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President Barack Obama’s Commencement Addresses: Revising the Functions of Ceremonial Rhetoric

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Abstract

Commencement speakers are typically expected to praise students for their achievements and motivate them for the path that is to come. When the commencement speaker is a President, however, the expectation is different. In times of rhetorical presidency, no presidential address is apolitical, and this project investigated the functions of ceremonial rhetoric in light of the rhetorical presidency doctrine. Close textual analysis of the three most controversial commencement speeches delivered by President Obama, revealed that the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address, while also responding to rhetorical problems, required the President to adopt complex rhetorical strategies. The predominant strategies included humor, which was used in the process of minimizing controversies; strategic use of rhetorical presence when selecting the elements to be emphasized in the speech; and ideological interpellation.

Method

Close textual analysis, consistent with the methodology of organic rhetorical criticism. This method involves three phases:

1. Descriptive analysis: investigates the structure, supporting material, tone, vocabulary, among others elements that compose the text;
2. Extrinsic analysis: unveils the contextual elements that provide better understanding of the text;
3. Analytical research: findings from the two previous phases are combined with theoretical framework that allows the critic to identify the rhetorical strategies predominant in the text.

Analysis

Commencement Address at Arizona State University (May 13, 2009)

Context

Great recession
Arizona is the home state of John McCain
53% of the state voted for McCain
45% of the state voted for Obama
Impasses in Congress
Honorary Degree controversy

Predominant Rhetorical Strategies

Dichotomy of the American Dream:
• The path of greed and irresponsibility → self-reliance
• The path of devotion to a “bigger purpose” → interdependence

Semantic Association
• The path of greed and irresponsibility → laziy; complacency; struggles; disrupted economy; material possessions; ruthless competition; get-rich-quick schemes; Wall Street; Barney Madoff.
• The path of devotion to a “bigger purpose” → quality; determination; freedom; opportunity; equality; wise investments; businesses and institutions that last; Abraham Lincoln.
• Interpellating the audience toward his motto: “it’s time for change”

Message conveyed through values that sounded “right”
• Audience is interpellated to subject to the ideology of interdependence.

Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame (May 17, 2009)

Context

Great recession
President Obama’s opinion on abortion clashed with Notre Dame’s Catholic values.
Controversy about honorary degree due to violation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ 2004 statement: “The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles.”
Multiple interruptions during the speech: “Abortion is murder! Stop killing children!”

Predominant Rhetorical Strategies

Combination of verbal and non-verbal strategies when responding to disruptions
Adoption of theological language
Prophetic tradition
Humor

Commencement Address at Barnard College (May 14, 2012)

Context

Reelection year
Polls indicated that both Obama and Mitt Romney were supported by 46% of voters.
Gridlock in Congress
Obama faced charges of limited accomplishments
National unemployment rate of 8.2%
Obama’s mandatory preventive services for women controvers
Religious institutions and Republicans running for president repealed the measure.

Predominant Rhetorical Strategies

Father Persona
Presence
Humor

Conclusion

President Obama used strategies that would allow him to be the embodiment of the ideologies most closely related to the audience. By doing so, President Obama was able to interpellate his audience to subject themselves to his perspective on the issues relevant in each occasion. With those findings, this project proposes to refine the functions of presidential ceremonial rhetoric. In this refined segment of the genre, the speech should use the available means of persuasion towards a single purpose: display leadership through eloquence thus interpellating individuals in the audience to subject themselves to the ideological views of the speaker.

References


