

DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN BARACK OBAMA'S STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESSES

Antonia Enache

Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017

(by Elena Serrano Moya, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja)

elena.serrano@unir.net

167

The public image of Barack Obama in the United States and around the world is marked by his iconic logo 'Yes we can', coined during the presidential campaign of 2008 during one of the deepest and most severe economic crises up to now. American society was suffering from a deadlock caused by a Republican government more worried about the enemies outside American territory since the 9/11 attack in New York than about the financial enemies within American soil who provoked the destruction of jobs, cuts on health and education and social apathy towards the government and its policies (Jacobson 2010: 207-208; Ostrom et al. 2018: 318-319).

One of the most important political acts during a presidential term is the State of the Union Address as the president himself presents to American society, both his opponents and his voters, his political tenets. In this context, *Discursive Practices in Barack Obama's State of the Union Addresses*, written by Antonia Enache, contributes to the field of political discourse analysis of a recent political figure. The book is divided into fourteen chapters, the first two of which provide the necessary theoretical framework of the basics of American democracy, the political and philosophical tenets of the two main parties, the main functions of the president and the role of the State of the Union Addresses in the American political scene. In addition to this, each of these chapters finishes with a concrete reference to Barack Obama's political figure: on the one hand, in Chapter 1 Enache provides

a thorough summary of Obama's historical presidency; on the other hand, in Chapter 2, looking at Obama's addresses from the points of view of both political communication and discourse analysis, the author offers an overview of the topics Obama consistently tackles in his speeches such as education, the fight against discrimination, unemployment and poverty, health coverage, taxation and environmental issues. These topics are grouped under more general frameworks such as the American hegemony in the world as well as participatory citizenship and the American Dream, as the author points out in her book. In this sense, the recurrent topics and the continuous references to the American ideals explicitly embodied by Obama provide a context for textual cohesion in terms of lexis. This textual cohesion refers back to Halliday's metafunctions of language, which are especially important in discourse analysis, and specifically in political speeches.

The following three chapters deal with the ideas of continuity and change, as Obama wants to present himself as the change America needs to recover from the financial and ideological crisis especially in his first years in office but also as the continuity America needs for reforms to work out after that period (Chapter 3). To do this, he regularly uses specific people throughout his narratives as they serve as examples of his successful policies (Chapter 4). As he is the embodiment of the American Dream and a symbol of overcoming discrimination (Chapter 5), it is quite important to focus on the politically correct use of language in his speeches, employed to fight inequality and express diversity and difference.

In Chapter 6 Enache analyses the use of 'buzzwords' such as 'responsibility', 'transparency', 'cooperation', 'compromise', 'patience', 'justice', 'trust', 'selflessness', 'dignity' and 'meritocracy' to appeal to the emotional side of the audience of the State of the Union Addresses. The reader may find this chapter helpful as all these abstract concepts are used in Obama's rhetoric and discourse to make them apprehensible to the American voter because this is what America is, i.e., Obama defines The United States of America and the American Dream. Thus, if you define the country, you are defining its citizens through their work, their economy, their dreams, their successes, their sacrifices and their differences and diversity. In other words, when Obama uses these general and abstract ideas, his intention is to appeal and connect to every single citizen in the US as those words define them individually. Moreover, in order to emphasize the connection between the abstract and the personal experience, the author shows through Chapters 7 to 9 how Obama not only presents himself as the embodiment of the American Dream but how he also urges citizens to participate actively in the game of democracy as it is one of the defining features of American society. In these examples, Obama establishes a conversation with the listeners, the American society, by personalizing the relationship between him and society,

which fits Halliday's Interpersonal Function of language. According to this linguist, it is through this metafunction of language that participants in a speech act establish their social relationships (1985: 68). It is true that in the addresses the speech act may not be complete as the hearers are not able to respond immediately, but Obama constructs his addresses in order to establish a personal relationship between him and the listeners, the American population (Shariffar and Rahimi: 2015: 344), by setting himself as an example, and a political relationship by explicitly commenting on his achievements. Moreover, Obama does so as he knows as a politician that American society's response will be through the vote.

As Enache explains in her book, Obama's political agenda during his presidency was not free of political controversy especially related to topics such as immigration (Chapter 10) and the apparently diminishing role of the USA in the world (Chapter 11). Yet, he was able to reverse that controversy by linking those topics to positive buzzwords such as 'education', 'prosperity' and 'economic growth' in relation to immigration and 'leadership', 'security', 'diplomacy' and 'cooperation' regarding the US hegemony in the world. Moreover, what Enache shows in her book is how Obama seeks for legitimacy in his speeches by presenting his achievements to the audience as part of his communication strategy and of course invoking vulnerable citizens like women or the elderly as part of his fight for justice, as is shown in the last three chapters of the book.

169

Throughout the book the admiration Enache has for Barack Obama's rhetoric and political persona is clearly shown. Yet, somehow, a comparative approach to the seven State of the Union Addresses, i.e., an analysis of how Obama's political communication and discourse practices changed, if they did, throughout his presidency, considering his achievements and failures, is missing. Indeed, it would be interesting for the reader to know how Obama communicated his political legacy to the American society and the rest of the world in his addresses during his second term, when both Houses were controlled by the Republican party, who blocked many of Obama's initiatives.

A good strategy the author implements is the use of a thorough quotation and after-thought analysis which give the reader a complete understanding of Obama's rhetoric and political communication style. For instance, Enache not only provides examples of the president offering a personal and emotional touch to his speech by providing personal instances of successful Americans fulfilling the American Dream (Ex. 6, Chapter 4, p. 52), of Obama explaining his criticized policy of coalition and collaboration with other nations (Ex. 5, Chapter 7, p. 107), or of the president delivering a complete summary of his political thoughts (Ex. 5, Chapter 8, p. 114), but also a comprehensive contextual analysis of the situation within American

society, which helps the reader, especially those who may not be very familiar with Obama's legacy yet, to understand the speeches within the American political arena and to understand Obama's style.

In terms of the book's organization, the division into chapters could have been more concise and specific as the reader may find some of the topics repetitive and some others scarce. For instance, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 deal with the topics of the American Dream, American identity and the issues of nationalism and immigration, which are interrelated as Obama repeatedly implies in his speeches, especially since he is the embodiment of the American Dream, being the first black president of the USA, whose identity has been attacked by the current American president. Therefore, as they are interrelated, they could have been dealt with in the same chapter so as to give full meaning to these concepts. Similarly, topics in the last four chapters should have been discussed earlier—in fact, some of them are implicitly tackled throughout previous chapters—to allow for a deeper analysis of the speeches and the selected quotations.

To sum up, the topic of the book is quite relevant to the study of Barack Obama's two terms in the White House. Firstly, Enache's study emphasizes the importance of the State of the Union Address as part of the strategy of being in a permanent campaign (Ornstein and Mann cited in Doherty 2007: 750), which the president undertakes in order to constantly remind the voter of the challenges he has overcome, his achievements and his pending promises. Secondly, this analysis provides us with a journey through Obama's main political tenets during his presidency and how with the use of specific language, his rhetorical prowess, plus his unique and iconic image, he can effectively deliver his message to the audience, his political colleagues, and American society at the same time. Lastly, in the addresses the president in office looks for legitimation by the audience, that is, the voter, as he thoroughly presents his achievements in the previous year and his goals for the future.

Anyone interested in American Studies, American politics and discourse analysis may find this book useful for studying one of the most iconic political figures in recent years, especially in terms of how Barack Obama uses language and discourse to construct his political agenda and persona. In addition to this, throughout Enache's analysis of Obama's seven State of the Union Addresses, we witness how the audience—the voter—is at the center of his speeches appealing to the emotional side of the audience by personalizing his political agenda. I believe the analysis presented in the book will stimulate future research by the author and other American Studies experts. Yet, Obama's presidency is still quite recent and it will take some time until his legacy takes form and is understood in his own terms and his political context, both at home and abroad.

Works Cited

DOHERTY, Brendan J. 2007. "Elections: The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College, 1977-2004". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37 (4): 749-773.

HALLIDAY, Michael A.K. 1985. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd.

JACOBSON, Gary C. 2010. "George W. Bush, the Iraq War, and the Election of Barack Obama". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (2): 207-224.

OSTROM, Charles W. Jr., Alon P. KRAITZMAN, Brian NEWMAN and Paul R. ABRAMSON. 2018. "Polls and Elections: Terror, War, and the Economy in George W. Bush's Approval Ratings: The Importance of Salience in Presidential Approval". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48 (2): 318-341.

SHARIFAR, Massoud and Elahe RAHIMI. 2015. "Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Speeches: A Case Study of Obama's and Rouhani's Speeches at UN". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 5 (2): 343-349.