

Feb 23rd, 1:30 PM - 2:45 PM

The Relevance of the Message to Time and Space: President Barack Hussein Obama Speaking

Michael A. Nkansah
Ohio University - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Nkansah, Michael A., "The Relevance of the Message to Time and Space: President Barack Hussein Obama Speaking" (2018).
Africana Studies Student Research Conference. 2.
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf/2018/006/2

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Student Research Conference by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Name: Michael Agyepong Nkansah

Program: Communication and Development Studies, M.A.

Class: Rhetoric, Culture and Social Critique

Course Code: COM 6320

THE RELEVANCE OF THE MESSAGE TO TIME AND SPACE: PRESIDENT BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA SPEEKING

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical artifacts are subjective individual representation of an idea in which meaning and purpose is found within a particular space and time – otherwise known as the “kairos” as in Greek Language. An effective rhetoric ought to be creative, imaginative and intellectual in order to be engaging and enriching to human insights. The effectiveness of a rhetorical artifact is understood through rhetorical criticism – a process of description, interpretation, evaluation and judgement. It is a process that attempt to understand the thinking, values and strategic goal of a rhetorical piece (Kuypers, 2003: p1). For instance, a public speech of a notable orator such as President Barack Hussein Obama. In the process, a rhetorical critique provides an alternative perspective, which is crucial to knowledge creation. This paper adopts the traditional perspective of rhetorical criticism by Aristotle. The traditional perspective has been used to explain advertisements, novels, films and for the most part speeches. In the foregoing, the discussion shall define concepts that forms the construct of the traditional criticism. Aristotle proposed three elements for rhetorical analysis of an individual’s performance to a target audience within a span of time: (i) the speaker or source is the person or team that work on the artifact (ii) the message is what is formulated to be presented, and (iii) the audience is those who are addressed (Kuypers, 2003: p70). The message has interrelated characteristics such as (i) logos, which is appeal to logical reasoning (ii) ethos, which is appeal to ethics and (iii) pathos, which is appeal to emotions. The audience can be categorized into three kinds

according to purpose: (i) forensic discourse, which could be jurors that decide a public or private action in the past (ii) deliberative discourse, which could be legislators who decide on a public or private action in the future, and (iii) epideictic discourse, which could be spectators who come to an event such as the commemoration of a person (Kuypurs, 2003: p72). It is also noteworthy that traditional criticism is very much contextual, which is divided into two parts: the physical setting of an event and the socio-political context out of which the rhetoric was necessitated (Kuypurs, 2003: p71). In the foregoing, elements of traditional rhetorical criticism shall be used for the analysis of the speech that is said to have made Barack Hussein Obama, the President of United States of America.

Recreation of Context

On July 27 2004, the Boston's Christopher Columbus Park became the venue for the Democratic National Congress. (Kuypers, 2003: p 71). Obama was chosen by John Kerry to give the keynote address. Prior to this event, Obama had met John Kerry but once at a fundraising event when he was a state senator at Illinois. Considering the many potential speakers within the inner circles of John Kerry, the choice of Obama over names such as Jim Carter, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore was unexpected. The campaign team of John Kerry saw Obama as an African-American who could help to attract minority votes. Moreover, he was youthful and energetic, which were qualities the campaign team could work with. Again, the democrats were interested in winning additional seats in November 2004 to have majority at the national senate. Considering that Obama was ahead in the race of the senate elections, it was speculated that giving him a high speaking platform was going to scare away potential Republican candidates (CNN, 2008). According to Obama (2006), "the process by which he was selected remains something of a mystery to him". With two weeks to prepare, he had 8 minutes to give the keynote address. Obama started to write the speech in which he intended to link his story to the larger American story. The eureka moment came, when he remembered the phrase "audacity of hope" by Reverend, Jerimiah A. Wright Jr., which became the focus of the speech. The first draft of the speech was about 25 minutes but his team including David Axelrod could only review it to 17 minutes, since Obama will not allow further reviews. However,

considering the suitability of the speech to the occasion, John Kerry's campaign team accepted it without reservations (Chicagomag, 2007).

Biography of Speaker

Obama was born on 4th August 1951 in Honolulu, Hawaii, where he lived most of his childhood. He spent a year in Washington State and four years in Indonesia. According to Obama, there was not a sharp sense of division in Hawaii, and by the time he had to confront such environments, he was already confident enough to make his own decisions (Alim and Smitherman, 2012: p1). While Obama struggled with the absence of his father as a growing child, he still kept the faith of his parents to aspire to go to the best schools in the land. He graduated with a degree in Political Science from Columbia University in 1983, and started to work as a community organizer in Chicago. Working in this capacity served many learning opportunities and personal findings for him. Obama became conscious of his ability to speak, inspire, motivate, mobilize people and funds toward shared community goals. In 1988, Obama enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he became the first African-American President of the Harvard Law Review. This achievement became a national news item but most importantly, it should have brought to Obama a new self-concept and purpose. With a doctor of laws degree from Harvard University, Obama became a professor of constitutional law from 1992 to 2004 at Chicago University. Subsequently, he represented the 13th District at the Illinois Senate from 1997 to 2004, when he ran for the United States Senate. Obama won the primaries in March, had the opportunity to give the keynote address at the Democratic National Congress in July, which will later set him on a landslide to win of the United States Senate Elections in November 2004 (Biography, 2017).

Rhetorical Style

Besides Obama's bi-racial identity, growing up within different cultures may have contributed to his appeal to people of different racial backgrounds. In the sense that Obama can be different things to different people in speech. Obama's language is said to be "ever changing as a reflection of his environment and

the racial or political composition of his audience” (Alim and Smitherman, 2012 p.4). Aside style-shifting, Obama is noted for the use of standard American English grammar and a paralinguistic style that suggest his African- American orientation (ibid., p6). According to Joseph Smith (2017), “it would have been interesting to see Obama as president with both parents alive”, and to see how that will influence his language and style of rhetoric. While Obama is considered the “the most powerful speaker of our age” (Alim and Smitherman, 2012: p4), he has been described in many different ways. Some of the words used to describe the way he speaks include eloquence, confidence, poise, conviction, composed, highly educated, humble, stern and compassionate among others. He often sorts to change the perceptions and believes of different constituencies of people (ibid., p 72), but being effective at it on one stage made set Obama apart from others. Perhaps, his first audience, the editorial team in his office may have contributed significantly to the effectiveness of his speeches.

Recreation of Audience

The keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in July 2004 was an opportunity for Obama to make a statement of his life. For the Democratic National Convention, this was an opportunity to unveil the “new promise” of the party without having to make an over statement of him. Obama lived up to the expectation by showing great confidence, energy eloquence and intelligence. He also exhibited a great degree of humility and gratitude about his achievements. Obama was able to keep a balance of seriousness and easiness as well as elegance and humor, which kept his audience captivated. In addition, he was able to find a common ground with his audience by connecting narratives of his life with that of the regular American. Following that, as part of engaging his audience, he asked rhetorical questions such as “do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in the politics of hope?” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Obama spoke to his audience using stories that many could identify themselves with across, gender, race, age among other constituencies. He achieved this by way of personifying narratives that are related to his audience. Sometimes, Obama took his audience on a journey to find their motivation or a journey to find their worthiness or even a journey to find their humanity.

MESSAGE, DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

In the keynote speech, Obama partitioned the speech into about three parts, which looked at the three cardinal principles of life that is faith, hope and love. For each part of the speech, he used stories and different approaches of storytelling to achieve his strategic goals.

In the exordium, Obama acknowledged his place as very unlikely as a result of his history. The humble beginnings of a foreign student father from a small village in Kenya, who came to the US on scholarship and a mother who was born in Kansas by a father who worked on the oil rigs and farms, and later served in the US army until the family moved to Hawaii in search of opportunities. In common, parents of his father and mother had big dreams for their children. Obama traced the unquenchable faith of his grandparents that was passed on to his parents, and to him. He was given an African name “Barack”, which means “blessing” “believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Again, “his parents imagined him going to the best schools in the land, even though they were not rich because in a generous America, you do not have to be rich to achieve your potential” (Democratic National Convention 2008). He said:

“My parents shared only not an improbable love but they shared in the abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation.... My story is a part of the larger American story, and I owe a debt to all who came before me, and there is no country on earth that my story is even possible” (Democratic National Convention, 2008).

Obama acknowledged with gratitude the diversity of his heritage believing that the dreams of his parents live on in his two precious daughters.

The second part of the speech talks about the values and commitments of the people of United States of America such as equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Obama said, “In this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and our commitment, and see how we are measuring up to the legacy of our forbearers and the promise of our future generations” (Democratic National Convention, 2008).

Obama introduced John Kerry and started to attribute every narrative to his eulogy. Subsequently, he talks about the sense of community and service, as values that is evident in the life of John Kerry in his service in the military at Vietnam and two decades at the Senate. Obama goes on to say that, “again and again, he made tougher choices when easier ones were available. His values and his records affirm the best in us” (Democratic National Convention, 2008).

Obama acknowledges the shared role of government and citizens with a narrative that makes citizens take ownership of the narrative. He uses the pronoun “we” on many occasions to express the solidarity of the American people. Obama said, “people do not expect government to solve all their problems....but they know we can do better” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Obama challenged parents to raise the expectations of their children in order for them to get ahead in life. In the light of that a black youth with a book will not be said to be acting white (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Obama subtle reference to white privilege and supremacy was to bring attention to the problem of education in black communities, while admitting to the prevailing socio-cultural structures owing to the historical precedence (Nakayama and Martin, 1999). Again, he reiterated the choice of John Kerry becoming president as the way to make things better.

In his persuasion of the audience, Obama made some subtle ethical claims (Kuypurs, 2003: p76). Obama talks about Americas famous individualism while sharing a common fate. He said, “it is the fundamental believe that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sisters keeper....and there is not a black America, or a White America, or a Latino America, or an Asia America, there is United States of America” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). His subtle use of colorblindness was neither sourced from established laws and policies nor from socio-economic and political structures (Obasogie, 2013), instead, it was sourced from a basic instinct of humans, which is empathy. He stressed on the interdependency of humanity, which is a necessary requirement for each and every American to pursue their individual aspirations.

He goes on to address established institutions such as religion, which is sometimes used to divide the country; therefore, the need for reasoning in the pursuit of individual beliefs. In this rationality, Obama adds that “John Kerry believes war would be an option sometimes but not the first option” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Therefore, should war be an option, it should be done with all the military might to achieve the intended outcome, protect those the country puts in the way of harm and earn the respect of the world.

In the third part of the speech, Obama talks about hope. He asked the rhetorical question; “do we participate in the politics of cynicism or politics of hope” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Without being a blind optimist, he acknowledged the need to think solutions to problems of healthcare and education. He traced from history the many times Americans have been hopeful; from the hope of slaves singing freedom songs, the hope of immigrants from distant shores, the hope of a young naval lieutenant patrolling the Mekong delta, and “the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes America has a place for him too”. In this statement, Obama’s use of humor brewed in sarcasm to exemplify the subject of hope, and that he is an evidence of the American dream.

In the peroration, Obama continued to use anaphora with the repetition of “I believe”. He said “I believe in things not seen, I believe there are better days ahead, I believe we can give the middle class roads of opportunity....” He urged the audience to believe in the promise of a better future. He ended the speech on that note.

EVALUATION AND JUDGEMENT - USE OF PATHOS AND ETHOS, RHETORICAL STYLE

Obama's style of delivery could be described as semi-formal, somewhat close to the grand style in traditional rhetoric (Kuypers, 2003). He was able to navigate in between the formal and informal presentation with a touch of elegance and humor. With a goal to persuade and inspire his audience, the speech also had an educational value.

Obama understood the context of the speech; therefore, he safely made some assumptions. In the first place, he took a moral stand that switched between universal truths and religious ideals, which are in line with the core values of the United States of America. Mind you, on the national crest, it is engraved "In God we trust". On many occasions, Obama used either his experiences or that of his subject, John Kerry or even everyday Americans to express the three cardinal principles of love, which he expressed as sense of community and service in addition to faith and hope. Secondly, he made an assumption about people's expectations of government and the shared role between government and citizenry.

Obama appealed to emotions of every small constituency such as African American, Hispanics and Asian Americans and White Americans, LGBT, senior citizens among others by using stereotypical or their shared experiences in order to connect with them. He was effective at using story-telling to address policy issues. For instance, in addressing the education problem in black communities, he said "if a black child cannot read that matters to me even if he is not his child" (Democratic National Convention, 2008). In another example, he empathized with a senior citizen who has to choose between paying rent and medication as a healthcare problem. In a subtle way, Obama spoke to these different constituencies without having to offend the other.

According to Obama, every black person who is successful in America has to be able to speak several different forms of the same language” (Alim and Smitherman, 2012: p1). The arrangement of the speech followed a logical order starting with the thesis of faith, then love and ended with hope. The speech was well segmented with adequate timing for the three parts. The choice to talk about love before hope was very necessary to enable coherency of thought to serve a solid build up to the thesis of “audacity of hope” (Democratic National Convention, 2008). The placement of the hope theme was appropriate for an anti-climax, but it became the climax of the speech. Obama’s skepticism with the discussion of hope is evident in his earlier acknowledgement of the need to tackle pressing national issues without alluring to blind optimism (Democratic National Convention, 2008). Considering that it was a chance to take, Obama effectively dominated the audience to have his intended outcome by the use of paralinguistic features such as hand gestures, facial expression, pitch and fluency. Obama’s use of anaphora, the repetition of the same clause “I believe in” was to emphasize on the subject of hope and establish the same meaning in different ways (Democratic National Convention, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Indeed, the message of hope was relevant to the time and space. Obama succeeded speaking hope into the lives of his audience in the midst of the security and safety issues that America faced at the time. In other words, he met his audience at their point of need. Considering that Obama was relatively a new face to the audience, he brought to them a new experience that could not have been carried by the old faces of the Democrats. In the effort to persuade his audience, the message needed to have an educational value in order to bring the diverse audience to an equitable level of understanding. Similarly, the message combined the best of ethical appeal, logical appeal and emotional appeal in ways that almost went unnoticed. With effective use of paralinguistic characteristics, Obama dominated his audience to carry them along with his message.

John Kerry was centered in the message with the discussion of love. Obama used narratives that emphasized the service and work ethic John Kerry represents. He brought the best out of John Kerry through the narrative on love. On the other hand, the narrative of Obama was very much unusually American; even though, he was able to link it to the larger American story. While each person may be better at telling their own story than another, the story of Obama is striking by merit and not only by narrative. His self-relation to the themes of the speech was very profound, and that accentuated his visibility in the speech than his primary subject. He started on the theme of faith, which captured the story of his grandfather, the parents of his father and the wife, and his own story. While his closure discussed the theme of hope, he used narratives of all constituencies that had made the American dream a living experience, which he is a product of it. It is noteworthy that Obama was to use the platform as a selling point, and he did it. He ended the speech by impressing upon his audience to share in his believe for the American people. With the choice of right discussion, strategic arrangement of themes, and right timing, the audience were effectively engaged. Obama left his audience wanting more.

REFERENCES

Alim, H. S., & Smitherman, G. (2012). *Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the US*. Oxford University Press.

Biography, (November, 2017). Barack Obama. Retrieved from:
<https://www.biography.com/people/barack-obama-12782369>

Chicagomag (November 2007). The Speech. Retrieved from:
<http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/June-2007/The-Speech/>

CNN (November 2008). The Day America Met Barrack Obama. Retrieved from:
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/05/obama.meeting/index.html>

Democratic National Convention (Published on May 22, 2008). The Audacity of Hope.
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fMNlofUw2I

Kuypers, J.A (2003). *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*. 2nd Ed. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

Obasogie, O. (2013). *Blinded by sight: Seeing race through the eyes of the blind*. Stanford University Press.

Nakayama, T. K., & Martin, J. N. (1999). *Whiteness: The communication of social identity*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Smith, J.W. (October 2017). Seminar on Rhetoric, Communication and Social Critique. Ohio University, Athens, United States.