



## **Obama and Bush: their victory and non-victory speeches**

**Dolores Fernández Martínez**

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria  
España

**Verónica Cristina Trujillo González**

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria  
España

### **Abstract**

This article aims to analyse the use of the first person plural, second person and third person references in Obama's and Bush's victory speeches. The contrasting circumstances surrounding the election of both presidents were imprinted on discourse through different patterns of personal references (Martin, 1992) and transitivity structures (Halliday, 2004 [1985]). By analysing them this paper will illustrate the social function of individuals in the speeches, as well as the way in which the systematic use of both linguistic devices contributed ultimately to define the role of the speakers as presidents of the United States. Whereas Obama's victory speech centred on the audience and allowed them to feel protagonists, Bush's anti-triumphant speech ignored them.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis; political discourse; Obama; Bush.

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Afiliación: Dolores Fernández Martínez: Departamento de Filología Moderna, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. España. – Verónica Cristina Trujillo González: Departamento de Filología Moderna, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. España.  
Correos electrónicos: dfernandez@dfm.ulpgc.es; vtrujillo@dfm.ulpgc.es  
Dirección postal: C/ Pérez del Toro, 1, 35003, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas, España.

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## 1. Introduction

Discourse analysis, as the study of language use in social contexts, has underlined a social dimension in the text in terms of which discourse both is influenced by contextual aspects and influences them as well. Contextual factors include institutions, ideology and the social function of individuals. They make up a network of interrelationships in which the analysis of any of these variables may lead to information about the others (Brown & Yule, 1983; van Dijk, 1985; Delu, 1991; Fairclough, 1995, 2001 [1989]; Gunnarsson, 2000). From this perspective, discourse emerges as an instrument of social action and control at the service of a particular institution, organization or ideology.

Discourse analysts have focused on different types of texts: dialogic (Nystrand, 2002; Thornborrow, 2002), journalistic (Li, 1996; Teo, 2000), educational (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Tupper, 2008), religious (Ferguson, 1985; Fernández Martínez, 2007) and political (Chang & Mehan, 2008; Wodak, 2009). Politics represents one of the most attractive research fields for discourse analysis. Although the study of political discourse has attracted the interest of scholars since the beginnings of discourse analysis, the expectations created about Obama as a political and media celebrity have made of him one of the most repetitive objects of research by discourse analysts (Frank & McPhail, 2005; Boyd, 2009; Horváth, 2009; Zhao & Yang, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Obama's discourse represents a rich source of exploration into the mechanisms which contribute to the great success of his public appearances. His overwhelming popularity has transferred the interest from the political to the personal plane: "I'm not the first to point out that the Obama campaign seems dangerously close to becoming a cult of personality" (Krugman, 2008). "The polarised divide created by the 'two Americas' rhetoric and the manifest failures of the Jacksonian presidency of George W. Bush created a hunger for change which Obama seized more effectively than any other politician" (Toal, 2009: 382).

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States on January 20, 2009. His presidential campaign began in February 2007 and in the 2008 general election he defeated Republican contender John McCain. He is the first African-American to ascend to the highest office and also the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

The central issue in Obama's presidential campaign was the economy, because of the crises in financial markets and the sharp drop of the economy into recession (Toal, 2009). Economic concerns also dominated the war in Iraq and terrorism. Obama's unusual personal characteristics and his sensitiveness for conveying the idea of global unity placed him in an unprecedented international position. He personified the American and world-wide desire to transform the socio-political environment. Thus, his victory speech represents a valuable source of analysis to investigate political discourse as a field of ideological triumph.

This context contrasts with the lack of attention raised by Bush eight years earlier<sup>2</sup>. Far from the triumphant character of Obama's words, Bush's victory speech was anything but victorious. Ritter & Howell (2001) describe the extraordinary circumstances of the ending of the 2000 presidential election in which Bush had to face a situation unprecedented in modern American presidential discourse. Bush was elected with a smaller number of votes than his opponent. He won by acquiring the electoral votes from the state of Florida with accusations of vote fraud and improper ballot counting. The results proved that the country was divided over its choice for the next president. "Bush was painfully aware that his election required a degree of modesty and brevity when discussing his new role as president-elect" (Ritter & Howell, 2001: 2325). This sentiment justifies Bush's decision to speak to an immediate audience gathered in the chamber of the Texas House of Representatives in Austin. In contrast, media reactions to Obama's inspirational victory communication centred on its tremendous immediate impact on the huge crowd of supporters crammed into Grant Park who knew they were witnessing history and were willing to be part of it. The divergent situations that marked the victory of both presidents after the elections led to different types of messages.

## 2. Analysis

The purpose of this paper is to analyse Bush's and Obama's victory speeches by focusing on one of the components within

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<sup>2</sup> George W. Bush was the 43rd President of the United States. Bush was elected President in 2000 as the Republican candidate, defeating then-Vice President Al Gore. He successfully ran for re-election against Democratic Senator John Kerry in 2004, in another relatively close election.

the social dimension of the text, namely, the function of the participants involved in the message<sup>3</sup>. In this work we will examine the role played by first, second and third person references or systems of identification taking into account the transitivity structures (Halliday, 2004 [1985]: 168-305) in which they appear<sup>4</sup>. Transitivity structures illustrate the experiential metafunction of the clause which represents a picture of reality as a complex of processes associated with some participants and circumstances. Halliday's transitivity constructions exemplify the behaviour and social function of members in discourse, as well as the relationships and influences enacted between them.

As will be described, Obama makes a carefully designed use of them in order to construct his message. His function as President of the United States is underpinned by the role he assigns to the audience, either through the second, third or first person plural. Obama felt victorious and he demonstrated so. Bush's words, on the other hand, represented the anti-triumph speech, the speech of failure. Bush did not make the audience participants of his victory, and by not doing that he made them participants of his failure.

### 2.1. Third person (*they*)

In Obama's speech the third person references (*they*) are intentionally employed in order to describe *you* as a diversified entity embodying different roles in society, an entity who moved from doubt and fear towards the bravery of the present<sup>5</sup>. Obama initiates his speech by appealing to the third person reference *anyone* which represents a social entity in doubt (*who still doubts, who still wonders, who still questions*). Through the third person references, the text describes the second person

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<sup>3</sup> Martin (1992: 129) defines *participant* as "a person, place or thing, abstract or concrete, capable of functioning as Agent or Medium in transitivity ...", although in this paper the term is confined only to people.

<sup>4</sup> Martin's (1992: 107) system of identification examines the way in which language is structured to refer to the participants in discourse, as well as the relevance attached to them in terms of the referential chains they generate: "The more central the participant ... the more likely it is to provide a referent for a phoric item ...". Martin (1992: 129) also comments on the role of the participants as agents within Halliday's transitivity design.

<sup>5</sup> Citations are taken from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/04/us/politics/04text-obama.html>. Citations from both speeches will be written in italics in this paper.

as a patient individual (*people who waited*), but convinced (*they believed*). The use of a double-sided transitivity structure of material and mental actions related by a causal relationship (*because*) contributes to enrich the second person as an agent of actions supported by a reflexive attitude. *People who waited three hours and four ... because they believed* represent the *you* who despite their doubts, acted, that is, voted.

The diversified identity of the third person is defined in terms of age, economic status, ideological and sexual orientation, race, nationality and physical conditions (*young, and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled*). All of them make up the national character of *you, Americans*, who transmit the first direct description of the first person plural to the world (*Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states*).

A hesitant and frightened *they* (*those who've been told ... to be cynical and fearful and doubtful*) evolves until becoming a strong entity (*working men and women, the young people who rejected the myth of the generation's apathy who left their homes and their families ... the not-so-young people who braved...*). In order to underline the mature nature of the second person, the speech follows a systematic transitivity construction of mental processes (*rejected, braved*) legitimating their role as agents of material actions (*left, knock*). The *you* of the past is also portrayed as a patriotic entity with strong determination (*from the millions of Americans who volunteered and organized and proved*).

The message proceeds by introducing key matters in American politics through the description of *they*: a reference to war conflicts (*brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq ... to risk their lives for us*) and to issues of money, health and education (*mothers and fathers who will lie awake ... and wonder how they'll make the mortgage or pay their doctors' bills or save enough for their child's college education*). But despite the ambitious scope of matters of concern, Obama is strategically cautious, as he continues referring to the weak and doubtful *you* by introducing him periodically in the text (*many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make*). This third person reference represents the weak and doubtful *you* of the present and the future, who resembles the weak *you* of the past, but opposes the genuine *you* of the present and the future.

President-elect Bush initiates his speech with a third person plural by addressing *My fellow Americans* who are the *you* recipient<sup>6</sup>. Obama's third person describes *you* as a diversified entity representing different roles in society, an entity who moved from doubt and fear towards the bravery of the present. Throughout Bush's speech the third person refers mainly to individual references: firstly, to Vice President Gore and his family, with an empathetic tone because of his understanding of that difficult moment for them (Ritter & Howell, 2001: 2322); Bush thanked *all the volunteers and campaign workers*; he also referred to Senator Lieberman, his wife and daughters, Dick Cheney as the next Vice President, his *friend*, *House Speaker Pete Laney, a Democrat*, the former Democrat Lieutenant Governor, Bob Bullock... In order to deprive the text of any triumphant connotations, Bush concentrated the attention of the listeners on the Democrats, who had got more votes than Republicans. For Bush the election had not been won; it had been *finalized*. Nevertheless, he granted an isolated place of consideration to the people who voted him: *I am thankful for America ... thankful to the American people*. America is presented as a unified national entity with a consensus: *Our nation must rise above a house divided. Americans share hopes and goals and values far more important than any political disagreements*.

In Obama's speech, transitivity patterns placed the third person as subjects of material and mental actions. In Bush's speech Americans are mainly confined to meaningless mental actions: *I know America wants reconciliation and unity. I know Americans want progress*. Also, their relationship with the speaker is enacted from their position as objects or complements. Their dispossession of relevant agent roles symbolizes their lack of importance as participants: *we can unite and inspire the American citizens, we will give Americans, the good hearts and good works of the American people, to make America a beacon of opportunity, Two hundred years have only strengthened the steady character of America, I have something else to ask of you, every American. I ask for you to pray for this great nation*. Facing Obama's depiction of *you* as a diversified entity representing different roles in society, Bush mentioned diversity in a very general way: *an America that is united in our diversity*. Fitting

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<sup>6</sup> Citations are taken from <http://www.2001inaugural.com/victory-speech.html>.

well with Bush's attitude of modesty, he committed himself to serve as *the president of every single American, of every race and every background*. The function of the third person as the second person of the past who overcame doubts and fear in Obama's message is reduced now to a reference to the presidential election of 1800 in which Thomas Jefferson was narrowly elected: *Two hundred years ago, in the election of 1800, America face another close presidential election. A tie in the electoral college put the outcome into the hands of Congress*. Bush used that episode from the past as an example to guide Americans to a peaceful resolution of the current electoral differences. Accordingly, the lack of any declamatory tone in Bush's message also affected the significance of the third person as protagonists in the electoral process and as agents of the tasks lying ahead. Bush's victory speech was anything but victorious, and so was the role he assigned to the third person.

## 2.2. Second person (*you*)

The second person (*you*) in Obama's speech represents the listener as an individual who played a relevant role in the past and recent past, and contributed to the creation of *we*. The second person appears at the beginning of the message in the form of the possessive adjective *your* (*tonight is your answer*). The beginning of the message attempts to solve the doubts of the second person and to place them in the present time, as the point of departure for the future (*tonight is your answer*). The second person as subject is introduced in *And I know you didn't do this just to win an election. And I know you didn't do it for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead*. The text negates the past in order to restore a new order of things through the double-sided transitivity pattern of material and mental processes. The role of the second person as agent (*did*) is again supported by a cognitive verb (*understand*) which validates his actions and which portrays him as a conscious entity.

Afterwards, the second person *you* appears as object pronoun in transitivity structures dominated by the first person singular *I* as agent (*I promise you, I will listen to you, I will ask you...*). Through them, the speaker maintains the communicative connection with the addressee, especially by means of verbal processes, and makes him share his feeling of thankfulness and

support. *You* is not an agent of material processes of the present or the future; it is an agent of the past who has contributed to the accomplishment of tonight's *you*, the *you* who becomes a powerful agent of the present and the future, not as a second person, but through *we*. Yet, *you* is presented as a source of present reflection, aware of his responsibilities in the present for the task that lies ahead (*you understand*).

In Bush's speech, the second person *you* is merely the addressee, nothing more than that. *You* does not function as subject in transitivity structures, only as complement and object within a text invaded by the first person singular *I*: *My fellow Americans, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you tonight, I am thankful ... to serve as your next President. Bush's text is dominated by individualism. The you addressee in Bush's message is also deprived of any major agent role, being just bestowed a complimentary religious mission: I have something else to ask of you ... I ask for you to pray ... I ask your prayers ... I thank you for your prayers for me and my family, and I ask you to pray for Vice President Gore and his family. You is nullified and left in a void in the new political period which opens now. They are entities without power, submissive people who are just to be served: Whether you voted for me or not, I will do my best to serve your interest, and I will work to earn your respect.*

### 2.3. First person plural (*we*)

In Obama's speech the *you* of the present and the future has produced a new entity, the *you* in power who, associated to the first person *I*, produces the first person plural (*we*). In its first manifestation, *we* appears within a negative structure in the past in order to later reinforce its description in the present: *we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America.* Far from being conceived of as a mere group of individuals, *we* represents a national unit whose description in terms of age, status, ideological and sexual orientation, colour, nation and physical conditions has been previously provided through the portrayal of the third person. The transitivity structures of *they* have prepared the territory for the first appearance of *we* in its patriotic role, but in addition, the negation of the past has also prepared the ground for the association of the first person plural to the present and

the future (*are, and always will be*). *We* represents an amalgamated individuality, *they* (namely, *you*) and *I*, which belongs to the present and the future. *We* is the entity which unifies past, present and future. Future expectations determine the agent role of *we* (*what we can achieve*), but emphasizing the present as the point of departure (*tonight ... this date in this election at this defining moment*), and maintaining a link with the past in order to validate his role as an agent of change (*but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment change has come to America*).

Once the identities of the third and second person have been defined, *we* becomes visible as a main participant in the text. Obama reiterates explicitly the association of *we* with the present and the future, and assigns to it the triple-sided transitivity structure of material (*celebrate*), existential (*stand*) and mental (*know*) processes. *We* is an agent of reflection and action which comes into view tonight (*as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow ... we stand here tonight, we know...*). The text also presents the first person plural as a participant who is cautious about the future (*may not*), but nonetheless displaying a strong determination (*will*): *We may not get there in one year or even in one term. But, ... we will get there. I promise you we as a people will get there*. Second, third and first person plural are interpreted as a cohesive entity of power looking ahead to the future (*I promise you we as a people will get there*). But the first person plural is enriched by additional roles. *We* represents *you* in responsibility, an agent of control that emerges in the present and projects to the future, a social actor bringing about change (*the challenges we face ... the change we seek ... for us to make that change*).

The Obama who faces the doubtful ones, supports peace and opposes the enemy is depicted through a play of third, second and first person plural intertwined with past, present and future: *to those who would tear the world down: We will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security we support you. And to all those who have wondered if America's beacon still burns as bright: Tonight we proved.... We comes into play tonight (we celebrate tonight, we stand here tonight)*. It is the *you* and *I* with power and capacity (*can*) to accomplish tasks and above all, change (*we can achieve, challenges we face, the change we seek*). Capacity and achievement are both reiterated throughout the message, although Obama condenses these ideas at the

end of the text through the unified identity represented by *we* (*Yes we can, Yes we can, Yes we can*). This linguistic structure emerges a means of conveying a strong feeling of confidence and supremacy on the addressee in a direct way.

The first references to *we* in Bush's speech embrace Vice President Gore and president-elect Bush: *we both gave it our all. We shared similar emotions. ... We agreed to meet early next week ... and we agreed to do our best to heal our country ... we are able to resolve our electoral differences*. In Obama's speech *we* represents the *you* in power associated to the first person. Now, *we* is oversimplified by the individuality of Bush's message and what has been considered its main topic, namely, bipartisan unity (Ritter & Howell, 2001): *Republicans and Democrats have worked together to do what is right for the people we represent, We had spirited disagreements, and in the end, we found constructive consensus, we must put politics behind us...* Bipartisan unity through the use of the first person plural is imposed all over the text and, at some points, reinforced with the reiteration of the structure *Together, we will...*, which leaves Americans in a totally devaluated position. Ritter & Howell (2001: 2324) talk of Bush's implicit confidence in the ability of American citizens to create a better society: *I have faith that with God's help we as a nation will move forward together, as one nation, indivisible. And together we will create an America that is open, so every citizen has access to the American dream*. But that confidence is not implicit; it is non-existent. The text fills the reference emptiness of the first person plural with fake bipartisan cooperation. Under the façade of peaceful resolutions and overcoming divisions, Bush formulates a pattern of personal references in which Democrats will apparently play a part in future decisions. With this strategy there is no place left for *we* as an entity of power embracing addresser and addressee. However, to consider *we* as a corporation of power based on bipartisan concord was just a discursive strategy to disguise the individualism of the first person plural.

### 3. Conclusion

McDurmon (2008) has described the parallelism and similarities between Bush's and Obama's victory speeches. According to him, at some points in their speeches you can get confused as

to who said what. McDurmon states that their words were not so much different; the rhetoric of change is present in both of them, the promise of progress or the partisanship. Nevertheless, as has been argued in this paper, the function of participants and the responsibility of their actions in those issues differ. Nick Morgan praised Obama's address because of its focus on the audience: "The best thing about Obama's speeches so far is that they are not about him, but rather about the audience. That is almost unheard-of for a politician, and rare for any speaker. Therein lies his oratorical genius" (Dlugan, 2008). Bush did not have any triumphant feeling and that sentiment was transferred to his audience by depriving them of any significant role in his speech.

The different conditions surrounding the election of Bush and Obama were encoded in their speeches and, more precisely, in their different patterns of personal references. Obama's words were the words of victory, his speech centred on the audience and he turned his victory into the victory of the people. Bush's words were the words of failure and resentment turned into discourse punishment for voters. Bush offered no clear celebratory declaration of triumph. Thus, his addressees were assigned a blank role as entities of the past, present and future.

Despite the connotations this study has supplied on the use both presidents make of language as an instrument of social action, further research remains to be carried out so as to shed new light on the implications of their speeches. Supplementary conclusions might help elucidate the full implications of Obama's slogan so as to unveil *who can*, assuming that, unlike in Bush's speech, *yes, we can*.

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