The Effects of Obama’s Inaugural Speech

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Successful politicians are often expert rhetoricians. The effective usage of language enables them to convince large segments of the population that their thoughts and beliefs are valuable to all. Some of the most memorable rhetoricians appear during periods of social and political unrest. Our present time is one of those periods. Barack Obama is one of those rhetoricians.

On January 20, 2009 millions of Americans and viewers worldwide witnessed the inaugural of President Barack Hussein Obama. This official changing of the guard catapults him into the highest position in the United States government. This responsibility obligates the President to contemplate the state of our union and to purpose the course of action to take. Obama accepted the challenge in the form of his inaugural address. The inaugural speech generally serves as a summary of the newly elected president’s principles, policies, and promises. President Obama’s speech clearly gives his overall viewpoint of the state of the nation to his constituents and listeners worldwide. Obama lists the following exigencies: the country is at war, the economy is weak, there is a lack of planning, health care is expensive, the school system is ineffective, there is too much dependence on other countries for energy sources, our energy consumption threatens the planet, and Americans have lost confidence and hope. Obama reveals some general strategic plans in answer to these problems. In his surmise of the situation, Obama gives the impression that, not only are we all in this boat together but, together we will weather this storm. This analysis will examine the effectiveness of Barack Obama’s rhetorical style in defining America as a unified nation.

Appeal

In an effort to inspire the American public to trust his leadership through the problems we face together, President Obama appeals to our senses with the use of the three argumentative styles. He ethically appeals to the public by establishing himself as knowledgeable and credible. He emotionally appeals to our sense of spirituality.
He logically appeals to us with concrete examples of our greatness as a nation. By utilizing these approaches, Obama appeals to all of his constituents the importance of remaining the great nation we have always been.

--Ethos

Obama’s eloquent style establishes him as a credible rhetorician who encourages unification of purpose. In the beginning, his humble, ceremonial tone is serious without being severe. He states he is humbled by what is to come and grateful for what is here. Though it may seem customary, he thanks President Bush for his service to our nation. Then, he helps establish his moral character even more when he blames our country’s situation on the “collective failure” of us all to make hard choices and prepare for the future. Obama appears knowledgeable and credible as he lists the problems our country faces. The hope that he expresses regarding the tackling of these problems gains further respect from the audience. Midway through his speech in paragraph 17, Obama’s attitude lightens as he refers of those cynical of the changes. He establishes them as being in opposition to our cause by stating that they have forgotten “What free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose...” One statement that establishes his ethical appeal is the mention of the small village that his father is from. Obama refers again to his modest beginnings with reference to his father in paragraph 31 when he states that sixty years ago a black man would not have been served at a restaurant. The natural conclusion that the audience draws from these statements establishes his ethos; Obama is the first American black man to achieve this high honor. As he delivers the refutation, a more impassioned Obama appeals with his knowledgeable demeanor. His articulate style exudes his commitment to examine the state of this country and inspire the American public to unite in purpose.

--Pathos

President Obama appeals to the “we” of our nation with numerous references to spiritual things. Before delivering the speech, Obama called upon God for help by ending his Oath with “So help me God”. Then in his speech, he makes his first obvious reference to God in paragraph 9. Obama states the following words from scripture “the time has come to set aside childish things”. This phrase is found in I Corinthians 13:11 of The Holy
The Bible which states, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (NIV). With this, Obama calls for the nation to act responsibly. Immediately after this direct reference, Obama refers to the “precious gift” and “the God-given promise” as a prelude to talk about how God wants us all to be equal, free, and happy. Other indirect references to scripture can be found in paragraph 26. These references convey some of Obama’s personal religious beliefs. By speaking of whispering spirits in Arlington cemetery, Obama reveals belief in life after death. Likewise, he reveals belief in the Holy Spirit by speaking of the spirit that must inhabit us all. In the next paragraph, he alludes to “the faith and determination” of the people as something this country relies on. Paragraph 30 could allude to Ecclesiastes 9 which speaks of a common destiny for all mankind. In the next paragraph, Obama appeals with religious weight to the public by mentioning the “sacred” oath that he has taken. In his concluding remarks, “God’s grace” is likened to the words found in Acts 20:32 “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified”. Obama leaves us with one lasting religious impression by offering a benediction of sorts when he blesses the people and the United States of America. By using religious references, our president demonstrates his personal beliefs and encourages us to be one nation under God.

---Logos

Obama uses inductive logic to persuade Americans of the unification gleaned from the difficult circumstances we have endured. In paragraph 11, Obama gives evidence of the United States’ determination by mentioning the country’s early settlers. Our long suffering is proclaimed in the example of slavery given in the next sentence. Paragraph 13 exhibits our courage through those who have defended our country in the military. He establishes more fact in paragraph 20 with the mention of perils endured by our founding fathers in establishing a nation assuring rule of law and rights of men. More examples of trials America has faced are mentioned in paragraph 21 where Obama discusses our encounters with fascism and communism. In the 26th paragraph, Obama begins using present day examples of our brave dedication with the mention of Americans who are
currently serving in the war in Iraq. Then he applies the appeal to all Americans with mention of the kindness that we show in our everyday lives as: good Samaritans, co-workers, public servants, and parents. Obama ties all of these logical appeals together when he states the values that enable our success in these circumstances are what define the character of us, the United States of America.

As exhibited, the three arguments Obama presents appeal to different senses thus, the arguments appeal to everyone. With the finesse of a politician, wisdom like a minister, and enthusiasm like a coach Obama uses different means of persuasion to deliver the same message. We must unify our efforts to conquer the army of problems we face.

**Diction**

Another area in which Obama exhibits his rhetorical skill is with use of grammar and vocabulary to convey his message. In carefully choosing what to say and how to say it, Obama delivers a powerful speech full of tradition. The emphasis clearly reiterates the message of this country’s ability to overcome our current situation if we begin thinking of ourselves as the “United” States of America.

**--Word Choice**

One technique Obama utilizes is deliberate choice of words to bond this “one nation”. One such word is found in the 2nd paragraph in the word “forebears”. Then, in the next paragraph he establishes the fact that our economy is in bad shape as a result of our “collective failure” to decide and plan. Instead of choosing another word like ancestors, Obama’s choice gives more weight to the suffering and sacrifices our ancestors made. Paragraph 22, reveals a couple examples of interesting word choice. Obama starts off this part of the speech indicating that “We are the keepers of this legacy” implying our responsibility to continue striving for the type of country our forefathers envisioned. A little further, the President states that “We will not apologize for our way of life” inferring that the American culture is uniquely ours. This idea is reinforced in the next paragraph with the word “patchwork” as a descriptor of our country’s heritage and the strength we draw from it. At the end of his speech,
Obama, for the fourth time, uses the word **common** to leave us with a lasting impression of the bond between every citizen of this country. With choice of words, Obama emphasizes our history of and our need for unification.

--- **Emphasis**

Emphasis is also a technique employed by Obama’s numerous referrals to written words from documents that our country was founded on. The first reference to the Preamble of the Constitution can be found beginning with paragraph 2. The stress here is on **we** when respecting and honoring the ideas of our founders. In another part of the speech, we are reminded in paragraph 20 of the Preamble with Obama’s mention of the common defense. In paragraph 9, Obama also touches on meaning from the Declaration of Independence when he discusses the importance of equality, freedom, and happiness. By making references to these revered documents from our history, the President adds emphasis to ideas that define our nation as one nation.

--- **Coherence Devices**

Another type of word manipulation Obama employs as a means of unity is repetitive use of words that generate a sense of unity. The inaugural speech is relatively short comprised of 2408 words. Out of the total amount of words, Obama uses words that create unison over 6% of the time. Throughout the speech he employs the word **we** 62 times to reinforce the idea that he is talking about all of the people in the country. Likewise, he accomplishes similar results by using the plural pronoun **us** 23 times. Obama also utilizes the adjective **our** 67 times in the speech to indicate that the country and all of the aspects of it belong to us collectively. By articulating these words of unity so often, our President emphasizes the fact that we are a unified country.

Obama adequately uses diction to encourage us to once again begin to think of ourselves as one nation. By using words to emphasize our past traditions, our President inspires us to look for solutions for the common good. His emphasis on our common ground unites this nation in the common goal of reclaiming our greatness as a nation. By choosing his words carefully, Obama effectively conveys a flowing message that we must be a united nation.
Figures of Speech

Obama’s resounding message of unity would be monotonous without his ample use of figures of speech. By utilizing this technique, his message becomes lively and interesting. The schemes and tropes he employs make the idea of unity more understandable to the audience. These techniques further enhance his message of how grand our country is.

--Schemes - Anaphora

Use of schemes increases the understanding of Obama’s message of unity and earned greatness. One scheme, anaphora, involves the repetition of the same words or group of words at the beginnings of successive clauses. The first example of this can be found in paragraph 3 where the President emphasizes the fact that we must remain faithful to the ideals of our ancestors by stating, “So it has been. So it must be with this generation of Americans”. In paragraph 4, Obama stresses once again the fact that the state of our country is in everyone’s hands with the repetition of “our” in the statement of facts or problems. Another anaphora used for emphasis can be found in paragraphs 7 and 8. Here Obama restates “On this day…” to build hope to overcome the problems this country faces. This same type of scheme is used again to provide evidence that we come from a harsh and difficult beginning: paragraph 11 talks about the first settlers, paragraph 12 talks about the slavery, and the final sentence talks about our fallen military. More repeated use of “our” is found in paragraph 15. This balances the statement of our concerns with the statement of our assets or strengths. Then to counterbalance both of the statements of facts, the statement of solutions contains anaphoric repetition of “we will” in order to emphasize. Farther into the speech, Obama again uses the same type of repetition at the beginning of successive clauses to emphasize more of America’s strong points. Anaphora is found again in paragraph 25 where “we” is used repetitively to propose more solutions in to the way we interact with other countries. Paragraph 26 continues with this same scheme in a tribute to Americans serving in the armed forces. Paragraph 28 supports two examples of the same, anaphoric, scheme. “These things are old. These things are true” suggests that the core values of the United States have not changed.
Two paragraphs later, Obama calls for a new sense of responsibility in the paragraphs that start with “What is”. In the next three paragraphs Obama uses short declarative statements that start with the same anaphoric beginning to drive home some key points regarding citizenship, confidence, liberty and creed. Obama concludes his speech with another example of anaphora in paragraph 34 in which he names off simple accomplishments with the repetitive “we”. Use of anaphoric schemes makes Obama’s speech more supportive of the unity required for this great nation.

--Schemes - Epistrophe

Throughout the speech, epistrophic schemes are also engaged by Obama to create emphasis of the importance of unity in our great nation. Epistrophe, the repetition of a word or words at the end of successive clauses, is another scheme found in the inaugural speech. The first instance is found in paragraph 10. “Greatness” is repeated to emphasize the importance of working toward this common goal. Though the next example is anaphoric and epistrophic, the action word here is “do” and it is intended to create urgency to action at the end of paragraph 16. Paragraph 24 addresses the Muslim world with an epistrophe that emphasizes “mutual respect and mutual interest”. Another type of scheme is found in paragraph 22 is Anadiplosis which is a repetition of the last word of a clause at the beginning of the next clause. “Even greater effort—even greater cooperation and understanding” are urged between nations as our world becomes seemingly smaller. Obama effectively uses schemes to create emphasis regarding his call for unity.

--Tropes - Personification

Tropes are another figure of speech used by Obama to create emphasis on unity to benefit the nation. Personification, for example, is an important theme in this speech and is dispersed throughout the whole discourse. The first time Obama utilizes it is in paragraph 6. Here, the problems that our country faces are personified to become “they” who are against us. This aspect increases the sense of unity. Later in paragraph 19, Wall Street assumes human qualities when “Its” power is unmatched. It has the power to make or break someone. By personifying these entities, the importance of unity can be better understood.
Another trope utilized in the inaugural speech is imagery. Paragraph 2 is the beginning of Obama’s use of metaphors. The “rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace” give a stark contrast between possible situations a new president will encounter. Obama goes on to state using enargia that he took the oath “amidst gathering clouds and raging storms”. In paragraph 8, our President fittingly refers to politics in the past as “strangled”. In paragraph 10, Obama describes our ancestors who have made this country great as having “carried us” up a rough and difficult path to achieve success and freedom. Simile is utilized in paragraph 14 where America is compared to the sum of all ambitions and greater than all of the differences from birth, wealth, or special interest group. In paragraph 18, an understanding of how our government is changing can be visualized from the “ground beneath Congress is shifting.” One can almost taste the “bitter swill” of war and prejudice described in paragraph 23. Perhaps the most powerful image of the speech is found in the next paragraph where President Obama implores estranged leaders to “unclench” their fists to take our hand in friendship. Images from the past build up to the conclusion: one strong image, found in paragraph 27, alludes to that fateful day, 911, when firefighters rushed stairways filled with smoke and debris in the attempt to save lives, the image in paragraph 31 of a black man who could not be served in a restaurant, and the image of the freezing patriots huddled by campfires on the shore of the icy river found in paragraph 32. All of the images mentioned not only demonstrate our great nation but they compel us to band together in our common goal of restoring our nation.

By using colorful language to enhance his speech, Obama adequately presents his message of our common bond in this time. By utilizing figures of speech, the message becomes tangible to the audience. The schemes that he uses emphasize his unity theme. The tropes create vivid images that the audience can take home with them. These techniques make it possible for the President to stress the importance of all of us accepting our situation and solving our problems together.
Conclusion

President Obama expertly uses his rhetorical style to encourage the American public to collectively work to restore the United States to greatness. Obama’s general plans involve each individual to strive more, to do more, and to care more. Americans must have their faith in their country restored: the energy situation must be addressed before it is too late; our schools need to be reorganized so that all learn; health care costs must be made affordable; government must start planning for rainy days while finding a way to restore our economy. Obama must follow through and address these problems as he has stated in his inaugural speech. Obama has nearly four years to start the wheel turning in a different direction. Time will tell. Meanwhile, this humble President has the support of many Americans and non-Americans. One thing we can anticipate is more of President Obama’s excellent rhetorical speeches.

In the words of John F. Kennedy, “If, in the effective use of language, style is the man, style is the nation too; men, countries, and entire civilizations have been tested and judged by their literary tone”. Let us hope that during his four years as president, Barack Obama’s talents as a rhetorician will aid in the restoration of this country. Let us hope that we can be known once again as the United States of America; the country that carries “that great gift of freedom” and delivers it safely to generations to come.