

A Stylistic Analysis of Joseph Biden's Inaugural Address

Ran Tian

CNU(Capital Normal University) Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics Beijing 100000

Abstract: Inaugural speech is a kind of unique and important practical style with wide influence and great significance. By analyzing the language features of the speech, profound meanings can be dug out. This paper analyzes Joseph Biden's Inaugural Address from the perspective of stylistics. And it gives an analysis of phonetics, words, semantics and rhetoric devices upon this speech with the aim to provide relatively comprehensive insights into the this speech.

Keywords: Joseph Biden; Inaugural address; Stylistic analysis; Comprehensive insights

1. Introduction

Public speech in a broad sense can include many subcategories, such as religious sermons, lectures by university teachers, speeches at public meetings and so on. Different types of speech will have different styles due to the influence of different factors(Zhang Xue,2011). Public speech is done before live audiences, thus it is limited to a specific time and place. It has played an important role in education, government and business. Words have the power to inform, persuade, educate and so on. And in some cases, the spoken words can be even more powerful than the written form. The style of public speech is usually formal and it often applies rhetorical devices at the same time. The Inaugural Address is an important part of the inauguration ceremony. During the Inaugural Address, the presidents announce their policies and persuade the public to accept and support them.

Joseph Biden is the 46th president of the United States as well as the eldest one in the American history. He faces many challenges as he assumes office. In his speech, he persuades Americans to end the "uncivilized war" which has divided the country and advocates people to be a unity and defeat the COVID-19 together. When delivering his speech, Biden also employs many rhetorical devices. This paper will analyze it from the aspects of phonetics, vocabulary, semantics and rhetoric.

2. Features of phonetics

Speech is a kind of colloquial style and speakers always use many phonetic devices like alliteration to enhance its effect.^[1] Alliteration is an expression form, the conspicuous repetition of identical initial consonant sounds in successive or closely associated syllables within a group of words. The function of alliteration in speeches is to be both attention getting and memorable.

Grabbing an audience's attention is the first purpose of alliteration in speeches. No matter where the alliteration is placed, the repeated sounds can wake up an audience, especially if delivered with subtle emphasis. At the beginning of Biden's Inaugural speech, he uses alliteration device to attract the audiences attention in his speech. "It is a day of history and hope, of renewal and resolve." The repeated consonants "h" and "r" act as a wake-up call for the audience. And he also emphasizes the significance of this special day. Another example in this speech is that "we have much to do in this winter of peril and possibility". Biden here chooses the words "peril" and "possibility" to form an alliteration in order to get the audience known the challenges that now they are facing, the pandemic, the violence and so on. But he also gives them confidence that the new government has the ability to lead the American people to solve the predicament. Another purpose of alliteration in speeches is to make a concept more memorable. Here are some examples, "Yet hear me clearly: Disagreement must not lead to disunion". The use of alliteration makes an effect of strengthening the tone. Biden wants the audience to know disagreement should be acceptable and respected. "We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts." Biden calls for the American people to be tolerant and embrace the difference. Alliteration makes his idea more memorable for the audiences.

3. Features of vocabulary

Inaugural speech is a formal event, thus the words chosen for it is very important. In Biden's Address, he uses many "big words" to show the audiences that it is a very formal speech. And his choice of words also expresses his ideas and hopes to the Americans. In addition, in order to enhance the effect of speech and shorten the distance between the speaker and audience, the speakers usually use the first person pronouns more often than other personal pronouns. This fact manifests obviously in Biden's Address.

3.1 Use of Big words

To show the formality of the Inaugural Address, Biden uses many formal words. For example, he chooses the word "liberty" in stead of "free", and the word "dignity" rather the word "proud", as well as the word "security" not "safe". He also employs the word

heed” to replace the phrase”pay attention to”. As a president, he delivers his speech from the role of the leader of the whole country, thus the words he chooses here are very formal and big and creates a solemn atmosphere for the audience.^[2]

3.2 Use of personal pronouns

Nerd points out that politicians and their speech writers have taken great care to deal with the use of personal pronouns in speeches. By using them, politicians achieve the aim of expressing their intentions to the public and make the audience more easily to accept their points.^[3] In his Inaugural Address, Biden uses the first person singular “I” or “me” 52 times. The function of the first person singular is to express his views and options upon the current situations of the America and his solutions to meet the facing challenges. And the most frequently used personal pronouns is the first person plural “we”, “us”, “our” for 149 times, which accounts for 53 percent of the total number of personal pronouns. The extensive use of the first person plural in a speech can shorten the distance with the audience, integrate the speaker and the audience. At the same time, it can stimulate the audience’s sense of identity, arouse the resonance of the audience, and make the speech highly inflammatory. confidence in the new government. “Must” and “can” are used 24 times, which not only stresses the Americans’ obligation and responsibility but also encourages them to act together and reshape the unity spirit of the United States .

4. Features of sentences

Sentence patterns of speech language are also different from other literature styles, speakers usually use simple sentence structures to get the audience understood their ideas.^[4]

4.1 Variation in sentence length

Biden speaks in slightly shorter sentences. And the shortest ones only consist of three words. Examples are as follows:

Bringing America together. Uniting our people. Hear one another.

The short sentences are easily to attract the audience attention and make them easily to get the idea of the speaker. They also highlight the important points speakers want to express.

4.2 Various sentence types

Most of sentences in Biden’s speech are simple. Complex sentences are few. There are also inverted sentences, imperative sentences and questions. The inverted sentence like “ Here we stand...” is used to emphasize the information after the word “stand”. The imperative sentences like “Uniting to fight the foes we face .” “Let us add our own work.....” are used to call for the audience to do these things. The form “Let us...” shows that Biden works with the American people together. It creates an equal and trust relationship with the audience. Questions in the speech like “What are the common objects we as American love that defines us as Americans ?” “Will we master this rare and difficult hour?”are employed to grab their attention and raise their thinking. Meanwhile, questions enhance interaction between the speaker and audience.

5. Features of rhetoric devices

5.1 Use of Repetition

Repetition, especially anaphora is a kind of Biblical style which is emulated by the American Presidents in their Inaugural Address.^[5] Biden also used this device in his speech. In the following example, “We can...” is used for eight times.

We can put people to work in good jobs. We can teach our children in safe schools. We can overcome this deadly virus.

The repetition helps to achieve the function of coherence in discourse and the function of reinforcement in mood and emotion. Here Biden emphasizes the importance of unity. His words also reveal the urgency to unite people together and his ambition to revive the United States.

5.2 Use of Metaphor

Metaphor is used to the similarities between the two things though they are basically different. It is usually used by speakers in order to make the speech more vivid and lively. And the figurative meaning comes from the literal meaning of the metaphorical object. Biden also used metaphor in his speech, for example, “And over the centuries through storm and strife, in peace and in war...” Biden compares the difficulties American people experienced to the “storm”, creates a picture in audience’s mind and made his words easy to understand.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes Biden’s Inaugural Address from the aspects of phonetic, vocabulary, sentence features and figures of speech. It not only illustrates the stylistic characteristics of public speech but also explored the purpose that the speaker want to achieve. The language of the public speech is not only attractive but also informative. Nevertheless, complex sentence patterns should be less used so as to make the audience easily understood the ideas and views of the speakers. From analyzing this speech, we should learn some skills and features when making public speech.

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