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American topoi in Barack Obama's Presidential Oratory

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AMERICAN TOPOI IN BARACK OBAMA'S PRESIDENTIAL ORATORY

Abstract

In the article I conduct analysis of Barack Obama's political speeches delivered by him in the 2008 and 2012 election campaigns in the USA. The primary focus of the analysis is put on different American cultural *topoi* and the way these serve as means of persuasion. The contrastive analysis of the speeches from the two election campaigns allows me to pinpoint the common areas between them, as well as points of contrast; also, I can observe how Obama adjusts his rhetoric to the changing expectations of the audience.

Keywords:

rhetoric, Obama, topos, persuasion, election campaign



The study of American presidential rhetoric constitutes a subgenre of political rhetoric, a subject keenly explored by scholars who deal with cultural studies and political science alike. As observed by Sonja Schwarz, presidential "speeches deserve to be studied because they are a unique product of human expression and of human creativity" (Schwarz 2010:8). Also, the study of rhetoric helps us to develop skills pertaining to how one can communicate one's ideas in a persuasive way – in addition, it teaches us how to discern rhetorical strategies that others are using in order to influence us. These skills are becoming exceedingly necessary in an age of mass media, when potent voters are bombarded every day with messages from radio, television,

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newspapers, and the Internet, and thus finding themselves flooded with public discourse. At the same time, the investigation of political oratory helps in discovering cultural scripts that govern the discourse of different communities.

In this article I intend to investigate selected cultural *topoi*, motifs, and concepts characteristic of the American culture, which are employed in Barack Obama's presidential oratory to persuasive ends. In order to look into the communicative functioning of these rhetorical stratagems, I have conducted a rhetorical analysis of selected speeches from Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, and of early campaign speeches from 2012.

The research I undertake in the article has to account for numerous characteristics of American presidential rhetoric which have been informed by American history, by the American political system, and by American rhetorical culture. William K. Muir observes that (1988:261)

One of the presidential powers is to speak. It is a unique constitutional power, for the president does not have to share it with any other branch of government [...] This independent rhetorical power is central to the presidency, and a prime responsibility of every chief executive is to use it well and, through language, to clarify the fundamental and animating ideas that free people carry in their heads and that give purpose to their actions. [...] If a president fails to execute this rhetorical power, he will be a failed president [...]

43

It is critical to observe that the American president does not only reign, but also rules (cf. Windt 1992: 207). He is not regarded as a party leader, but rather as a head of state and chief executive – the Article II of the American Constitution grants him the right to appoint ambassadors, judges of the Supreme Court, and all other officers of the US, to request written accounts from all branches of the government, to make treaties, to veto laws passed by Congress, and to act as commander-in-chief if necessary. In practice, the president of the US also acts as chief legislator in sending draft bills to the legislative branch of government. Finally, he acts as the country's chief diplomat. In short, the US president is the “nation's leading political figure” (Schwarz 2010:12).

In the 20th century, American presidents recognized that presidential *power* is the “power to persuade” (Neustadt 1960:11); and, with the boom of mass media, speeches became the “core of the modern presidency” (Gelderman 1997:8-9). One can differentiate between various subgenres of presidential oratory; for instance, the inaugural speech, the State of the Union Address, or the “crisis speech”; yet all of them

are written to become events to which people react as to no less than “real” events themselves. Thus the American political system requires presidents to be outstanding speakers, and that their speeches take on somewhat of a “performative” quality, they become “spoken action”.

One aspect of US presidential rhetoric turns out to pose particular methodological problems, that is, ghost-writing. When I refer to Barack Obama in the context of his rhetoric, I employ nothing short of a metonymy; Barack Obama may be a crafty politician, a brilliant speaker, but he is not the wordsmith, he does not devise his own speeches from scratch by himself. Ladd Hamilton casts a rather negative light on the role of ghostwriters by suggesting that “communication through hired hands may be cheating not only the voters but the candidates themselves. An end of this plague of ghostwriters would serve not only to enlighten the voters; it would also force the politicians to examine their own thinking about the issues, and in the process, enlighten them” (1992:215). Robert Turner, who worked as a speechwriter for president Truman and Kennedy, offers a different perspective on this topic: “Although the writing in ghostwriting was done by staff people, you need to remember two things: first, the staff people were trying to say what they thought the President himself would say if he had the time to do the writing; secondly, the President does go through it very carefully, and frequently, he does suggest changes” (Einhorn 1988:99). Nonetheless, the matter of “authorial question” needs to be taken into consideration in any investigation of the US presidential rhetoric.

44

Jon Favreau, Barack Obama’s speechwriter, is a political science graduate and a prodigy of rhetorical talent. At the age of 31, he had been listed by *Time* magazine as one of the “100 most influential people in the world” (Pilkington 2009). Favreau began working for Barack Obama in 2004, having left his volunteer job on senator John Kerry’s campaign. He was quickly noticed by senator Obama’s advisors and distinguished himself with exceptional rhetorical talent and intuition. According to Obama’s own words, Favreau is his “mind reader” (Pilkington 2009).

Barack Obama’s rhetorical prowess was widely celebrated especially after the successful election campaign. For the 2008 presidential election, Jon Favreau crafted a rhetorical image of Barack Obama strongly immersed in American history and culture, creatively emulating great American speakers of the past. According to Marr Bei (2009:4) in *New York Times*, “Obama is a walking analogy; if he were a punctuation mark, he’d be a colon”, Bei proves his point by arguing:

For some, Obama arrived in Washington as the modern analogue to Franklin D. Roosevelt, the soon-to-be architect of a radical plan to save the economy. For others, especially those of the '60s generation, Obama brought back memories of the young John F. Kennedy. Obama himself left little doubt about his own historical pretensions. He traveled in triumph to the capital by rail, as Abraham Lincoln did, and rested his hand on the Great Emancipator's Bible.

To give some examples proving Bei's last point – in his announcement address Obama quoted Lincoln's "House Divided" *oratio*, in his victory address, on the edge of the presidency, Obama turned to another canon speech, Lincoln's first inaugural, an allusion he reinforced during the inauguration ceremony by using moral oratory of the „Gettysburg Address“.

To Obama, Lincoln's oratory is of particular significance because, just like Lincoln, Obama constantly needs to negotiate his relationship with American history. They both rhetorically establish a rhetorical proposition that history is a steady progression towards a common goal, a goal that fits the framework of American myths: echoing the Founding Fathers conquering the wilderness who push the frontier westward towards the Promised Land. John Murphy (2009) points out that Obama's and Lincoln's rhetoric seem to be stressing the fact that these processes would happen again and again in the life of the country: generation after generation, each dedicating itself to the covenant willed by the founders, each crossing the wilderness in view of the proposition that all men are created equal, each generation celebrating the union with the American history, „a union that could be and should be perfected over time.“

The last line, a paraphrase of Lincoln, comes from Obama's speech of March 18th 2008, so called, the „Race Speech“. But it is not only the belief in human potency for perfection that binds the two presidents together: it is their oratory which sustains the myth that America is a "city upon a hill", a godsend paragon of virtue other nations ought to emulate. As pointed out by Norman Davies (1997: 141), „Everyone needs myths. Individuals need myths. Nations need myths. Myths are the sets of simplified beliefs, which may or may not approximate reality, but which give us a sense of our origins, our identity, and our purposes.“ Obama's oratory explores this need for national mythology, sustains it and appropriates it in such way that it cements the members of the audience and binds the speaker to his hearers. The national methodology employed in Barack Obama's oratory in 2008 maintains America's greatness and celebrates American history and culture.

The national myths used in Obama's oratory serve as *topoi* – rhetorical categories, ideas, concepts which are easily recognizable by the listeners. In rhetorical theory “topics” are referred to as “commonplaces” (after Aristotle), that is, associative areas familiar to the members of addressed community. *Topoi* differ in the degree of their universality: some, “common topics”, could be employed regardless of the affinities of the audience, on the other hand, “special topics” would be more suitable only to special occasions and specific audiences.

A survey of Obama's oratory from the first campaign ought to begin with a detailed look on the most salient element of rhetoric from the year 2008: the slogan *Yes, we can*. It played a pivotal role in the promotion of the – then – senator Obama, and served as contextual framework for a number of persuasive strategies of his oratory.

A model political slogan has a few inalienable features: it ought to be brief, pithy, and memorable. It should also evoke positive associations and encourage active, rather than passive attitude of the addressees. Finally, it should be easy to pronounce and chant during election rallies. The *Yes, we can* slogan seems to exhibit all of these features, further enhanced with versatile rhetorical appeals. The catchphrase became popular at the beginning of 2008. Initially, it was not the main slogan of Barack Obama's campaign, yet with time, it became the most widely recognized element of his promotion agenda. The slogan was circulated throughout the electorate with hammerlike repetitions. One could see it in almost every single speech orated by Barack Obama, a candidate for the presidency of the US. And the strength of the slogan did not resign in its omnipresence but in its rhetorical persuasiveness.

First and foremost, one has to consider its form: grammatically, it is an affirmative sentence which constitutes a part of a conversation; its form presupposes the existence of an enquiry that was asked in the previous turn and whose exact content the addressees do not know. This quasi-dialogic form renders the slogan dynamic as it provokes the addressees to try to recreate the interrogative that preceded it. And in consequence, the message it carries becomes more easily incorporated into the hearers' minds.

The words which form the slogan are similar; they are monosyllabic, simple, universal in terms of register. They also constitute the rhetorical figure of *tricolon*; in rhetorical theory of figures the arrangement of textual elements in groups of three has always been deemed as most potent – one might recall other memorable *tricolons* from American politics: an example used by Roman Jakobson to illustrate his discussion of the poetic function of language: „I like Ike”, adver-

tising the political campaign of Eisenhower in 1955, or slogans of more recent US political figures: „Putting People First” from Bill Clinton’s campaign of 1992 or „Yes, America Can” from George W. Bush’s campaign of 2004 – this last example exhibits striking resemblance to Barack Obama’s 2008 slogan.

One should consider each word of the slogan. The word “yes” accounts for the optimistic message of the *tricolon*. Since the answer for the aforementioned presupposed enquiry is affirmative, the minds of the addressees are pushed in the direction of positives. At the same time, “yes” provides a specific positive context in which the two other words are to be considered. Similarly, the pronoun “we” is of utmost importance for the construction of the persuasive strategy behind Barack Obama’s slogan. The pronoun does not indexically point to an individual speaker, but to a collective addresser: it refers to Barack Obama together with – presumably – his followers. Thus, Barack Obama manages to create a communicative community: the use of the pronoun suggests that he and his audience share one lot, have mutual understanding, and represent a unified political entity. The community he constitutes is not phatic or conventional; it is a group of people who became united for one profound political goal.

In a great many of his speeches one can easily discern the echoes of the concept behind the inclusive pronoun “we” from the campaign slogan. What more, in the slogan, Obama implicitly distances himself from his opponents since it is he who, together with his supporters, is the catalyst of the great positive potential in people, and with nobody else, the addressees of the slogan „can” do so much. In consequence, the presence of Obama in this collective “we” is very strong: there is no “we” from *Yes, we can* without Barack Obama.

The collective inclusiveness of the pronoun “we” is neatly interconnected with the message behind the third word of the slogan: “can”. The modality of the word renders its meaning flexible and intentionally ambiguous; the addressee does not know what it is that the collective subject “can” do, but infers that it is something positive (because of the echo of the initial “yes”) and it is somehow connected with the idea of collectiveness (because of the inclusive pronoun). This ambiguity remains to be explored by the hearers in their minds – when they try to recreate the interrogative that preceded the question. At the same time, they themselves ascribe additional sense to modality and complete the persuasive strategy with any ideas they want. Thus, the slogan surreptitiously engages the addressees to become more than its passive receivers – they turn into active participants in of the communicative act.

Interestingly, the inclusiveness of the pronoun “we” becomes an implied condition for modality. Without the collective subject, the word “can” loses its potency: “Yes, I can” would be a neutral affirmative, the collective *Yes, we can* implies determination and willingness (suggested by the assembly speaker behind it). Thus, persuasive modality of the slogan becomes inseparably joined with the notion of collectiveness it carries. The three words constitute a persuasive whole and their functioning is strongly dependent on one another: there is no “can” without “we” and there is no “we” without “can”.

One last aspect of the slogan needs to be considered: linguistically, when regarded in its rhetorical context, the slogan may be viewed as an indirect hybrid-speech act comprising a representative, an act which commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed, as well as a commissive, an act which commits the speaker to a certain course of action. In *Yes, we can*, the actual political promises are not stated overtly, but become inferred by the hearer from implicatures: the speaker promises a lot and the hearers have a sense that he will fulfill his promises – at least until the magical influence of rhetoric wears off.

The relationship between the slogan and Obama’s use of American *topoi* becomes apparent when one looks at one of the most important speeches of the 2008 campaign: the New Hampshire primary election oration. In the speech the aforementioned slogan *Yes, we can* is used in such a context that it points to the founding concepts of American consciousness and the turning-point events in American history. The use of the *topoi* helps to define the collective „we” from the slogan – it is the American nation together with its implied newest leader, Barack Obama.

The whole New Hampshire primary election speech is endowed with versatile rhetorical figures of repetition and reinforcement. Obama opens the speech with a conventional, rhythmic expression of gratefulness to his voters and a reunion address to his opponent, Hillary Clinton. The two speech-acts reinforce his rhetorical image, *ethos*, of a benevolent and modest man. Throughout the whole speech, he stresses that it is not his personal victory, but the victory of his supporters.

Right after the opening, *exordium*, the speaker begins to construct the “we” that is both the rhetorical subject and object of his oratory – at this point the “we” he uses denotes the people who helped his campaign, soon to take up the meaning of the American people (the word “America” is the most common content word of the speech). Three anaphorical constructions “there is something happening” characterize his supporters as united, dedicated, idealistic, and not entangled in

politics (presumably, with high morals) – thus the *ethos* of the community, of the “we”, is constructed alongside a hidden compliment.

The vagueness behind the word “something” is soon dispersed with Obama stating that America undergoes a “change” accompanying his election. In the further inclusive construction of the “we” (incorporating an *enumeratio* of parallel antithetical labels “black and white”, “gay and straight”, “Democrats and Republicans”) he also delineates general goals of the “we”: he and his supporters become unified in yet one way – by common political, social aims.

It is also here that Obama employs the first *topos* of the speech: “we will restore our moral standing in the world” – the speaker implies that the moral standing used to be there (it is not there anymore implicitly due to the failures of the previous administration) and its existence is important for America – the *topos* of the US as a “leader”, “godsend” nation: similarly the statement he utters later: “But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope”, he builds up an image of America as a unique country, a country whose fate is governed by a “story”, thus suggesting a mission-like narrative, implicitly recalling the *topos* of a “city upon a hill”, America as a country that is looked up to and looked upon.

At the same time, Obama reinforces the positive *ethos* of the community by ascribing it another positive feature: patriotism. He utilizes the *topos* of an American patriot and employs *enumeratio* of the most important positive, almost idealistic, motifs of American culture and history – the American scriptures, the abolitionist movement, as well as the drive to conquest the wilderness and to push the frontier westward. Each of these motifs bears significance for the shaping of the American identity and as such has undeniable rank of a cultural *topos*. At the same time, the listing of these motifs exerts powerful unifying impact, by linking the past with the present, and the present with the past, Obama summons the national spirit and transforms the “we” of his supporters into the “we” of America, making all American citizens his supporters and making himself implicitly the only leader of the nation.

The sense of community is also reinforced by the puzzle-like communicative quality of *antonomasia*, the substitution of a proper name by a longer descriptive phrase, e.g. making a reference to John F. Kennedy’s presidency and the mission of Apollo 11, Obama says a „President who chose the moon as our new frontier”, also making a reference to Martin Luther King and a well known passage of his speech „I see the Promised Land”, Obama says „King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land”. By doing so the speaker reinforces the existing sense of community through com-

mon cultural roots: if his hearers are able to decipher the references to the founding concepts of the American mentality and US historical figures, their cultural and national affinity with the speaker becomes confirmed. They become the „we” from *Yes, we can* in one more way.

With all the above references, the collective modality behind the word „can” becomes at least partly specified – the words Barack Obama employs bear strong positive connotations, they are also set in parallel structures, which reinforces their semantic strength: „justice and equality”, „opportunity and prosperity” (the latter echoing the “American Dream” *topos*). As the great Americans in the past, the collective „we” is capable of the most impressive national, social, and patriotic feats, and will erect new immortal monuments of the American identity – by the implied parallel between the national accomplishments from the past and the moment of the utterance of the slogan, the profundity of the moment is stressed – it gives the addresses a sense that they take part in a milestone moment in the history of their nation. Finally, to reinforce the suggestion that Obama’s presidency would be different from George W. Bush’s, the ideas of „changes” and „healing the nation” are repeated – an appeal that must have been particularly effective in the address to voters, who, to a large extent, were strongly critical of the previous president’s policies.

50 When one moves to 2012 and takes a brief look at the rhetorical mechanisms used by Obama, one can notice simultaneous continuity and discontinuity in comparison to the language of the 2008 campaign. A number of political events informed the American political landscape in the four years of the presidency – to name just a few, primarily the financial crisis, plans of US health reform, ongoing American engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the killing of Osama Bin Laden. Also, Barack Obama’s presidency became a self-influencing factor as, in the course of his term of presidency, he ceased to be a novelty and the sole condition for the American splendor of a „city upon the hill”. In consequence, the US president needed new vocabulary to tackle the changing political and economic situation, he needed to reinvent his rhetorical appeal; putting primary communicative emphasis on the *topos* of the American Dream allowed him to do it.

When one takes a look at the State of the Union Address of 2012, one sees this turn in Obama’s rhetoric. The president emphatically (employing an anaphora) stresses the fact that „For the first time in nine years, there are no Americans fighting in Iraq”; and “For the first time in two decades, Osama bin Laden is not a threat to this country”. Thus suggesting that an important element of the grand mission of „policing the world” can be temporarily put aside. Obama employs

a series of parallel constructions to present a vision of America: „Think about the America within our reach: a country that leads the world in educating its people; an America that attracts a new generation of high-tech manufacturing and high-paying jobs; a future where we're in control of our own energy; and our security and prosperity aren't so tied to unstable parts of the world. An economy built to last, where hard work pays off and responsibility is rewarded.” This idealistic vision connotes the offering of hope and prosperity from the previous campaign, but unlike in 2008, Obama does not condition America's success in himself but in the motivating power of the American Dream. Echoing the *Yes, we can* slogan, Obama emphatically stresses that „We can do this. I know we can, because we've done it before.” The powerful call to action, an instance of figurative encouragement and *pathos*, is reinforced by the elaboration on the American Dream (as he says, one of “American values”): the „basic American promise that if you work hard, you could do well enough to raise a family, own a home, send your kids to college, and put a little away for retirement.” Obama brakes the myth into particularities, rendering it concrete, accessible to the audience: he crafts a story of a „self-made man”. The further elaboration on the principles of the American Dream is reinforced by an obligation the speaker sets upon himself and his hearers, a patriotic mission: “we have to reclaim them” [i.e., “American values”].

51

Obama himself grounds the reason for the call to action in an extensive *narratio*: „In 2008, the house of cards collapsed. We learned that mortgages had been sold to people who couldn't afford or understand them. Banks had made huge bets and bonuses with other people's money. Regulators had looked the other way, or didn't have the authority to stop the bad behavior.” Obama uses short coordinated sentences, briskly elaborating on the causes and the course of the crisis. The reference to the past event allows him to endow the idea of the American Dream with new significance: through his rhetoric, it becomes a remedy for the financial crisis and the problems of the American economy.

In another speech from January this year, the fundraiser speech, Obama projects an image as a speaker is particularly strong: he states „I said in 2008, I'm not a perfect man. I'm not a perfect President” – such an overt *depreciatio* helps him in constructing his image as a truthful, honest, easy-going person. The speaker also employs another American *topos* to unify his listeners, to combine them under the label of „America” – he stresses that he together with his voters has a mission, an „errand” to reconstitute America as a great country: „[the people] understand that this country is still that last, best hope”. This

usage of the *topos* of a “city upon a hill” appears in the context of the financial crisis and the elaboration on economic setbacks. But the usage of this rhetorical stratagem is different from what it was in 2008 as, at the same time, one also notices another cultural *topos* – that of a „self made-man” and the „American Dream”: „in America, if you work hard you’ve got a chance” and Obama incorporates into this concept a wide sweep of the American people: „It doesn’t matter what you look like. It doesn’t matter what your name is”. The concept of the American Dream becomes inclusive to all his voters, as the speaker implicitly promises them its fulfillment and prosperous future.

Barack Obama skillfully adjusts his speeches to the changing social, financial and political context. In general, in the 2008 election speeches, the American *topoi* were used to construct the voting community of Obama’s supporters, the inclusive “we” from *Yes, we can* framed in the myth of America as a “city upon a hill”, a paragon for other nations; in the 2012 campaign, Obama seemed to pay more attention to the re-vitalisation of this sense of community and evoking it under the label of hope of economic growth guaranteed by the “American Dream” as well as by the determination and ability of the American people to surpass the financial crisis. Still, the above considerations are by no means final – the campaign of 2012 and the post-campaign debates offer opulent material for extensive rhetorical investigation of not only *topoi* employed in Barack Obama’s oratory but also of figures, and tropes, body language, etc. It is apparent that the speeches of the president of the US constitute important artifacts of American culture and help in grasping the nuances of the American identity.

52

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Abstrakt

W artykule przeprowadzona została analiza przemówień politycznych Baracka Obama, wygłoszonych w ramach kampanii prezydenckich w USA w 2008 r. i 2012 r. Analiza skupia się na rozmaitych amerykańskich toposach kulturowych, które używane są w retoryce Obamy; szczególna uwaga jest poświęcona strategiom perswazyjnym, których są one częścią. Skontrastowanie przemówień

z dwóch kampanii pozwala wykazać punkty kontrastu oraz punkty wspólne między retoryką dwóch kampanii, w szczególności to w jaki sposób Obama dostosowuje swoje przemówienia by sprostać zmieniającym się z czasem oczekiwaniom publiczności.

Słowa klucze

retoryka, Obama, topos, perswazja, kampania wyborcza