

Persuading and Defending: A Stylistic Analysis of Obama's Speech at Hiroshima Peace Park on May 27, 2016

Murana, Muniru Oladayo¹ (PhD)

Abstract

The task of persuading people to change their attitude is usually arduous more so when their action is informed by their experience or their mindset is justified by facts. An effective persuasive discourse, therefore, is characterized by multiple strategies capable of effecting a change in the psychology of the audience. This paper examines Obama's speech delivered at the last Hiroshima commemoration to explicate the stylistic strategies deployed in its production. Its thrust is that the speech is both persuasive and defensive. It finds that Obama employs all structural sentence types to achieve comprehensiveness of both his persuasion of the Japanese hosts to redefine their conception of the historical bombing and his exoneration of America. More specifically, it discovers apt choice of non finite clauses and adverbial clause of purpose in the presentation of the rationale for the gathering; adroit deployment of negation to refute the Japanese conception and exclamatory questions to advance his persuasion. Again, the analysis shows that Obama exonerates America through such devices as agentless passive, negative polarity, topicalisation and generalization.

Key words: stylistic devices, persuasion, defense, Obama's Speech

Introduction

There is no doubt that man lives in the strange world of contrastive features, the world of opposites. Such saying as: life is war and attack is the best form of defense among similar others provide linguistic underpinning for the polarity. Speech is an indispensable feature of life and as a political animal; man's meaningful existence is achieved mainly through communication. Consequently, a community of people without language can at best thrive in the hypothetical world of imagination. Both peace and war are motivated and realized through speech in a language. However, peace is more desirable, quite pleasing and pertinent to development. Thus, mutual deliberation leading to compromise and resolution is a better alternative than waging war. The expression of the British politician, Winston Churchill, in June, 26, 1954 *to jaw-jaw is better than to war-war* underlies the primacy of mutual resolution over communal disagreement.

The final stage of World War II will continue to remain fresh in the history of the world for its indelible mark on Japan. It was the point at which the United States dropped nuclear weapon on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August, 1945 leading to the death of close to 130, 000 people. The then United States' President, Harry Truman, warned - following the first bombing of 6th - that Japan should expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which had never been on the earth to predicate his perfect knowledge of the unprecedented havoc intended by the bombing. This made the tendency to genuinely regret quite unlikely. The victims expectedly were mainly Japanese; however, there were a sizable Japanese American among them. The Japanese may never forget the event of the bombing as it is marked every year. The memorial in each of the two cities contains the list of the victims known to have died since the bombing and this list is updated annually at the time of the anniversary.

¹ Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria.

Besides, the surviving victims enjoy some financial support from the government and perhaps some protection against discrimination by the people. The bombing incident is, therefore, constantly fresh in the mind of the people and the government of Japan. President Barrack Obama attended the anniversary last year (2016). He is the first sitting US president to visit the site of the atomic bomb attack. His motivation could be his humility, strong belief in unity and peaceful coexistence and powerful oratory. His speech believed to have been premeditated and cautiously crafted considering the context is the corpus analyzed in this paper. The aim is to investigate the stylistic devices employed to tactfully enlist acceptance, carefully condole the Japanese, mourn the dead and tactically position his nation, America, as forgivable.

Theoretical Underpinning

The modern focus of stylistics is the investigation of the linguistic resources deployed in the construction of texts – literary and non literary. Style study, thus, concerns the analysis of the linguistic features employed consciously or otherwise in textual production with the aim of adducing communicative reasons for such features. Basically, stylistics sets to answer the question of how a text is configured in relation to why it is thus structured. The how concerns ‘the form, the architectonics’, while the why is the ‘axis of interpretation and speculation’ (Salman, 2013:114). Style study is essentially an interpretative exercise whose thrust is the elucidation of the manner of the matter (Osundare, 2003).

Stylistics is sometimes an exercise at revealing the linguistic peculiarity of an author’s art. This perspective conceives of style as idiolect. Crystal and Davy (1969:77) explain that studying an author’s work via this theory is ‘an attempt to isolate, define, and discuss those linguistic features which are felt to be peculiarly his, which help to distinguish him from other authors’. Authorship identification, therefore, underlies the stylistic efforts that employ this theory. However, this can be dicey due to certain unifying factors in textual production.

Style is also studied in terms of deviant forms in a piece of work and their communicative implications. The style- as- deviation perspective presupposes that there are set norms or standards against which deviations are identifiable and analyzable. Lawal (1997) differentiates accuracy (grammatical correctness) and appropriateness (social acceptability) as the norms of the standard varieties of language. Nonconformity to these, therefore, amounts to deviation. Todorov (1971:31) similarly identifies four types of deviation as: quantitative (deviation in frequency of occurrence), qualitative (deviation from standard grammar), syntagmatic (deviation from a norm preset in the text) and paradigmatic (deviation from norm outside the text). Deviation is not error; it is conscious and motivated by communicative needs. Explanation of these needs through the deviant forms is the task when this theory is employed.

Besides, style is viewed as choice made from among competing and variant options inherent in language for textual constructions. Simpson (2014:22) explains the concern of stylisticians using this theoretical framework:

There are often several ways of using the resources of language system to capture the same event in textual representation. What is of interest to stylisticians is why from possible several ways of representing the same happening, one particular type of depiction should be privileged over another.

Choices in text composition are usually conditioned by selectional possibility and constraint in language (Lawal, 1997) but language does not necessarily incapacitate its users through these prescriptions as adventurous users can liberate their styles through ‘its elastic edges’ (Osundare, 2003:17). The theory of style as choice is interrelated with the perception of style as situation or product of context. The interface is grounded on the fact that choices in communication are made with due consideration to the situation. Effective communication thrives on purposeful choices mediated by the context of interaction. Context - linguistic and non linguistic; immediate and wider – are essential to textual comprehension. As Azuiké (1992) notes, context encompasses intra textual and inter textual ordering as well as extra textual features that are essential to resolving textual meaning. Context is essential to stylistic execution as most choices from the linguistic system are ‘occasioned by the writer’s expectation that the reader will locate the meaning within a broad context’ (Chinelo and Macpherson, 2015:67).

The choice-context concern of stylistics is underpinned by Traugott and Pratt's (1980:29) definition of style as 'the characteristic choices in a given context'. This position aligns perfectly with the systemic perspective on language as a network of options and a resource for meaning making. These last two theories primarily constitute the framework for the analysis as the speech under study is premeditated and sensitive considering the remote and immediate contexts of its composition.

Studies on Barrack Obama's Oratory

Obama's discourse has attracted the interpretative curiosity of some of the linguists interested in political discourse since his nomination as presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in 2008. Some of the studies of his speech are briefly reviewed in this section. Horvath (2009) examines the persuasive strategies and covert ideology of Obama's public speeches. He employs Fairclough's Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. His findings show that Obama has preference for pragmatism, liberalism and inclusiveness and that his speeches reveal overt acceptance of religious and ethnic diversity via his various linguistic choices and preferences. Kulo (2009) studies linguistic features in Obama's and McCain's presidential campaigns. The two respectively were the candidates for the Democratic Party and the Conservative Party. The aim of the study is to examine implicit statements in the language of politics. The findings show that the candidates' campaign strategies include use of metaphorical expressions, metonymy, analogy, voice and ample pronominal references.

Adamec (2011) investigates five speeches delivered by Obama. The study is a rhetorical analysis intended to reveal the persuasive strategies employed by politicians to convince their audience of the validity of their political claims and consequently make the audience willing to act cooperatively. Both quantitative and qualitative criteria are used to examine the ideas, themes and contents of the speeches and underlie their persuasive strategies. Benjamin (2012) examines the linguistic resources that inform the effectiveness of Obama's victory speech. His analysis shows that the speech is characterized by stories, personal anecdotes, gratitude, overflowing humility, inspiration, amazing sense of intimacy and call for solidarity achieved through a dash of humor, inclusive pronouns, anaphora and metaphor.

Hameed and Ahmed (2015) employ Critical Discourse Analysis relying basically on Fairclough's and Halliday's perspectives to investigate the various persuasive strategies employed by Obama to justify his proposal on attacking Syria and garner the audience support. They find that he uses pronoun we extensively to stress the collaborative nature of the undertaking and employs pronoun I similarly to register his conviction and commitment. Besides, they discover his ample use of the modal will/would as a means of predicating the future implications of the proposed attack.

This study is similar to some of the above studies in its bid to reveal persuasive mechanism in the chosen speech. However, its peculiarity lies in its stylistic framework and the defensive strategies it aims at unraveling.

Analysis of the Speech

Obama attempts vigorously in this speech to reappraise the event of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings against the backdrop of the human existence characterized by war and crises. His mission is to moderate or influence the view if the Japanese and perhaps their sympathizers all over the world about the uniqueness of their bombing experience. He believes the nuclear bombing should be understood as an instance of a great lesson for humanity in general and not an unforgettable special tragedy of the Japanese.

Quite noticeable in his efforts at accomplishing this orientation is his employment of the varied and various sentence types. One reason for this is to enable comprehensiveness considering the onerous nature of the task and another is to reflect his dynamism and conscious bid to justify his mission. The table below presents the various sentence types in the thirty-one - paragraph (p) speech composed of ninety-one sentences.

S/N	Sentence Type	Frequency
1	Simple	31
2	Complex	42
3	Compound	06
4	Compound Complex	10
5	Multiple	02
	Total	91

The simple sentence, although ranks second in frequency, is employed for a number of stylistic reasons in the speech. It is used to set the tone for the gathering by questioning its essence: Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? (p.2)

This simple interrogative sentence reveals the speaker's primary transactional motive in the encounter. His overall intention to give a new orientation through the speech is predicated early in the speech through this sentence. This interpretation is justifiable if the interrogation is not to be taken simply as merely rhetorical. Obama, thus, foregrounds the thrust of his speech as an attempt not only to define but also to redefine the essence of the gathering. Again, the simple sentence is chosen to reinforce arguments in the text as its brevity is occasioned naturally by some tone of finality. This is also accompanied by some frenzied attempt at indoctrinating the listeners. In his characterization of the world as a haven of contradictions and imperfection, he identifies religion, politics and science which are products of man's intellectualism as the source of numerous wars witnessed across the ages. He substantiates his argument through three consecutive simple sentences cited below:

The wars of modern age teach us this truth. Hiroshima teaches this truth.

Technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institution can doom us. (p.4)

Besides the melody, the combination of simple sentences reveals desperate move to convince as it engenders some 'frenetic or fast-paced feel' (Simpson, 2014:6) to the overall argument. The first two sentences are structurally parallel with the semantic implication that the subject of the first, the war of modern age - is equated with the subject of the second and the topic of the discourse, Hiroshima. This equation is intentionally calculated at reducing the bombing experience to an instance of the modern wars. The subject of the third sentence has a fully modified head whose negative tendency is spelt out in the potentiality modality encoded by *can* and finally predicated by the lexical verb, *doom*.

The third manner in which the simple sentence is successfully stylistically deployed in the text of the speech is to juxtapose the polar effects of the bombing on the Japanese, an attempt to underscore the palatable side of the undesirable event. The first three of the four sentences in the penultimate paragraph of the address are cited for illustration:

The world is forever changed here. But today, the children of this city
will go through their day in peace. What a precious thing that is. (p.30)

Obama is aware that denying the eternal change caused by the bombing event will make his speech unacceptable, he, however, globalizes the effect by generalizing the context of the change as the whole world. Besides, he emphasizes the consequent peace achieved through the compact subsequently signed by Japan as the rewarding effect. Through the contrast achieved by the initial adversative *-but*, in the second sentence, the two effects of the nuclear bombing are contrasted. The third sentence is rhetorically designed to appeal to the listeners' emotion so that they can appreciate the peace and more importantly accept the tragic incident as indubitably fated.

The complex sentence type is the most frequent in the text. This is not unusual in a political discourse and the complexity of the task before the speaker is another justification. In the early part of the speech, Obama's attempt at providing the rationale for the gathering leads to his choice of complex sentences:

We come to ponder a terrible force unleashed in a not-so-distant past.
We come to mourn the dead including over 100,000 Japanese men,
women and children, thousands of Koreans, a dozen American held prisoners (p.2)

The two sentences are similarly formed: each contains one finite and one non finite clause and their predicators are patterned alike. The structural parallelism is motivated by the speaker's passion to respond acceptably to the preceding question: why have we come to this place, to Hiroshima? The question, to the speaker's hosts, may be simply rhetorical as they gather yearly for commemoration, but for the speaker, the arrow head of America, it requires tactically premeditated answers. The paralleled syntax is designed to highlight the speaker's reasons for the assembly: to ponder and mourn. The choice of complex sentences instead of compound ones, however, requires a different stylistic argument. Each of the two sentences includes an agentless nonfinite passive clause. The first, *unleashed in a non-so-distant past*, is tactically employed to forestall apportioning blame to America. It is a defensive strategy.

The second, *held prisoner* serves the speaker to prevent direct accusation of the Japanese government and, therefore, paves way for a balanced oratorical rationale. The same structural congruity is effective in characterizing the speaker as fair. Another notable feature of the second sentence is the purposeful qualifications of the complement of *mourn*, that is, the dead by an adjectival phrase through which the list of the victims is orderly presented. The list is comprehensive and given in preferred manner with the major victims first. This group is followed by the Japanese American and finally by the Americans in Japanese prisons. Through the orderliness and comprehensiveness of the list, Obama again generalizes the tragedy of the bombing.

Obama's further attempt to expatiate the reason for the commemoration is made through the grammatical resources of infinitive and adverbial clause. These stylistic devices are not unusual in the context of defensive communication, persuasive speech and orientation discourse. The following infinitive clauses in the speech are apposite:

They ask us to look inward, to take stock, of who we are and what we might become. (p.3)
 We stand here in the middle of the city and force ourselves to imagine the moment the bomb fell.
 We force ourselves to feel the dread of the children
 Confused by what they see. (p.16)

Having established his argument that the gathering is for pondering and mourning, Obama expatiates elaborately the twin reasons. He exploits the general context of the Japanese belief in some form of communication between the dead and the living and through the infinitive clauses presents the message of the departed victims to the gathering. This message is purely the need to ruminate: look at themselves (inward) and think carefully (take stock) of their present situation and future possibilities. Besides, the meditation should include the moment of the bombing so that they can achieve the second purpose of mourning. The same elaboration is achieved through the choice of adverbial clause of purpose in the following excerpt:

This is why we come to Hiroshima:
 So that we might think of people [we love] (p.28)

Through these devices, it is obvious that the emphasis of the speech is more on the need to ponder than the need to mourn. This, however, is justifiable as mourning cannot prevent future calamity but reflection accompanied by appropriate actions can do.

Obama makes concerted efforts to influence the psychology of his hosts regarding the unfortunate incident. He attempts to de-emphasize the uniqueness of the bombing through a number of stylistic resources. First is his choice of cleft sentence with negative polarity as demonstrated below:

It is not the fact of war that sets Hiroshima apart (p.4)

As a cleft sentence, the anticipatory subject, it and its notional counterpart, the fact of war are the same since the latter is an intensive complement of the former. The major clause is also supported with a relative clause making the sentence complex. The sentence is a rebuttal. This is achieved through negation marked clearly by *not* and clefting.

Since nuclear bombing is known in the world history to have been launched only in Japan, the task of negating its uniqueness to the Japanese cannot be simple. In his bid to support his refutation, Obama employs compound and multiple sentences composed of semantically contrastive clauses:

Empires have risen and fallen. People have been subjugated and liberated,
 at each juncture, innocents have suffered- a countless toll, and their names forgotten by time. (p.4)

The contrastive incidents cited through paratactic clauses above are common in history making them logical and convincing. The presupposition, however, is that the Japanese are only unique by their strict record keeping since other brutal events have faded into the oblivion of forgotten history. The device of negation is further used by the speakers to prescribe a future perspective for the hosts as his concluding paragraph shows:

This is a future we can choose: a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are
 known not as the down of atomic warfare, but as the start of our moral awakening.(p.31)

By introducing this concluding paragraph with a met communicative structure, *this is a future we can choose*, the audience is directly encouraged to erase the negated conception and embrace the contrast prescribed. Quite prominent in the speech is the presenter's exploitation of the paradox of life in his persuasive act. He takes life as the wider context of his arguments.

Certain stylistic devices are annexed to relate humanity's contradiction to the cause of the Hiroshima bombing and thereby preclude the necessity of accusation of America or any other nation. Appeal to the listeners' emotion that every nation or human is culpable of causing massive destruction is done through exclamatory question as the next excerpt reveals:

How often does material advancement or social innovation blind us to this truth?
How easily we learn to justify violence in the name of some higher cause.

The audience is reminded subtly of the high frequency of destruction by man and the great ease with which violence is justified in life through a conflation of exclamation and interrogation. This device is used stylistically to solicit the agreement of the audience (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

Another way this is executed is through the choice of consecutive topical themes that jointly project human intellectual and socio-religious feat but also equally mark man's weakness. This topicalization is reflected below:

Every great religion promises pathway to love and peace... And yet no religion has been spared from believers who have claimed their faith as a license to kill. Nations arise telling stories that bind people... But those same stories have so often been used to oppress and dehumanize... Science allows us to communicate... and fly... But those same discoveries can be turned to ever more efficient killing machine. (p.11-13)

The conflation of theme with subject in each of the first sentence of the three paragraphs makes it topical. The various topics are well chosen as they affect all human beings. This cannot be accidental as Johnstone (2008) notes that people's prior knowledge of a persuasive task makes them to consciously design their discourse for strategic purpose. The three topics are generalized respectively through logical determiner (every), preference for plural (nations) and uncountable form without modification (science) to exclude any exemption. Through initial adversative – and yet or but, the second sentence in each of the three paragraphs presents the negative side which is responsible for human woe.

Lexical choices equally reveal the persuasive predilection and defensive stance of Obama in the address. He construes the incident of bombing as actually catastrophic and pitiable through such words as: terrible force (p.2), brutal end (p.6), violence (p.10), dread of children (p.16), terrible war (16) and deadly material (p.21). His argument, however, that such incidents are inevitable and therefore should not be taken personal is revealed by such words and phrases as: mankind (p.1), every continent (p.5), old pattern amplified (p.7) and humanity's core contradiction (p.9) while the thrust of his address that the Japanese have gained despite their loss is lexicalized by items like moral revolution (p.14), friendship (p.17), treaties (p.18), interdependence (p.23) and peace (p.30).

Conclusion

The speech, as the analysis reveals, is quite rhetorical, defensive and persuasive. Its rhetorical leaning is obvious in its identification of the two sides of the issue at discourse besides the speaker's identification with the listeners by acknowledging the depth of their historical loss. The rhetoric is targeted at securing the speaker's acceptance, garner the listeners' attention and set the tone for the mourning and pondering tasks identified by the speaker as reasons for the gathering. The address is deftly designed as a defense through some stylistic resources of generalization, juxtaposition and negation. The primary purpose of the speech, however, is to change the Japanese conception about their nuclear bombing experience. This is done by appealing to their emotion and reason, exploiting their belief in venerating the dead and emphasizing the existing peace in Japan.

References

- Azuike, M. (1992). Style: 'Theories and Practical Application'. *Language Science Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 pp.109-127.
- Adamec, B.P. (2011). *Persuasion in Political Discourse*. Masaryk University, Brno.
- Benjamin, L. (2012). 'Eight Powerful Speech Techniques that Obama Used to Wow the World I in his Presidential Victory Speech, 2012.' www.benjaminlow.sg.

- Chinelo, J. E. and Macpherson, A. (2015). 'A Stylistic Exploration of Lexical Ambiguity in Newspaper Headlines'. In *Humanity and Social Science Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp.63-72.
- Crystal, D. and Davy, D. (1969). *Investigating English Style*. London: Longman.
- Hameed, O. R. and Ahmed, J.S. (2015). 'Obama's Technique of Persuasion in his Speech on Striking Syria'. In *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity Research*. Vol 3. No.4, pp.7-13.
- Horvath, J. (2009). 'Critical Discourse Analysis of Obama's Political Discourse'. In *Language, Literature and Culture in a Changing Transatlantic World*. International Conference Proceedings. Presov: University of Presov
- Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse Analysis (2nd Edition)*. Blackwell Publishing: Malden, USA.
- Kulo, L. (2009). *Linguistic Features in Political Speeches*. Luka University of Technology.
- Lawal, A. (1997). 'Aspects of Stylistic Theory and the Implication for Practical Criticism'. In Lawal, A. (ed.) *Stylistics in Theory and Practice*. Ilorin: Paragon Books. pp. 25-47.
- Osundare, N. (2003). *Cautious Path through the Bramble: A Critical Classification of Style Theories and Concepts*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.
- Salman, S. A. (2015). 'Language and Style in Okot P'bitek's Songs of Ocol'. In Ogunsiji, A., Kehinde, A, and Odeunmi, A. (eds.) *Language, Literature and Discourse: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor A. 'Lekan Oyeleye*. Ibadan: Sterling-Horden Publishers. pp. 113-24.
- Simpson, P. (2014). *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students (2nd Edition)*. Oxion: Rutledge.
- Todorov, T. (1971). 'The Place of Style in the Structure of the Text'. In Chatman, S. (ed.) *Literary Style: A symposium*. pp. 29-44.
- Traugott, E. C. and Prat, M. L. (1980). *Linguistics for Students of Literature*. NewYork: Harcourt Brace Jovanorich.