

The Cooperation Principle in President Obama's second inaugural Chicago speech

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Abstract

The full text of the speech given by President Barack Hussein Obama in Chicago after he won a second term in office as US President has been broken into its minimal communicative speech acts. This strategy has been used to analyse and understand how the whole speech is consistent with the cooperative maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner. Being a corpus-based work the study goes through the Rhetorical Criticism Approach with the Textual Analysis as the method at hand. The resulting interpretation shows that President Obama's speech fascinated and positively affected his listeners' emotions because it was highly consistent with all the four maxims of Cooperation, that is, the speech was cooperative in design. With these results we can confirm that the cooperative quality of a political speech is crucial to the audience's appreciation of the speaker and the value of his public talk.

Keywords: Speech act maxims, Rhetorical criticism, Textual analysis

Introduction

When people think of crucial, vital and very important persons we tend to think of doctors, politicians, teachers, philosophers, attorneys, police officers etc. Yet none of these can achieve their job without communication. To achieve the funding facilities, or support any of the above must communicate with large audiences (or have someone do it). That is where the communication specialist comes in (Gumperz, 1982).

A glance at recent history will show that in public situations it is easier to get things done when everyone concerned has the same background than when the backgrounds differ. As Gumperz (1982, p. 187) puts it: "The way we talk, along with what we say, determine how effective we are in dealing with the public."

This study aims to analyse an already-produced message and try to prove its cooperative quality-content as a factor favouring the happy reception of the message by its intended audience, in the light of the cooperative principle of Pragmatics that operates through four maxims as already indicated in the section above.

Quality and Quantity maxims

Many writers have given these two maxims separately. But now that we have to deal with the corpus speech through a practical pragmatic analysis, it looks smarter to present quality as entailing quantity. Leech (1989, p. 82) observes that both maxims frequently work in competition with one another so that the amount of information **S** gives is limited **S**'s wish to avoid telling an untruth. Harnish (1976, p. 362, as cited in Leech, 1982, p. 85) has even proposed a combined maxim as follows: maxim of quality-quantity = make the strongest relevant claim justifiable by your evidence. This goes to say that unless there are outweighing reasons for the contrary, one should not

make a weaker statement rather than a stronger one if the audience is interested in the extra information that could be conveyed by the latter. Strength here refers to the amount of information communicated.

From a pragmatic view of things the speech that is analyzed here proves itself full of evidence for quality and quantity combinations: “Tonight more than 200 years after a former colony won the right to determine its own destiny, the task of perfecting our union moves forward” (paragraph 1) is the strongest way for a president who wants to express neutrally that in voting for him and accepting these vote results the union of the Americans is reinforced. If he had said instead “I am satisfied because you have voted for me, and not only my voters but also the opposite camp has willingly accepted the vote results, which to my opinion justifies our union”, this would prove as lacking evidential justification since the speaker is in front of a diversified audience and nothing proves that these are the people who actually voted for him and who willingly accept the vote results. Moreover, it is often proved that some magazines reported cases of some Americans who decided to leave the country as soon as it was established that Obama was becoming the US president. Yet many other Americans rejoiced and enjoyed his reign as US president. Thus, the most relevant way of saying it is that neutrality (avoiding discrimination and overgeneralization) found in the line that I have just quoted.

It is possible to identify some more examples from the same speech text, like:

Some of you were new this time around, and some of you have been at my side since the very beginning. But all of you are a family. No matter what you do or where you go from here, you will carry the memory of the history we made together and you will have the lifelong appreciation of a grateful president (paragraph 8).

Furthermore, we cannot take it for randomness that all these sentences appear in the same paragraph one after another. Suppose we just considered “you have been at my side since the very beginning”, then the speaker would not only appear pompous but also he would be making a claim that is not supported by evidence. Fortunately it appears in a much longer sentence that follows: “some of you were new this time around, and some of you have been at my side since the beginning”, and which is followed by another sentence that goes: “But all of you are a family. No matter what you do or where you go from here...”

Notice here that the use of “all” in the second sentence addresses the limitedness (mistake) of “some” in the first sentence. We say it is a mistake because it sounds like breaking the politeness principle by discriminating one part of the audience.

Paragraph 20 is a powerful rhetorical discourse made of a series of “buts”. The understanding of this paragraph brings into play what is termed implication. To begin with here reads the paragraph:

This country has more wealth than any nation, but that’s not what makes us rich. We have the most powerful military in history, but that’s not what makes us strong. Our university, our culture, are all the envy of the world, but that’s not what keeps the world coming to our shores (paragraph 20)

While any hearer possessing any proof of the contrary would feel the above paragraph as full of exaggerations, and untruths, it remains possible to consider that the speaker

does not break the maxims of quality and quantity insofar as he is addressing a truly American audience. Most Americans believe that theirs is the best nation on earth in all aspects.

Considering the complete sentences containing the “buts”, we realize that the first sentence of 21 comes to given sense within the conventional illocutionary force of the utterance as accepted by both the speaker and his audience. That sentence reads: “what make America exceptional are the bonds that hold together the most diverse nation on earth.” That is a sentence full of optimisms and self-esteem, imploring once again unity in diversity in such sentences as this; it is precisely the state of potentiality as opposed to the actual act of performance that is given prominence (Leech, 1989, p. 89).

As a matter of fact, the recurrent use of referential pronouns such as “I”, “we” and “you” are crucial for a pragmatic analysis and comprehension of the overall speech in that they provide the necessary tools for the determinacy of the speaker-hearer context. The speaker is “I”, “you” stands for the addressees or hearers, and “we” stands for “I + you”. The reader of this paper should remember that in an earlier section of this paper we have already identified Obama’s audience as being entirely Americans because he defines this in his speech (paragraphs 2, 3, 11, 17, 20 ...). Of course not all the Americans were present at the very public place where the speech was held – not even all those true voters of Obama. The speaker knows his audience – real as well as visual – and he determines it, and he holds the right speech for them, and the speech’s illocutionary meaning needs to be found on these very grounds. The whole Paragraph 7 presents other unusual speech acts demonstrating the application of the quality-quantity maxims as it reads:

And I wouldn’t be the man I am today without the woman who agreed to marry me 20 years ago. Let me say this publically: Michelle, I have never loved you more. I have never been prouder to watch the rest of America fall in love with you too, as our nation’s first lady. Sasha and Malia, before our very eyes you’re growing up to became two strong, smart beautiful young women, just like your mom. And I’m so proud of you guys. But I will say that for now one dog’s probably enough.

If we consider the first sentence of paragraph 7 it seems to present a condition: “I wouldn’t be the man I am today without the woman who agreed to marry me 20 years ago ...” Can it be said that a man is only a man because a certain wife accepts to marry him? That condition is only pragmatic and belongs more to the speaker-hearer contextual conventions to mean, for instance “you have supported my campaign so much and that’s why I am a president today.” Knowledge of the politeness principle comes in for a better interpretation of that speech act. The speaker, we assume, might be meaning that the speaker gives so much consideration to his wife’s contribution in the improvement of his socio-political activities.

Later in the same paragraph the following sentence appears: “Let me say this publically: Michelle, I have never loved you more”. This requires a common ground of presuppositions for its better appreciation. “I have never loved you more” presupposes that I have ever been in love with you to some extent, and today something more adds up to my love for you. In this the hedging device “more” is to be analyzed as a semantic amplifier.

Last, yet not least, something must be said with the sentence in the paragraph; I have never been prouder to watch the rest of America fall in love with you too, as our

nation's first lady. Then the semantic meaning of "fall in love" needs to be wide enough for the hearer as for the speaker. Once again this requires a common ground of illocutionary knowledge for both speaker and hearer. Otherwise, would a man really feel proud to see the whole country (that is many persons) fall in love with his own wife. Well, the common grounds needed here are implicatures. And yet, implicatures are something so probabilistic. It is not so obviously a sure thing that the hearer is ultimately certain of what the speaker means by an utterance.

According to Leech (1989), "the observable condition, the utterance and the context, are determinants of what S (speaker) means by U (utterance); it is the task of H (hearer) to diagnose the most likely interpretation" (p. 30) Now since utterances are liable to illocutionary indeterminacy, it is not always possible for H, although a reasonable diagnostician, to come to a definite conclusion about what S means.

The relation maxim

Before addressing this issue let us say as an offset that the speech acts should be analyzed from the speaker's conversational goals. This study is more interested in the speaker's goals because the study is based on a record of his words, his speech acts. The audience, even though defined has not reacted as such in the records that we have on paper so that their reactions could be confronted with the speaker's words of course such public speech are not generally meant to be dialogic. Their conversational structure is only implied.

Now for a start in the relation maxim it is important to go from Leech's (1989, p. 94) statement: "An utterance U is relevant to a speech situation if U can be interpreted as contributing to the conversational goals of S or H." This definition of relevance stands up from the core characteristic of the maxim of relation: be relevant.

Jordan (1984) speaking about textual rhetoric gives a position that could be adapted to interpersonal rhetoric in the following way:

All informative speech can be seen as a solution to a need-to-know problem. The speaker, in attempting to meet the needs of hearers, tries to predict exactly what his hearers need to know and then directs his writing to meeting those needs. Even road signs and notices are such solutions, and notices can be analyzed in these terms of problem solving. (p. 86)

With that paragraph it is understood that the main concern of participants is with the communicative effect of what they are saying (result). Selection among linguistic alternates is automatic, not subject to social recall. The social norms which govern language usage here form part of the underlying element which speakers use to convey meaning.

Now let us turn again and look into president Obama's speech in order to discover whether or not, and how much he has been relevant. We revisit the goals he had in holding that speech, as a politician. With regard to this concern Leech (1989, p. 134) states: "conversational goals may include both social goals (observing politeness) and personal goals (finding what one is looking for)." If we consider these two goals proposed by Geoffrey Leech, then we admit, for sure, that cooperation as a pragmatic principle entails, for the speaker, tying good relations with his interlocutor within the speech situation. Here then we need to identify president Obama's personal goals, which is only possible by looking into his words. We are borrowing an English popular phrase that goes: "our words, our world".

First of all, the politeness goal is overtly manifest in the speech because president Obama has reserved most of his to friendship and respect and politeness. For example, paragraph 6 reads: "I want to thank my friend and partner of the last four years, America's happy warrior, the best vice president anybody could ever hope for, Joe Biden." Here the expression of politeness goes with acknowledgements. The same sign of politeness through thanksgiving is noticeable in the content of paragraphs 4, 7, 8 and 30. In paragraph 4, for example, the speaker is expressing thanks to all American people, his intended audience: "I want to thank every American who participated in this election whether you voted for the very first time or waited in line for a very long time" (4).

Let us fix that in saying: "whether you pounded the pavement or picked up the phone, whether you held an Obama sign or a Romney sign, you made your voice heard and you made the difference", the speaker goes eloquently beyond the confines of the speaker's side to satisfy the needs of his hearers in terms of personal consideration.

Furthermore, we must clearly state that through his speech, president Obama does not only express politeness but also thanksgiving. Most of his statements are polite, not rude. He avoids reflecting a triumphal mind and seems to forget self-praise. Beside the referential devices, such as the pronoun "we", the elegance of paragraphs 12 and 18 are worth the mention, as they look complementary with each other.

That won't change after tonight, and it shouldn't. these arguments we have are a mark of our liberty. We can never forget that as we speak, people in distant nations are risking their lives right now just for a chance to argue about the issue that matter, the chance to cast their ballots like we did today (Paragraph 12).

Tonight you voted for action, not for politics as usual. You elected us to focus on your jobs, not ours. And in the coming weeks and months, I am looking forward to reaching out and working with leaders of both parties to meet the challenges we can only solve together. Reducing our deficit. Reforming our tax code. Fixing our immigration system. Freeing ourselves from foreign oil. We've got more work to do (Paragraph 18).

The speaker does not use the pronoun "we" to escape responsibility but rather to reinforce his identity as belonging to the family. "you elected us", "focus on your jobs not ours." When it comes to taking responsibilities, he shifts to the pronoun "I": "I am looking forward to reaching ..." (paragraph 18). I want to thank ... (paragraphs 4 and 6), "I wouldn't be the man I am today..." (paragraph 7), "I have listened to you, I have learned from you, and you've made me a better president..." (paragraph 17)

Enough about the maxim of relation through politeness, now let us look at another not less important facet of the Relation maxim. This is the relevance of the speaker's speech to its orientation toward a particular goal. The goal here is not a social one but a very personal goal. One might wonder what the special goal there is in Obama's inaugural speech. Hickey's arguments provided above make notice of one thing: that nearly all politicians have a personal goal in their public speeches. That is to defend their political decisions, directly or indirectly, criticizing the ideas and actions of their opponents. If we cannot put it that president Obama's speech under study here is built upon this very goal, and fearing overgeneralization, at least we need to listen to the speaker again with this particular focus: personal goal orientation. From the early paragraphs (1, 2 and 3) we hear him saying:

Tonight, more than 200 years after a former colony won the right to determine its own destiny, the task of perfecting our union moves forward. It moves forward because of you (paragraph 1). It moves forward because you reaffirmed the spirit that has triumphed over war and depression, the spirit that has lifted this country from the depths of despair to the great heights of hope, the belief that while each of us will pursue our own individual dreams, we are an American family and we rise or fall together as one nation and as one people (paragraph 2). Tonight, in this election, you, the American people, reminded us that while our road has been hard, while our journey has been long, we have picked ourselves up, we have fought our way back, and we know in our hearts that for the United States of America the best is yet to come (paragraph 3).

And this gives us the impression that the speaker has a personal goal which he overtly expresses. That goal is more of awaking people's consciousness for determination to lift the country up. It is like the speaker's sensitization mission that will have an end: that all Americans be united in their diversities.

Now what about the election winning itself as part of the goal? Because we should not forget that it is an inaugural speech held by a politician just after winning the elections. For the speaker: "the task of perfecting our union moves forward... in this election, you, American people, reminded us that... but the best is yet to come... tonight you voted for action, not politics as usual"

The speaker decides to accommodate his audience in his own worldview. All the few extracts given above are instances illustrating that Obama held his speech with some goal. What is much of pragmatic analyst interest is how the weaving of these speech utterances has contributed to the fulfilling of the illocutionary goal. Almost all the ideas contained in the speech lines are evidences for this. But something remains even more striking with the statements in paragraphs 11 and 12 as they are complementary:

That's why we do this. That's what politics can be. That's why elections matter. It's not small, it's big. It's important. Democracy in a nation of 300 million can be noisy and messy and complicated. We have our own opinions. Each of us has deeply held beliefs. And when we go through tough times, when we make big decisions as a country, it necessarily stirs passions. Stirs up controversy (paragraph 11).

That won't change after tonight, and it shouldn't. These arguments we have are a mark of our liberty. We can never forget that as we speak, people in distant nations are risking their lives right now just for a chance to argue about the issues that matter, the chance to cast their ballots like we did today"(paragraph 12).

Beside the fact of evidencing his ideology and dreams for the country, the speaker is now drawing the audience's attention to one thing: the electoral struggle or competition is a proof of our determination to lift our country further and further. There's somewhere to go, with this mobilization. Being part of his own personal goal to take his audience into his boat, he tries to describe where he wants to take them, and what it looks like being there. The paragraph 15 reads:

We believe in a generous America, in a compassionate America, open to the dreams of an immigrant's daughter who studies in our schools and pledges to our flag. To the young boy on the south side of Chicago who sees a life beyond the nearest street corner. To the furniture worker's child in North Carolina who wants to become a doctor or a scientist, an engineer or an entrepreneur, a diplomat or even a president –that's the future we hope for. That's the vision we share. That's where we need to go- forward. That's where we need to go.

The Manner Maxim

According to Leech (1989) the maxim of manner -be perspicuous- appears like the Cinderella of Grice's (1975) four categories: others have followed Grice in mentioning it last, and it rarely figures in explanations of conversational implicature. Grice himself sees this maxim as in some sense less important than the maxim of quality, and as differing from the others in relating not to what is said, but rather, to how it is said, is to be said (as cited in in Leech, 1989). Some of the critics often equate this maxim to the Clarity Principle, yet the difference between "being perspicuous and being clear is to say the least meaningful.

Other diverging arguments are whether a maxim of manner would better serve textual rhetoric or better interpersonal rhetoric. Leech (1989, p. 100) suggests that it might serve both. In fact, there exist two kinds of clarity. One kind consists in an unambiguous use of the syntax and phonology of the language in order to construct a clear text. Another type of clarity consists framing a clear message; there is a message which is perspicuous or intelligible in the sense of conveying the intended illocutionary goal to the addressee. Perspicuity in this sense is hand in glove with relevance: both the maxim of manner and the maxim of relation will favour the most direct communication of one's illocutionary point. And indeed, this is why addressees will normally assume the most direct interpretations are blocked.

Looking into our speech as corpus with these lenses it comes forth that the maxim of manner is the most widely used of all by Obama. To start with, except for some very few instances, most of the speech statements are devoid of any ambiguity or unnecessary verbiage. If we must start by exceptions we shall start by elaborating on the cases of ambiguity and unperspicuity. For example in paragraph 7, when the speaker mentions his wife, the audience might have expected him to say: I want to thank my wife Michelle for ... just as he did in the preceding paragraphs. But this time the speaker turns it otherwise and delivers his message of acknowledgements to his wife in a rather indirect statement: [and I wouldn't be the man I am today without the woman who agreed to marry me 20 years ago. Let me say this publicly: "Michelle, I have never loved you more..." Some critics might take this as the expression of the president's unavoidable sentimentality. For sure, it might be understood as a way of introducing his wife to the audience. But let us remember that they already know her. This was Obama's second term election as a US President and he had been married. The second interpretation is that since this paragraph comes just in a series of other paragraphs in which the speaker has been expressing thanks, then we might think that he is saying this as a way to thank his wife for her participation in the political battle.

Before looking at it differently, it becomes quite obvious that the syntactic clarity impacts on the illocutionary clarity. Ambiguity might mislead the hearer in this interpretation of the speaker's illocutionary message. Fortunately, most of the statements through this speech are unambiguous. Paragraph 19, just as an instance reads:

But that doesn't mean your work is done. The role of citizen in our democracy does not end with your vote. America's never been about what can be done for us. It's about what can be done by us together through the hard and frustrating, but necessary work of self-government. That's the principle we were founded on.

In that paragraph the speaker expresses his dreams for an effective mobilisation of all Americans. He struggles to make them understand that what they have done with the vote is one more step forward and not the end aim.

Moreover, paragraph 27 completes:

America, I believe we can build on the progress we've made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunity and new security for the middle class. I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you're willing to work hard, it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you love. It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or native American or young or old or rich or poor, able disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you're willing to try.

The overall structure of this speech presents a logical sequence that aids the best understanding of its illocutionary meaning. For example, the fact the five successive paragraphs (4 through 7) are made of acknowledgments, helps the hearer to interpret paragraph 7 as being rather a polite and mannered thanksgiving than just a mere introduction of Obama's wife or a deliberate expression of Obama's wife or a deliberate expression of Obama's sentimentality, as might have been interpreted otherwise. The paragraphs 1, 2 and 3, as they are successive are opening the speech by providing the context of understanding of the rest of the text. Paragraph 9 through 13 constitute a particular block that presents the state of things (elections) as a manifestation of the determination to build unity through or in diversity. That is the speaker's point of view. There are provided arguments to support this point of view and to make his audience believe and trust it. In paragraph 14 and 19 is a complement to the preceding by providing more reasoned arguments to convince his audience. The speaker uses a block of 8 paragraphs (21 through 28) to express his dreams for the country.

Conclusion

This pragmatic look into president Obama's inaugural speech of November 2012 in Chicago has focused more on the cooperative principle as seen through its maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relation. The intention was to discover through technical pragmatic lenses how much the speech producer endeavoured to conform to the cooperative requirements. Since communication skills are commonly considered as critical for desirable managers, executives, staff, and other employees then, people having influence and control over mass-mediated messages deserve equal attention. They can have immediate and long-term impact on thousands or millions of people-sometimes at an incredible speed.

Just like any political speech, anyone who watched the video might have realised that the audience of president Obama's second inaugural speech in Chicago, as they were attending the assembly during which this speech was given clapped and cheered continually at every pause of the speaker. The question was whether they clapped and cheered because there were beautiful and exciting promises throughout

the speech or just because of the speech's particularly striking content. All things being equal, it was assumed the president's speech was washed enough and therefore was pragmatically ready to be chewed and digested by the hearers without any misunderstanding. In search for this pragmatic guarantee through textual evidence this analysis has taken into account a combination of strategies. Strategic techniques and procedures were all put work under the umbrella of the rhetorical criticism approach.

It has been discovered, through such probing analysis, that the speech given in Chicago by President Barack Obama in November 2012 was consistent with the audience's discursive expectations. This consistence was due in part to the fact that the speech was orderly in structure and consistent with contextual interpretation. It is not that the speaker communicated only what the audience was expecting him to say in terms of content, but he consistently and competently communicated his own prepared message, through coherent argumentation. The second level consistency lies in how much cooperative the speech was as a whole. The speaker started by defining the illocutionary context in order to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation. He tried to present all his thoughts without many ambiguities. He avoided unnecessary speculations by saying, at every instance, just the rhetorical truth in its most minimal informative way. There is no obscurity of expression since the speaker used less and less implicative and ambiguous statements avoiding unnecessary prolixity.

This analysis has embarked us into confirmation of pragmatic hypotheses by analysis of corpus data. We acknowledging some limitations in the present study which are due in part to the nature of the research, that corpus study in pragmatics is probabilistic. There is still much to be done for example about the Processibility Principle in relation to an articulation on theme and focus. A textual rhetoric approach can be also possible used in exploring for instance the Expressivity Principle as well as aesthetic aspects of this public communication considering it in its textual form. We are sure that through such studies as well as other kinds of related concerns one could come closer to bringing more and more people into this area of research and contribute to clearing out the clouds that are due to the lack of objective information.

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