

US PRESIDENTS' POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: GEORGE W. BUSH AND BARACK OBAMA. A PRAGMATICS APPROACH

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Abstract: An examination of the political discourse of presidents establishes an understanding of the factors that influence word choice and communication. Most notably, the context provided by presidents in their political discourse conveys the meaning intended by the speeches, which then influences the way the public reacts to what they have to say. Through knowledge of these factors, linguists can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language and the perceptions of American presidents by both Americans and non-Americans. The purpose of this paper is to examine the political discourse of two American presidents – George W. Bush and Barack Obama – in order to identify the overall message intended by their speeches and the factors that influence their discourse.

Keywords: discourse analysis, linguistics, pragmatics, US presidents

1. Introduction

Language in actions is referred to as pragmatic language where it is impossible to understand the message unless you know what is going on (Halliday and Hasan 1985:6). The political discourses of Bush and Obama are significantly different from each other. In fact, these particular presidents, despite both serving recently, can be discussed to show the vastly different approaches of politicians in communication and discourse. Analysing their discourses is revealing of the differences among politicians in the context of their linguistic styles, as well as in understanding the influence of their personalities on their communication approaches. This can be particularly significant in our understanding of the way presidents use context to convey meaning based on the circumstances in which the presidents are speaking. Quite often a pragmatic approach to discourse is used without a clear recognition that it is being used. However, in the case of political discourse, presidents and those who write their speeches are highly aware of the intentions behind their words and the meaning and context in their speeches.

In what follows I shall examine in turn the influential factors in the political discourses of Presidents Bush and Obama.

1.1. George W. Bush

The factor influencing Bush's political discourse was September 11, 2001. Specifically, the terrorist attacks that occurred on that day shifted the focus of his presidency to that of a wartime president. Within this context, Bush's discourse focused on the protection of the American people in the face of an enemy, which created an 'us versus them' mentality and urged a patriotic return to the idealism of the United States (Mazid 2007:351-376), which could be achieved through military action against the enemy. This context had a strong influence on President Bush's decision-making.

This factor can be seen by comparing his inaugural speech in the 2000 presidential election with a speech given in 2007 in China. In 2000, Bush's inaugural speech focused on unity, consensus, and attempting to work together across party lines (Lakoff 2001:309-27). Bush sought to heal the nation and use his role as a leader to facilitate that healing (Lakoff 2001:309-327). At the start of his presidency, Bush had no idea what was coming or how it would impact his term of office and legacy. Instead, he was able to focus on his platform and what he intended to do during his presidential term.

However, September 11, 2001 changed the way President Bush spoke. Even when he attempted to remain hopeful about the nation, the context of the terrorist attacks changed the meaning behind them (McKenna and Waddell 2007:377-400). According to Mazid (2007:368), "The utopic kernel is America: the land of freedom, democracy, progress, and pluralism; the land of 'hard work, and creativity, and enterprise': a country where different religions and ethnicities are equally respected; a country that donates and tolerates". This patriotism and hope existed after September 11, 2001, but was tinged with sadness, fear, and the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

This was seen in Bush's speech in China at Tsinghua University. During this time, Bush was attempting to promote American patriotism and was focusing on rebuilding after the terrorist attacks. To that end, Bush's political discourse focused on building the ideals of Americanism in China (Pu 2007:205-16). The climate of the nation at the time was that of American patriotism as the focus of the American people, with the United States being viewed as the best nation in the world. Therefore, even when speaking in foreign lands, Bush's political discourse was framed in American patriotism and creating unity among the American people. Regardless of what else President Bush attempted to do or actually accomplished during his presidential terms, he would forever be known by what he said and how he behaved in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

1.2. Barack Obama

The factor influencing Obama's political discourse was the integration of the Internet into society (Ballatore and Natale 2016). Unlike Bush, Obama did not have an event, tragedy, or other defining moment within his presidency. Obama's perspective was shaped by his role as the first African American president, but more significant was the role of the Internet in communication during his campaign and presidency. That is, since the Internet facilitated instant communication and feedback, Obama's political discourse could be examined, analysed, and discussed instantly and with greater bias than the discourse of presidents before him (Baum and Groeling 2008:345-365). For example, in an article about Obama's speech patterns, Greene explains:

Alas, people see what they want. This helps to explain why, on the eve of last night's state-of-the-union address, a New Hampshire public-radio show called "Word of Mouth" asked (via Twitter) how many times Mr. Obama would say "make no mistake." When will the president shed this "verbal tick", the show wondered (perhaps leaving some to worry whether such "ticks" carry Lyme disease, adding injury to insult). But does the president actually favour the phrase "make no mistake"? Taking Mr. Liberman's cue, I did a quick count. Sure enough, Mr. Obama said "make no mistake" just once in five state of the union speeches. (Greene 2014:para. 3-4)

Due to the ability of viewers and listeners to communicate digitally about political discourse while it is happening, perceptions about word choices can be skewed. This is not necessarily accurately representative of the political discourse of the presidents, but it is representative of other people's *perceptions* of their political discourse.

It is for this reason that the pragmatic approach in political discourse is even more important to investigation language in use (Bloor and Bloor 2014:190). Understanding the context through which a president speaks facilitates effective communication from the Oval Office. President Obama's discourse used short sentences and simple words in his speeches, according to Greene

(2014). This does not mean that Obama's discourse is less developed or sophisticated than other presidents'. Instead, it suggests that Obama is very skilled at conveying meaning through context in an age in which digital media is commonplace. This also suggests that Obama understands the connection between discourse and power, and was able to use that knowledge to develop discourse that conveyed his views and platforms, but also created a connection with the audience within the context of the circumstance in which he was speaking to increase the likelihood that he would be perceived the way he wanted to be.

2. US Presidents' Speeches. Pragmatic Aspects

2.1. George W. Bush

Bush's speeches are characterized by his Southern accent and his misuse of the English language quite frequently (Metcalf 2004:314-317). However, as mentioned earlier, the most influential factor in Bush's presidency was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which significantly changed the way Bush spoke. Pragmatically, Bush's discourse focused on patriotism and recovery from the terrorist attacks. In this way, Bush's political discourse was framed by the attacks, and his presidency was framed by the way he spoke about the attacks. The structure of his political discourse sought to draw a comparison between what was and what could be, with a particular emphasis on unity and the protection of the American people and American patriotic ideal. For example, in his 2001 inaugural address Bush states:

We will build our defences beyond challenge, lest weakness invite challenge. We will confront weapons of mass destruction, so that a new century is spared new horrors. (Inaugural address, 2001)

In these statements, Bush uses the structures of his sentences to provide a context for his intention.

In the first sentence, Bush explains that the defences are needed and, if the nation does not defend itself, it is at risk for attack. In retrospect, this may have been a reference to the September 11, 2001 attacks and a call to be better prepared to protect American security. However, that aside, the sentence structure, using commas to create a scenario and a reason for it, guides the audience in the direction intended through the suggested implications of *not* doing what is suggested in the sentences. Essentially, Bush's statements suggested an "If we don't"/"then" effect. The sentences can be rewritten using this framework.

If we don't build our defences beyond challenge, then weakness will invite challenge. (my emphasis)

If we don't confront weapons of mass destruction, then a new century will experience horrors. (my emphasis)

In this way, Bush highlights strategies for avoiding negative effects by following his intentions for this presidency.

In Bush's address following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, his sentence structure was different in comparison to his inaugural speech, with a majority of short, straightforward sentences rather than more complex sentence structures. For example, in the address after the attacks, Bush said:

These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. (Address following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks)

The short, straightforward sentences are used to convey a sense of the seriousness of the situation. However, Bush continued to use sentence structures that included commas to show dichotomies.

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Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. (Address following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks)

Rather than ‘if-then’ statements, the use of the clauses in these sentences are intended to draw attention to the negative and then alleviate the audience’s fears with reassurances. For example:

Terrorist attacks can shake the foundation of our biggest buildings (negative)
but they cannot touch the foundation of America. (reassurance)

Finally, in President Bush’s announcement of war in March 2003, Bush continued to use short, straightforward sentences to convey his message.

Since then, the world has engaged in twelve years of diplomacy. We have passed more than a dozen resolutions in the United Nations Security Council. We have sent hundreds of weapons inspectors to oversee the disarmament of Iraq. Our good faith has not been returned. (Address announcing war against Iraq, 17 March 2003)

These statements, like the others examined, create a dichotomy. The first three sentences identify what the United States has done (engaged in diplomacy, passed resolutions, and sent weapons inspectors to oversee disarmament). Following this, the last sentence identifies the result: the good faith was not restored. This is a reversal of the linguistic structures used in Bush’s address following the attacks, in the sense that the reassurances come at the beginning and the statement ends with the negative situation.

President Bush’s speech perhaps contained more simple sentences than Obama’s speeches, in keeping with Bush’s well-known simple and unsophisticated manner of speaking. That speech contained many examples such as: “We must live up to the calling we share”; “America at its best is also courageous”; “We will defend our allies and our interests”; “Sometimes in life we’re called to do great things” (Inaugural Address, January 20, 2001). But his speech also contained multiple complex sentences, including subordinate clauses. Complex sentences are often more active than compound sentences because complex sentences refer to clearer and more specific relations between the essential parts of the sentence, such as “I ask you to be citizens: citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens building communities of service and a nation of character” (Inaugural Address, January 20, 2001).

2.1. Barack Obama

Obama’s language is characterized by his ability to connect with audiences in the Internet age (Baum and Groeling 2008:345-365). This age of the internet has not only called for a more casual discourse in politics, but has also created an environment in which feedback is unedited, instantaneous, and can be highly biased (Baum and Groeling 2008:345-365). As a result, Obama reflected the connection among people facilitated by the Internet, and his ability to choose words to effectively evoke emotions based on the setting and circumstance. This helped Obama cultivate an image of being well-liked and approachable. Obama accomplished this through simple sentence structures, and a number of compound complex sentences, emphasizing the casual atmosphere of the Internet’s linguistics and highlighting the similarities between Obama and the average American voter. This can be illustrated in his inaugural address.

This generation of Americans has been tested by crises that steeled our resolve and proved our resilience. A decade of war is now ending. An economic recovery has begun. America’s possibilities are limitless, for we possess all the qualities that this world without boundaries demands: youth and drive; diversity and openness; an endless capacity for risk and a gift for reinvention. My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment, and we will seize it – so long as we seize it together. (Inaugural address, January 21, 2013)

President Obama's speech contained far more compound complex sentences, and his speech overall reflected his natural skills as an orator. For example:

"My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment, and we will seize it so long as we seize it together" ("Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013). Here is another example: "We know that America thrives when every person can find independence and pride in their work; when the wages of honest labor liberate families from the brink of hardship" (Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013).

Throughout this statement, Obama aligns himself with the American people. He uses pronouns such as "we" and "our" rather than "you" and "your." This suggests that Obama is not only the president, but an American, which helps the audience relate to him more effectively. Even when talking about the war and the economic crisis, Obama's language focuses instead on unity and the hope of what is to come.

This sense of unity can even be found in Obama's remarks about the situation in Iraq. In a speech in 2014, Obama stated:

Above all, Iraqi leaders must rise above their differences and come together around a political plan for Iraq's future. (Remarks on the Situation in Iraq, June 2014)

In this statement, Obama is striving to bring people together for common goals, maintaining a sense of optimism by emphasizing Iraq's plans for the future.

Even when discussing tragedy, Obama attempts to maintain optimism and to connect himself with the American people. In his address following the bombing at the Boston Marathon, Obama said:

So if you want to know who we are, what America is, how we respond to evil – that's it. Selflessly. Compassionately. Unafraid. (Address following the Boston Marathon bombing, April 16, 2013)

This simple statement emphasizes the positive aspects of what occurred in the immediate aftermath of the bombing in the people's responses at the scene and aligns Obama as an American rather than as a separate entity.

3. Conclusions

Political discourse is typically carefully crafted to align with the circumstances being addressed or the agenda being expressed. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that political discourse is influenced by external factors such as current events and the specific platforms of the presidents. Based on an examination of some key speeches of Bush and Obama, it is clear that current events have a significant impact on the political discourse of American presidents. Politicians shape their discourse based on the setting in which they are communicating, which also shapes what, specifically, the politicians want to convey.

The primary influential factor in George W. Bush's presidency was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These attacks not only marked a shift in the state of the nation, but in the direction of his presidency. The attacks created a different context from which Bush spoke both domestically and on foreign soil, which impacted his word choice and, to some extent, his linguistic patterns. His language approach focused on American patriotism, unity, and healing after the terrorist attacks.

By comparison, with the Internet as the driving factor during Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency, Obama's language approach focused on word choice and sentence structure that could be more easily understood in the Internet Age. The prevalence of this medium of

communication had an impact on the way Obama was understood, particularly because his words could be parsed, analysed, and discussed instantaneously.

It is clear that current events have a significant impact on the political discourse of American presidents. Politicians shape their discourse based on the setting in which they are communicating, which also shapes what, specifically, the politicians want to convey.

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