

# Analysis of the Rhetorical Devices in Obama's Public Speeches

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**Abstract:** A successful speech can not only spur loud applause of the audience but also enlighten them. Public speech is made to exert much influence on the public in a short time, thus achieving the speech-maker's aim. Being one of the most powerful Presidents in the history of the United States, Obama has been asserting himself among the American people via his enthusiastic and infectious speech. There are many factors attributing to Obama's success in speech, one of which is that he skillfully applies a variety of rhetorical devices in his various speeches. Therefore, it's needed to analyze rhetorical devices and their effects in some of his speeches to provide reference for the people who want to make a brilliant speech. With language rhetoric of Neo-Aristotle rhetoric as the theoretical framework, this paper will study four of Obama's speeches from the perspective of lexical devices, phonological devices and syntactical devices in order to explore the functions of applying these three categories of rhetorical devices. Seven rhetorical devices are to be discussed with regard to their applications and effects in Obama's speeches. They are alliteration, simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis and parallelism. Finally, some suggestions on speech and rhetoric devices will be offered.

**Keywords:** Public Speeches, Language Rhetoric, Semantic Device, Phonological Device, Syntactical Device

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## 1. Introduction

Speech, as one of the communication methods of conveying information, has been gaining no less importance whether in the past and nowadays or in the West and the East, thanks to its uniqueness from other kinds of talk and strong influence on audience, many people, especially politicians usually take full advantage of it to convince their targeted audience to achieve their political ends. This is a cheap and effective way of gaining support. However, a successful speech needs not only the speaker's eloquence but also a decent speech craft, in which many skills are used. Among them are proper rhetorical devices added to make the speech more encouraging and mesmerizing.

Speaking of famous speeches in political field in the twenty-first century, Barack H. Obama, as the first President of black color in the history of the United States, has made numerous speeches during his political career, and can be one

of the most influential and noted statesmen at present. Therefore, it's never unnecessary to make an analysis of rhetorical devices applied in his public speeches, thereby, readers can learn a lot from the way he writes a speech and the skills he uses in a speech.

As a quite influential president of the United States, who combines both talent and eloquence, Obama is such an expert in wording and phrasing, therefore, his speeches are undoubtedly the research targets of many linguistic scholars in various fields. In retrospective to papers related to Obama's speeches, there are a number of results in hand. Li Xiao (2009) made stylistic analysis on Obama's victory speech. He explored that speech from four aspects which are phonetics, vocabulary, sentence structure and semantic structure. Zhong Sheng (2009) made analysis on the interpersonal meaning of Obama's inaugural speech. He drew the conclusion that Obama expresses his opinion or attitude effectively and wins support from the audience by means of moderate tone, voice, personal pronoun and assessment. Besides, in this way, he can

also inspire the audience to build confidence in him and strive for realization of their American dreams. Zhang Liping (2009) and Hu Mingxia (2009) made stylistic analysis of Obama's speeches via the language database Word Smith application from vocabulary, sentence and discourse aspects. Then, they summarized the reasons of how Obama makes successful speeches. Daniel C. O'Connell (2010), Sabine Kowal (2010), Edward J. Sabin (2010), John F. Lamia (2010) and Margaret Dannevik (2010) investigate the start-up rhetoric employed by U.S. President Barack Obama in his speeches. Their analyses confirmed Obama's skillfulness in using challenging and variable settings and detecting orderliness and scientific generalizability. The concept of orality or literacy provides a theoretical background and emphasizes dialogical interaction between the audience and the speaker. Concepción Hernández-Guerra (2012) made an analysis of Obama's Speech in Chana, Africa, from both rhetorical devices and textuality aspects. He discusses what contributes to an outstanding oral speech by summarizing the vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure being used in that speech.

To conclude, some scholars made researches on Obama's speeches from different points of view. Some began with certain rhetorical devices such as parallelism, metaphor. Some completed their studies from aspects of story-telling, meta-function of language, pragmatics and face-saving theory. However, most of them didn't take on the specific backgrounds of those speeches and didn't come out the detailed functions of those rhetorical devices. This paper, therefore, will explore four of Obama's political speeches thoroughly according to the category of language rhetoric. These four speeches are *A More Perfect Union*, *Three Suggestions to Graduates*, *the Audacity of Hope* and *Our Responsibility as Father*. The following part will use 1, 2, 3, 4 to represent these four speeches respectively.

*The Audacity of Hope* was made at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 when Mr. Obama defeated several influential rivals and achieved unexpected landslide victory which absolutely laid concrete foundation for his later success in political field. *Three Suggestions to College Graduates* was the commencement address for the graduates in University of Massachusetts at Boston in 2006. *A More Perfect Union* was made on March, 18, 2008, which helped Obama become the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. *Our Responsibility as Father* was made on Father's Day in 2008. Addressing this speech, Obama successfully presented his positive image as a responsible and caring father, thus increasing people's fondness of him as the new President of the USA. These four speeches can be searched from American official website <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office>.

On top of that, although these four speeches were all made in different periods of Obama's political career and expressed various themes, they all shared one thing in common that Obama's words were precisely chosen and applied and that these four speeches succeeded in gaining support from the public for Obama. Therefore, by observing his speeches closely, we can find some frequently-used figures of speech

which play a crucial role in influencing and impressing the audience in a hidden way. What's more, this paper aims to unveil those hidden figures of speech and explore how they come into effect well.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The second part will introduce the theoretical framework and methodology of this paper. The third part will explore the unique figures of speech employed in Obama's political speeches from the perspectives of phonological, lexical and syntactical rhetoric and discuss their functions respectively in the corresponding context. Then the last part is a conclusion of the whole paper which includes some useful suggestions to readers, together with implications, limitations and directions for further study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

### 2.1. Definition of Rhetoric

The word "rhetoric" which means public speaking develops from the ancient Greek word "rhetor" (Zheng Lingling, 2014). In the old times, rhetoric means learning how to be a great speaker. With time going on, its meanings have diversified. Aristotle once described rhetoric in *The Art of Rhetoric* as "instrument of exploring the overall feasible ways to persuade the audience whatever the subject is in relation to". (Winterowd, 1953: 6) "Rhetoric is the subject that is concerned with the employment of the discourse, whether spoken form or written form, to motivate the hearer, whether the hearer is just a single person or is composed of a group of people." Said Corbett (1971: 3). In the view of John Locke, an English philosopher of the 17th century, rhetoric is "the science of oratory," or "the art of speaking elegantly and forcefully." (Huang Ren, 1999: 1) Being a Chinese famous rhetorician, Liu Yameng (2004: 2) defined rhetoric as "the way of influencing ideas, judgments and actions through symbolic approaches."

To conclude from the above definitions, rhetoric can be defined as the art of speaking in an elegant and forceful but hidden way to influence, impress and persuade the audience.

Language rhetoric is one important element of Neo-Aristotelian rhetoric which drives from Neo-Aristotle rhetoric introduced by Kenneth Burke (1969) and modern rhetoric. Wang Dechun (2001), a Chinese rhetoric scholars also put forward language rhetoric in his *Modern Rhetoric*. Wang Dechun concluded four main categories of language rhetoric in his works, which are phonology, lexicology, syntax and text. Those four aspects have prevailed and been widely accepted in the field of rhetoric study. By observing one's speech closely under the guide of those four aspects, one can easily discover and understand the hidden meanings and intentions in the speeches, thus make it easy for orators to achieve his/her ends.

This paper will analyze Obama's four speeches thoroughly from phonological rhetoric, lexical rhetoric and syntactical rhetoric. As for each category, there will be one or more specific figures of speech to be discussed.

## 2.2. Methodology

The main research methods adopted in this paper are document research and textual analysis. With the purpose of exploring what rhetorical devices are applied and their respective functions in the corresponding context, the author will select four of Obama's addresses in hopes that Obama's speech techniques can be understood and imitated by all the relevant readers, thus bettering their speech-making.

## 3. General Language Rhetoric Applied in Obama's Public Speeches

### 3.1. Phonological Rhetoric Applied in Obama's Public Speeches

Alliteration is the repetition of speech sounds in a sequence of nearby words; when the recurrent sound occurs in a conspicuous position at the beginning of a word or of a stressed syllable within a word (M. H.: 1981). As the definition points out that alliteration can be the repetition of identical consonants in unaccented syllables or in middle or terminal positions in the syllables. Follow-ups are some examples of alliteration, classified by different positions of the repetition.

#### 1. Repetition of initial syllables

Example 1. *Instinctively, they knew that it was safer and smarter to stay at home.* (3)

Actually, it's better to stay at home watching the African-American Civil Rights Movement on TV than put themselves into the dangerous situation, but some students chose to take part in the freedom of Negroes, their real action tremendously contrasted their draw-advantages-and-avoid-disadvantages instinct. So, here, Obama used an alliteration to show his appreciation for those selfless and self-giving characters and at the same time encouraged students to do the right thing and to be devoted.

Example 2. *I believe we can provide the jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless.* (3)

"Jobless" and "homeless" are two common tricky problems the Americans confront in their life, and Obama skillfully used alliteration and put forward the solutions, which showed his sincerity and genuine characteristics, meanwhile, he conveyed the information of having faith in the government, which greatly arose audience's confidence in their country, which is his purpose in delivering this speech.

#### 2. Repetition of terminal syllables

Example 3. *They (churches) are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear.* (1)

Obviously, those four words underlined end up with "ing", in other words, in the form of participle. On hearing those words, the audience seem to be able to see a noisy and dynamic scene where people in different motions loom time and time again. So, here we can see that by using alliteration in the form of participle, a speaker can create a visual and vivid picture for the audience, thus making his or her speech more

lively and vibrant.

### 3.2. Lexical Rhetoric Applied in Obama's Public Speeches

#### 3.2.1. Simile

Simile is one of the most widely-used figures of speeches, and especially true in English literature. According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Geoffrey, 1981), simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, in such a way as to clarify and enhance an image. It is an explicit comparison (as opposed to the metaphor where the comparison is implicit) recognizable by the use of words "like" or "as".

Example 4. *America, which stood as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.* (3)

Originally, "beacon" means a radio station that broadcasts a directional signal for navigational purposes or a tower with a light that gives warning of shoals to passing ships. So a beacon can be seen as hope and guiding direction. Here, Obama compares America to a beacon which provided limitless opportunities and hope for his grandparents, his parents and himself too. This is the very place where the combination of these two families gave birth to the new baby who is also the new hope for America. By using simile, Obama successfully brings out the theme, that is, the audacity of hope. For the audience, they can easily connect this magical family's experiences with their motherland where the hope is amplified and at the same time can be aroused their passion and patriotism for their country. Therefore, the application of simile can impress the audience and stimulate their empathy.

#### 3.2.2. Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily used of one thing is applied to another. (Gove, 1981: 1280). Typically, in a sentence containing metaphor, there is no obvious sign of instructive words or phrases which directly compare one thing to another. Though hard to be discovered, the use of metaphor can be very natural and implicit, similar to the function of a simile. Metaphor compares an abstract thing to a concrete thing, which makes the sentence easy to be understood.

Example 5. *In the end, that is the God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation.* (3)

Prior to the sentence listed above, Obama talked about the American people's dreams, which's also the dream of this country. So, here Obama compared the audacity of hope to the bedrock, which plays an essential role in building a country. The utility of metaphor here enables Obama to highlight the importance of holding hope for the country, thus engaging his people to have faith in America and his administration.

Example 6. *On behalf of the great state of Illinois, crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention.* (3)

The primitive meaning of "crossroads" is that it's a place where two roads meet and cross each other, its extended meaning is an essential artery connecting two or more areas and making traffic easier and more convenient (Gove, 1981: 56). Here Obama compared Illinois to crossroads to stress the

geographical significance of this state, thus expressing his great gratitude of being bestowed the honor of addressing a speech in front of people there.

### 3.2.3. Metonymy

Metonymy, according to Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, is a figure of speech. It consists in using the name of one thing for that of something else, with which it is associated (Gove, 1981: 1332). Such as "... spent the evening reading Shakespeare", "lands belongs to the crown" and "ogling at the heavily mascaraed skirt at the next table". By proper use of metonymy, one can achieve the effects of humor, irony and connotation.

Example 7. *The day after Pearl Harbor he signed up for duty, joined Patton's army in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas.* (3)

Pearl Harbor is a lagoon harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, west of Honolulu. Much of the harbor and surrounding lands is a United States' deep-water naval base (Funk & Wagnalls, 2014). However, Obama replaced the attack by the Empire of Japan in 1941 with the name of the attacked place -- Pearl Harbor, for the fact that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor is a well-known historical event, in which thousands of soldiers of the United States died. So there is no need to mention the complete details of this distressing fact. Instead, by using metonymy, Obama can show his and the country's generous attitude toward that past notorious behavior of Japan and show Americans' tolerance of letting the past be the past. Here we can get a glimpse of Obama's wit of dealing with embarrassing and sensitive historical events.

Example 8.... *They don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or the Pentagon.* (3)

Here "Pentagon" refers to the America government, which keeps running with the majority of income from tax. As is well-known to all, the headquarters of the United States' Department of Defense is a building in the shape of pentagon. American people, including President Obama, usually uses the capitalized Pentagon to represent the American government to refrain themselves from unnecessary troubles when mentioning something bad directly related to government.

Example 9. *We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes.* (3)

Sometimes, a national flag is the best symbol of a country. The flag of the United States is the combination of both five-pointed stars and stripes. Since America is one of the most noted countries around the world, people can easily relate the national flag to this country, consequently, the feature of the flag becomes the symbol of the United States, which is also something they feel proud of. Consequently, patriotism once again is motivated among the audience, which will lay the foundation of their approval and support for the appearance on political stage for this young man.

### 3.2.4. Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something, or vice versa (N. R. Clifton: 1983). A synecdoche is a class of metonymy,

often by means of either mentioning a part for the whole, or conversely the whole for one of its parts.

1. A part represents the whole.

Example 10. *They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear.* (1)

An ear, as an indivisible part of creature, cannot exist independently without the support from a living body. However, in the sentence above, this "untrained ear" is used to substitute for people who pay few visit to churches where are full of various kinds of loud noises. This is a visual explanation of state of those who seldom go to the churches and can hardly be adapted to the noisy atmosphere.

2. The whole represents one of its parts.

Example 11. *Let's give them a handshake and tell them to get their butts back in the library.* (2)

Originally, "butts" refers to one's bottom. Here it represents a person. To be exact, it's about those who have achieved less competitive education degree. Typically, library itself is just a place which hosts a large number of books, journals and newspapers. However, it appears so mostly in colleges and universities. Besides, the majority of students' study got accomplished in it. So, a library can be the concentration of knowledge and schools. Naturally, Obama used it to stand for further study and personal improvement and development.

## 3.3. Syntactical Rhetoric Applied in Obama's Public Speeches

### 3.3.1. Antithesis

Antithesis can be defined as "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 opposition of ideas" (The Columbia Encyclopedia: 2014). To form an antithesis, the sentence itself must be paralleled and at the same time conveys at least two kinds of contrary meanings.

Example 12. *We need to show our kids that you're not strong by putting other people down – you're strong by lifting them up.* (2)

"Put down" and "lift up" are two completely different phrases which convey opposite meanings. By using antithesis, Obama made it easier to describe what a strong father should be like and what are needed to make a really responsible father. Therefore, when expressing "dos" and "don's", one can use antithesis sentences to better highlight one's idea. The same example goes like "*we should be making it easier for fathers who make responsible choices and harder for those who avoid them.*" (2)

Example 13. *More to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her, who has the grades, has the drive, has the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.*(3)

By illustrating things the women and more people like her have, then turning the intonation abruptly, talking about things they don't have, thus creating a gloomy mood in which the audience can realize and reflect on the seriousness of the situation. Absolutely, this antithesis makes Obama's words sound sincere and genuine, furthermore, make those words

take into effect in persuading the audience into taking the reality seriously.

Example 14. *The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias...*(1)

Obama here described five pairs of contrasting abstract concepts that coexist in America, there are also churches where people's common daily talks take place. This explained why there was no need to criticize his previous pastor's improper words about races, let alone to associate Obama with some improper and malicious talks. So, by saying these, Obama disillusioned his opponent's intended assaults and lead the misguided American people to come back to the right track.

### 3.3.2. Parallelism

Parallelism comes into being when the repetition or antithesis or some other devices are added. In this way, thought is set over against thought and form balanced forms as to bring the meaning home to one strikingly and agreeably (Herbermann & Charles, 1913). It is also called parallel structure. Parallelism can be made up of adjectives, propositional phrases, paralleling phrases and short sentences, together with their one or more equivalents as the paralleling opponents.

1. Two or more adjectives consist of parallelism.

Example 15. *There is more work to be done, more justice to had, more barriers to break.* (1)

Through addressing three "mores", Obama wanted to enlighten the people that even America had made progresses, but those weren't enough, and explained the actual and serious situation that enormous endeavor remained needy. Then followed the next call that it's next generation's duty and responsibility to continue this effort, thus delivering this huge project to them and making them feel honored and are willing to accept the heavy burden.

2. Parallelism comes into being where two paralleling "whethers" guide two predictive clauses.

Example 16. *Yet, the true test of our union is not whether it's perfect, but whether we work to perfect it.* (2)

By speaking "whether" twice while in contrasting way, Obama successfully made it clear that America faced challenges not being imperfect but the option of being united or departed. He skillfully calls on people to cooperate with their brothers and sisters to build and strengthen the United States. Besides, those sentences cited above serve as a modest spur to induce the next paragraphs in which Obama put forward his valuable advice and illustrations about the progresses that America had made.

2. Three short sentences make a parallelism.

Example 17. *Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that....* (1)

By repeating "Let us" three times, Obama successfully created a sense of family and joy of reunion. Moreover, these three sentences go forward one by one, with meaning complementary with each other. The audience will feel

obliged to help and support people around them who are also called brothers and sisters. Therefore, by using parallelism here, Obama made it possible to unite the public and build a reciprocal society. That's also the theme of his speech and what the country wants its people to do.

3. Parallelism appears when two or more paragraphs are paralleled.

Example 18. *In the end, that's what this election is about... In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more...* (3)

Typically, when using two or more corralled paragraphs, the author wants to further his or her persuasion and deepen their feelings and appeal. Similarly, Obama used these two corralled paragraphs to point out the theme of his speech in a more powerful way. The first conclusion explains the real meaning of elections. That is, they are not about blind optimism, but about something more substantial that can be realized by common and ordinary American people who give birth to the audacity of hope. Then, in the second conclusion, Obama made his and the government's promise to the public that they are here to make all this audacity of hope to be possible and approachable. So, seen from the perspective of structure, these two corralled paragraphs present the theme of this speech in a complementary but progressive way, which will push the audience's empathy forward and force them to take actions. That's also the real charm of this speech.

4. When examples listed above show up at the same time, combined by conjunctions such as "but", "or", "and", "but... also", either... or" etc.

Example 19. *Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy.* (3)

By using the conjunction "not... but...", Obama made it clear that the purpose of their gathering together was not to celebrate what the American people have created but to witness how great this country has been. In other words, America is great for her innovative and hardworking people, for her creative and hopeful young men, not for what she has achieved militarily or economically.

5. Parallelism comes into being when using proper repetition of some words, phrases or even sentences.

Example 20. *That we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think.... That we can have an idea... That we can participate in...* (3)

By repeating "that we can" four times, Obama's words become more and more powerful as well as more and more thought-provoking. The audience can easily feel that those words from the Declaration of Independence will definitely come true for America is a continent of hope, and it provides countless opportunities and possibilities. People who keep on their dreams will work miracles from small ones, such as having a happy family to big ones, such as becoming dominant at the stage of history. So, the charm of parallelism lies in enhancing the power of voice progressively and leads the audience to think and behave in the way being told.

## 4. Conclusion

After analyzing Obama's four political speeches from the theoretical basis of language rhetoric, this paper finds out the several most used rhetorical devices in his speeches. For example, with regard to phonological rhetoric, Obama tends to apply alliteration in order to create rhythmical effect which can better attract the audience's attention and at the same time make the speaker's words more powerful and persuading. As for lexical rhetoric, Obama is more likely to utilize simile, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche to replace something abstract for those common and understandable in order to express his ideas in a more vivid and visual way. When it comes to the syntactical devices, parallelism is more than anything but Obama's favorite and frequently used weapon to emphasize his theme or create a thought-provoking atmosphere. Generally, compared with phonological and lexical rhetoric, syntactical devices are the most frequently employed devices for Obama to appeal to the audience and exert influence on them, which will finally help to achieve the speaker's ends.

With the language rhetoric as the theoretical framework, the author analyzes several rhetorical devices applied in four of Obama's public speeches and studies their functions in specific contexts, for one thing, to reveal the hidden meaning beyond the word meaning in Obama's speeches; for another, to provide those English-learners who are not well informed of language rhetoric with special techniques of composing a speech which can be well accepted and can also make a difference.

Although some major findings have been listed out, there still remain some limitations needed to be pointed out. First of all, further study on Obama's speeches is recommended to classify his speeches into different groups according to different themes and situations. Second, the author's lack of background knowledge in various walks of life, to some degree, may contribute to some subjective judgment and opinions in writing this paper. Additionally, this paper cannot make references to as many related works as it could to analyze Obama's speeches thoroughly and comprehensively.

All in all, for further study, there still are many ways of making an analysis in Obama's public speeches such as from the perspective of spoken form, other rhetorical theories, even from the viewpoint of body language.

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