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Analytical Elements and Social Discourse Deconstruction in Barack Obama's Inaugural Address

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Abstract:

President Barack Obama is considered by many to be the communicational descendent of President John F. Kennedy, and his 2009 inaugural speech stands testimony to this bold, yet justifiable assertion. Just like his predecessor, Barack Obama managed to inspire the masses through the charisma and intelligence of his acts of communication. He was uniquely gifted, not only with an almost uncanny ability to inspire his base voters, but to also reach across the aisle and expound new-fangled hopes for social and national reconciliation. The generation of discourse, through political contextualisation is based on the exploitation of social impact resources in order to achieve the objectives of socio-political power. Political harmonisation cannot take place outside the spheres of social communication based on the politicization and polemics of discursive paradigms. The connection between language structures and vectors of political ideology derives from the perception of language as a platform for communication and achievement of functional campaign objectives. Each political image discourse is generated based on this paradigm of exploiting the linguistic structural functionality by loading it with ideological significance and persuasive force in the psycho-ideological meaning of the term.

Keywords: *Obama; inaugural address; society; contextualisation; harmonisation.*

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This research aims to provide a comprehensive in-depth analysis of President Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address, exploring both the overt and covert structural mechanisms that define the newly-elected president but also the biased party leader who was ultimately elected and appointed by a partisan electorate into the highest office of the United States of America.

During the political presidential campaign, Barack Obama was unburdened, unbound by any strict protocols or legislative restrictions. This freedom allowed him almost unrestricted access to doctrines and acts of communication, to any mechanisms that would, for all intents and purposes, aid in his election. When analysing any politician from the perspective of a yet unelected candidate, we must perceive that communicator as attached to a certain ideology or a specific system of values. Brants and Voltmer had a very positive perspective on solid well substantiated ideologies seeing these elements as harnessing the values and objective of an informed electorate. They are quite keen to embrace and support candidates who boast "stable ideologies that have values and policies, as coherent packages, to individual problems and pragmatic solutions" (Brants & Voltmer, 2011: 9). Researchers Paunescu and Chiritescu have an utterly opposed standpoint with regard to ideologies. They believe a strong and healthy society should be governed by balance and harmonisation, considering ideologies the landmark of dysfunctionality, of inner conflict. They predicate that: "Ideologies usually arise due to imbalances or strong stagnation in society, aiming at reaching or regaining trajectory toward progress." (Paunescu & Chiritescu, 2018:15). It is indeed evident that a healthy society demands strong dialogue and an exploration of relevant topics, and yet when freedom of expression becomes an instrument of conflict and discord, then perhaps there is such a thing as too much freedom considering the fact that our personal freedom ends where the freedom of others begins. Burtea-Cioroianu understood this status quo quite well and postulated that: "The misunderstood freedom becomes recognisable in the state of those who believe that they are allowed to do anything they want." (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2021:71). The candidate Barack Obama could operate freely and force the limits of what is deemed as freedom of expression and ideology. However, after becoming president, Obama had to set aside his status as a candidate and become a more presidential communicator, a national and global communicator whose duty was no longer to just seduce and influence the masses, but to act as a national unifier, to reach across the political aisle and extend the proverbial olive branch to the rival conservative electorate. In a more simplified manner, a candidate strives to serve the interests and affinities of a singular political party or movement, but a lawfully elected president is compelled to serve, at least on a communicational level, the interests of each and every citizen of that country. One cannot be a Republican or a Democratic president, but a president of each and every citizen whether that person has voted for or against him or simply has not voted at all.

Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address represents his first chance to truly construct a presidential, non-biased act of communication that is meant to confirm the hopes and dreams of his electorate, as well as put aside the fears and angst of those who chose not to vote for him. Although the beginning of his speech does not appear in any way strong or unconventional, it is actually meant to send a powerful message to conservatives that he shares their sense of patriotism and connectivity to the values of the past: "My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you've bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors." (Obama, 2009) The subtextual ramifications of this apparently benign intro are far encompassing if we are to

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consider the context of the address, as well as his target audience. The “my fellow citizens” part is nothing but normal discursive protocol specific to the pattern of address, yet what is striking is Obama’s invocation of the past, calling the people who built and defined America as “our ancestors”. Through the simple connection of two words, Obama aims to speak directly to Republicans who had one fundamental concern about him. His political adversaries had often accused him of being unpatriotic, disconnected from the history of the United States, going even as far as saying that he was not even a real American, that he did not care for the country whose president he had just become. But with this brilliant and simple word association, he manages to deconstruct all of those carefully crafted arguments, personal and political attacks. He does not just care for his national family, he is an integral part of that family, he does not only acknowledge those who came before him, he identifies with those figures and honours their achievements.

The next part of the speech bears further testament to his universality as a president and his solid detachment from his previous status as candidate. If ideologically and politically President George Bush was his exact opposite, his most important ideological rival, the office of President of the United States does not afford him the luxury of capricious criticism and campaign banter. Talking as the president of the United States, he can no longer criticise an individual without having to consider consequences. If Obama were to criticise Bush on such a festive and solemn occasion, that would have meant a communication attack against hundreds of millions of Americans. Therefore, he chose the pathway of maximum diplomacy and honorary protocol by thanking his predecessor: “I thank President Bush for his service to our nation -- (applause) -- as well as the generosity and cooperation he has shown throughout this transition.” (Obama, 2009). Praising and thanking a man he most certainly disliked and disavowed showed great communicational composure and a highly embedded respect for the constitutional mechanisms that allowed a peaceful transition of power between two individuals that could not be further apart from an ideological standpoint.

Moving on from President Bush, President Obama once more doubles down on his attempt to address and seduce the conservative electorate by invoking all of the previously elected presidents of America and proudly aligning himself to that honoured and respected national legacy: “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. Yet, every so often, the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms. At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because we, the people, have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears and true to our founding documents.” (Obama, 2009). The invocation of the forty-four presidents and the sacred “oath” all have taken to protect and serve America seeks to further drive out the paranoid clouds of suspicion that sought to aggressively portray Obama as anti-American and unworthy of the status of the leader of the free world. The double iteration of the word “oath” adds a solemn dimension to Barack Obama’s image as a politician who is completely and utterly committed to the interests of America and each and every one of its citizens. Moving on from the values and merits of responsible and legitimate leadership, the act of communication moves towards the citizens themselves, for they are the true holders of power and authority inside any country and the president is nothing more than their chosen representative, a spokesperson whose purpose is to carry out their will and implement their interests as

faithfully and efficiently as possible. In terms of the solemnity of his speech, Obama moves for the trifecta and mentions the third and final pillar of democracy, namely the most important text of any nation, the Constitution. Even the manner in which he mentions the Constitution represents a communicational art form in itself, adding further layers of significance. If “founding documents” triggers a clear and direct mentioning of the Constitution, it is the subtle subtextual part that impresses the most through its craftsmanship and innate simplicity: “we, the people”. This iconic assembly of words represents one of the most easily recognisable, fundamental expressions in America, as it forms the opening of the American Constitution while also symbolising that governments and politicians do not only serve the people, they are true and genuine representatives of the people. Barack Obama wants to emphasise that although he holds the highest office in the country, and indeed the world, he is, and always shall remain so, a part of “we, the people”, just another normal citizen who has been fortunate enough to be chosen to serve his or her peers and equals.

The formulation of any Presidential Inaugural Address in America functions in accordance with certain structural protocols that are almost impossible to overlook. A founding principle for this type of act of communication is to navigate across every portion of the temporal axis, namely the past, the present and the future. The temporal dimension becomes intertwined with the spatial dimension, ultimately creating a chronotopic framework that spans across space-time and ideologies. To clarify this matter further, invoking the past means catering to the affinities of conservatives, of the American right wing, which greatly treasures and cherishes history, historical values and icons, and the series of elements which have stood the test of time and have aided in the creation of America, its prosperity, values and the American dream itself. The present is an area of in-betweenness triggering the attention and preoccupations of both the left and the right. All citizen, regardless of their political views, are worried about the present, day-to-day challenges affecting their lives. Issues such as jobs, the economy, inflation, education and so on are universal elements that appeal to the entirety of the electorate and are, therefore, the most important element that must always be addressed. One cannot talk about big plans for the future or the greatness of the past if the audience is listening on an empty stomach. Therefore, any politician and any act of political speech must always deal with the current agenda first before extending and expanding towards other conceptual factors.

The last and final element of a presidential address is, of course, the mentioning of the future. By addressing this element, the presidential communicator shall mainly bear in mind the left wing, progressive part of the electorate that is always consistently preoccupied with future challenges often overlooking the past and sometimes even shadowing present and immediate problems. We mention space as a factor that is inextricably intertwined with time because America is a somewhat spatially segregated republic. Mentioning the past will mean addressing Republican voters and, in terms of spatial coordinates, that means Kansas, Alabama, Kentucky. Mentioning the future will mean connecting to Democratic Party voters and that will in turn establish the spatial coordinates of California, New York, Massachusetts etc. The present is the only true conversational unifier, but only from the standpoint of capturing the attention of the entirety of the voting audience. Each and every voter is interested in the present, will want to get involved in debating and solving the current state of affairs, but that will by no means imply a harmonisation or constructive dialogue. All people want food, jobs and security, but the pathway towards achieving those elements is often contradictory or

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even outright opposite and confrontational. Yet, the spatial unifier remains a constant and people in every corner of America will want to hear about the present and the challenges it brings but will almost always provide personalised social, economic and ideological solutions to those elements.

Having mentioned the past in order to woo the Republican voters, Obama moves on to the present for a more universal approach to his political discourse, aiming to captivate the broadest possible audience concerned with the country's urgent, immediate state of affairs: "That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly, our schools fail too many -- and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet. These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics." (Obama, 2009). Barack Obama's assessment of his present is an honest and complex assembly of facts and issues challenging the American people from terrorist networks threatening the nation, an economy badly crippled by the global financial crisis, as well as healthcare and most of all education, which according to Stoian "is one of the most important factors that define a society. It represents the starting engine for all the activities that run within each society." (Stoian, 2019:126). Obama understands the importance of these key elements in society, taking it upon himself to improve and maximise their efficiency while at the same time uncovering their shortcoming.

Though he is very careful at not placing direct blame on his predecessors for the current state of affairs in the country, he does abandon the use of Present Tense verbs and moves towards the use of an impersonal Present Perfect in order to subtly transfer blame towards the previous presidency of George W. Bush: "Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered" (Obama, 2009). Obama acknowledges the current state of the union, takes responsibility towards finding solutions for the problems facing America and in quite a noble fashion, atypical to most politicians, he even somewhat accepts a common blame for the crisis due to "our collective failure", but he cannot maintain this standard of pristine political morality for too long as he subtly directs some of the blame, but to his credit not all of the blame towards his presidential predecessor.

The energy needed to solve these dire contemporary challenges is paradoxically once more found in the activation of past resources of discourse and historical relevance: "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." (Obama, 2009). To the untrained eye, this fragment appears utterly deprived of any past significance, quite the contrary, it seems to be looking towards the future, yet everything is revealed once we look towards the words of his ideological and political predecessor President John F. Kennedy: "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin." (Kennedy, 1961). Though the two fragments are not absolutely identical, it is clear that Obama is channelling John F. Kennedy in conveying the fact that many challenges facing a nation cannot be solved instantly through the waving of magic wand. Serious issues, deep wounds require time to heal, to resolve and will never go away on their own. Each journey, no matter how long, begins with a single step, and some problems

are so complex, so complicated that entire generations may have to work across the span of time in order to set things right. Raising this meta-generational awareness, invoking the resources of the past to solve the problems of the present within a predictable future is not only the mark of a true leader and visionary, but also the prerogative of a very skilled and determined political communicator.

Further addressing present, contemporary challenges, President Barack Obama outlines his most diplomatic part of the entire address. The gold standard of every presidential act of communication is that of the unifier, the leader who is above political partisanship and has as a sole purpose the objective to heal and unify a nation, to tear down defences of misbelief and implement a solid paradigm of trust between people with opposite political views. For all intents and purposes, a president can no longer be a simple politician produced by the masses, he or she must perform what Barbuceanu defined as contemporary, global mentoring. Thus “Concentrating on existing times and global struggle, mentoring can make presence dynamic [...]” (Barbuceanu, 2019:50). Therefore, Obama, as the leader of the United States, is dutybound to become a paragon of mentorship and guidance for the entire American electorate. From this perspective, it is counterproductive to have a Republican or a Democrat America, but rather “The United States of America”, to achieve the highly coveted unity in diversity, to find the capacity to help his compatriots celebrate the things that unite them rather than the often-petty elements that seek to divide a nation: “On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics. 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 forward 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.” (Obama, 2009). The newly elected president uses the importance of his address to motivate his fellow Americans to choose “hope over fear”, “unity of purpose” over “conflict and discord”. In a very skilled manner, he tries to minimise the ideological rifts within society by calling them “petty”, by dismissing them as capricious, counterproductive and incompatible with the progress of society as a whole. As he was a well-respected and appreciated communicative figure among the Democrats, the simple fact that he was uttering this objective meant that the progressive base would accept and try to implement it. Nevertheless, the problem would still stand with trying to convince Republicans of the urgent need of togetherness. This is why, in a master stroke of communicative intuition, he draws in the conservative element of the electorate by referring to the “Scripture”.

The invocation of God and the word of God inside any presidential address is often used to begin and end a speech and has been used to great effect by countless presidential predecessors. Utilising the instrument of spirituality to mitigate political descent represents a personal contribution and communicational intervention from the very eloquent and powerful message generator that is Barack Obama. He invokes the word of God telling the people to “set aside childish things”, connecting not only to the Scripture but also generating an imagery of conflict that is by no means grave or complicated. The contradictions in American society are, according to his discourse, in no shape or form grave, but simply the bickering of immature children who are fundamentally good and wish to grow towards something better, who desire to become

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more than the previous generations before them, to find peace and harmonisation where their forefathers have failed to do so.

Upon completing the parts relating to the past and the future, President Obama is free to be himself and discuss the progressive issues he and his electoral base feel so strongly about. He no longer needs to be diplomatic or carefully plan his words, he can just embrace a dose of healthy communicative partisanship and deal with the importance of future plans and strategies: "And we will act, not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth. We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together. We'll restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. All this we can do. All this we will do." (Obama, 2009). By freely talking about his vision of the future, he is able to specify the very talking points that got him elected by young people and the democratic electorate. He begins in a rather classic manner by underscoring the necessity for jobs and infrastructure, but he quickly moves on to the more progressive talking points having to do with digital development and of course the bedrock, the very foundation of the leftist desire to: "harness the sun and the winds". The green energy dream represents the core idea for the future of the Democratic Party which supported Barack Obama. This strategy, whether successful or not, fourteen years later has not amounted to much, benefits from solid support from the progressive base and represents a sine qua non condition of every aspiring left-wing politician.

In other words, this particular vision for the future is embedded within the communicational and electoral platform of each and every significant politician who is a member of the Democratic Party.

Barack Obama was an impeccable political communicator who managed to draw in a huge following among his fellow Americans. His skilful capacity to anchor his speech within every aspect of the American experience, his ability to draw strength from the past, present and future and the people attached to the issues of those respective temporal constructs, have brought forth concrete results turning him into one of the most popular presidents in the history of the United States. His communicative ability rose to such heights that he actually managed to bring about a sort of ecumenism relating to his personal approach to divinity, to redefine America's connection to God. He brilliantly acknowledges that America was not the same country ethnically, spiritually and religiously, saying that: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth." (Obama, 2009). He, by no means, dismissed the Christian legacy of America, but he vigorously stated that his country is indeed a religious melting pot where all individuals are protected and free to worship as they see fit without fear of prejudice or repercussions.

The speech is concluded according to the already classic formulation "Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America" (Obama, 2009), specific to any address formulated by an American president. The invocation of God has normally come to be a trademark of any presidential discourse. This is paradoxical, given the secular status of America, in which the separation of state and religion is one of the strongest principles. However, emotionally and meta-linguistically, a number of spiritual, sentimental affiliations and grievances are activated

overwhelmingly relying on the blessing and protection of a superior entity, especially in the context of the constitutional and religious opinion that America is and always shall be One Nation under God as specified in the American Pledge of Allegiance.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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