

Transformative Rhetoric: How Obama Became the New Face of America. A Linguistic Analysis

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Abstract

His brilliant use of rhetoric made Obama the face of 21st century America. His ability to portray himself as the embodiment of the American dream and to relate to the stories of other Americans brought many to support his candidacy. This article presents a discussion of his use of personal narrative, stories, repetition, metaphors, clichés, audience involvement, and humor with illustrative examples from Obama's most memorable speeches.

Keywords

Obama, campaign speeches, rhetoric, rhetorical devices

Introduction

America, the land of opportunity, where any little boy can grow up to be president. Until 2008 that little boy had to be white and preferably the son of a wealthy and well-connected family. The fact that Barack Obama became America's first non-white president was a major glass ceiling breakthrough but even more significant was how he managed to market himself to the American people as the face of 21st century America. In this paper I will examine the rhetorical devices that Obama used to convey his message and convince the American people to elect him as their 44th president. Those devices that Obama uses so expertly include the use of personal narrative, stories, repetition, metaphors, clichés, audience involvement, and humor.

Peretz and Peretz in their book *Barack Obama's Secrets of Persuasion and Influence* (2010) discuss many of the rhetorical devices Obama uses but one aspect that they don't address is his ability to incorporate three or more rhetorical devices in the same sentence or paragraph in an overlapping manner so that the emotive power of his rhetoric is enhanced. Take for example the following sentence from A More Perfect Union "The Race Speech" delivered in Philadelphia, PA. on March 18, 2008: *"I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations."* In those nineteen words we see the following rhetorical devices: personal narrative, use of opposites as a means of emphasis, superlatives, and pairs. Additional examples will be discussed further on.

Background

In my book *Obama's Message – An Examination of Political Rhetoric* (Kayam, 2013) I present the view that rhetoric is “verbal manipulation”, the theory of written or verbal expression using words in an effective manner to influence or convince another person. Rhetoric is a tool to transmit information, influence, persuasion and action whose techniques of speaking and writing, when used in the proper and efficient manner, are essential in most areas of life and are used by many. In almost every person, be they a ruler or a common citizen, there exists the urge to impose their opinions and tendencies on others and to dictate their way of life. The ability to convince or persuade another to change their beliefs or attitudes is accomplished by means of communication (Wolman, 1990). Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1954).

Rhetoric has been a significant factor in public dialogue from ancient Greece to modern times (Clarke, 1962; Kennedy, 1963). Its development and status are inseparable from the development of patterns of democratic government in Greece. Verbal persuasiveness was essential not only in forwarding public affairs but was a necessary skill for every citizen wanting to find their place in the social system (Aristotle, 1954). The origin of the art of discourse as a subject of formal study goes back to the fifth century BC, and the father of the art of discourse was Corax of Syracuse in Sicily. In 466 BC the tyrant of Syracuse was overthrown and a democratic regime was established in its place. Many residents of the city who had fled or were exiled returned and found that their land and property had been expropriated (Nedava, 1957). As a result of the ensuing wave of property lawsuits Corax and Tisias, two residents of Syracuse, developed a method meant to advise people on how to conduct themselves in a court of law. At the height of the Athenian State the use of rhetoric was found not only in courts of law and meetings but its echo was heard also in tragedy, comedy, philosophy and historiography (Aristotle, 1954).

Researchers in the field of rhetoric differentiate between two types of persuasion: *convincing*, which appeals to one's sense of logic, and *persuading*, which appeals to one's emotions. Landau points out that the difference between convincing and persuading is expressed, inter alia, in that with convincing the speaker is interested in convincing the listener of the truth of his or her arguments as they are determined by the intellect, while with persuading, the speaker is interested in getting his or her audience to agree with his or her position. Audience of listeners is a key concept in rhetoric (Gitay 1991, 1996; Speigel, 1973).

Landau (1988) also points out that the main characteristic of emotive rhetoric is that it generally does not raise arguments but rather gives an emotive-stylistic

character to the text and provides the listener with pleasure from its manner of linguistic expression. In contrast, the aim of rhetorical argument is to raise arguments as a means of addressing reason and not emotion (of course, this division is not absolute, and there are rhetorical devices that include both). Another difference between emotive rhetoric and rhetorical argument is that the former focuses on words and their combinations and only sometimes complete sentences, while the latter employs sentences and units larger than sentences.

In this article I will show how Obama uses the above tools so successfully.

Method

In my book *Obama's Message – An Examination of Political Rhetoric* (Kayam, 2013) I chose to examine eight key speeches starting with the 2004 Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention, and ending with the 2009 Inaugural Address.

The devices were sorted by known rhetorical criteria (Kayam, 2011). The devices will be analyzed and their theoretical background presented along with examples taken from the speeches.

In this article I present a selection of the choicest examples from those speeches.

Use of Personal Narrative and Stories

Narrative derives from the Latin verb *narrare*, "to tell", and is related to the adjective *gnarus*, "knowing" or "skilled" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "narrate, v.". Oxford University Press, 2007). The narrative is a story that has been changed by a process of internalization derived from the teller's experience (Dr. Eli Avrahami eli-avrahami.com).

Obama made extensive use of the rhetorical device of narrative, both his personal narrative as well as the narratives of others. Obama was born on August 4, 1961 in Honolulu, Hawaii, the son of a white mother and a black father and in his early childhood he experienced changes in the family framework, parental figures, living environment – country, culture, language – and even his personal identity (Peretz & Peretz, 2010). The circumstances of his life molded him and gave him a unique character. Prior leaders of the American people absorbed the American way of life and developed patterns of understanding reality in the spirit of the American dream. Obama's conceptual world and experiences was not exactly the American way (Hoffman, 1968). Obama's self-defined identity is complex and encompasses all his varied background, experiences, lessons learned and internalized in various cultural settings without any one being dominant, which enables him to observe with a certain distance the charged issues of race.

It is ironic that Obama, with a father who wasn't even an American and who had abandoned him at a young age, managed to play the American dream narrative so successfully. Starting with the Keynote Address at the Democratic Convention in 2004, where he told the story of how his parents met and declared himself *"grateful for the diversity of my heritage"* and his story *"part of the larger American story"*, Obama turned his outsider status into something quintessentially American. This was repeated again in his speech A More Perfect Union where he also added his wife's family narrative to his own saying: *"I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."*

Also in that speech Obama demonstrated how he could effectively use other peoples' stories to bring home his message, in this case black and white, young and old, coming together in common purpose: *"There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today - a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.*

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the

millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

"I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins."

Ashley's story and the response of the elderly black man create a strong reaction in the listener and support Obama's message.

Another example of using other peoples' stories to strengthen his case comes from a speech he gave in Ohio one week before Election Day:

"I still remember the email that a woman named Robyn sent me after I met her in Ft. Lauderdale. Sometime after our event, her son nearly went into cardiac arrest, and was diagnosed with a heart condition that could only be treated with a procedure that cost tens of thousands of dollars. Her insurance company refused to pay, and their family just didn't have that kind of money.

In her email, Robyn wrote, "I ask only this of you – on the days where you feel so tired you can't think of uttering another word to the people, think of us. When those who oppose you have you down, reach deep and fight back harder."

Let us conclude with the story of Ann Nixon Cooper from Obama's election night victory speech. Note that while telling this story Obama incorporates additional rhetorical devices (clichés, repetition, use of we, opposites and referencing giants which will be discussed later):

"... Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when

someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons – because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin...

She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that “We Shall Overcome.” Yes we can.

A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes we can.”

Metaphors

Figurative speech is the use of pictures and metaphors to express ideas. Landau (1988) says that the main function of figurative speech is to express the requested message in a picturesque and tangible way that will be absorbed by the listener's emotions rather than their thoughts. The impact of figurative speech is very strong because the message is made clear and tangible, and yet direct. When using figurative speech, complex ideas can be expressed in a brief text.

The most prominent form of figurative speech is the metaphor: A metaphor has a double meaning; it transfers the meaning from one semantic field to another semantic field; or it is a word or group of words that is given a second broader meaning (Nir, 1978). In literary theory a metaphor is a word or group of words, which have been given a different meaning that is broader than their dictionary meaning (Ochmani, *Lexicon of Literary Terms*). Tzarfati (1978) adds that the power of the metaphor is its ability to bring alive, renew, and strengthen the impact of the message. A successful metaphor will leave a strong impression on the listener.

An examination of Obama's speeches from the 2008 campaign found extensive use of metaphors. From a rhetorical standpoint Obama's use of metaphors is divided into two categories: old worn out metaphors, much used and of little rhetorical impact, and full picture metaphors having genuine rhetorical effect in addition to the aesthetic pleasure and emotions they arouse. Nir (1978) states that the more complex the metaphor, the more impressive its effect. When a metaphor is used too frequently, its figurativeness is diminished to the point where the stylistic-rhetorical transformation becomes a permanent word in the lexicon (e.g. bottleneck). A metaphor's degree of figurativeness ranges from one-time use, which has the highest degree of figurativeness, to those metaphors so commonly used that their figurativeness is no longer felt and they become dead metaphors.

In the first category we see the following examples:

October 27, 2008 One Week

Broken politics

October 27, 2008 One Week

Seeing the highest mountaintop from the deepest valley

March 2008 The Race Speech

Continue on the path of a more perfect union

They can write their own destiny

Glass ceiling

November 2008 Election Night Victory Speech (Peretz)

America's beacon still burns as bright

For the most part however we find in Obama's speeches metaphors from the second category which include within them additional rhetorical elements. So for example, the metaphorical image is not presented as a whole but is integrated within text that is not in itself figurative. Landau contends that his technique enables the writer to achieve two ends: The incomplete metaphor awakens the listeners' emotions in the first part of the text, he continues to impart his message in metaphor free language returning only at the end to complete the metaphorical image which leaves his audience with a greater effect than if the two parts of the metaphor has been contiguous.

In other cases there is a combination of rhetorical devices that intensifies the rhetorical-metaphorical effect.

Here are some examples:

January 2008 New Hampshire Primary

Get a seat at the table

They don't get to buy every chair

"To get a seat at the table" is a well-known lexical term whose simple meaning is "to take part in the discussion". Obama uses that well-known phrase and then adds on to it: "They don't get to buy every chair", meaning that while they are welcome to participate in the discussion they don't get to decide the outcome in advance in accordance with their own interests. Thus Obama takes a simple metaphor and upgrades it breathing new life into a tired metaphor while censuring his opponents (in this case the insurance and drug companies).

January 2008 New Hampshire Primary

A president who chose the moon as our new frontier

A king who took us to the mountaintop

And pointed the way to the promise land

In this example, in addition to the use of metaphors, Obama references two great American historical figures. The references are so clear to any American that explicit mention of their names is unnecessary. The allusion to President Kennedy and Martin Luther King reinforces Obama's message that nothing is impossible and that what is perceived as unattainable will be attained by the right person at the right time: Kennedy-King-and by extension, unstated but clearly intended, Obama.

Kayam (2011) and Livnat and Kayam (2004) contend that building on, quoting or referencing "giants" (a term meaning any famous public figure held in high esteem) is an encompassing rhetorical device, filling many varied roles, such as reinforcing the speaker's position, presenting and promoting information, stylistic ornamentation, etc. These may have added rhetorical value when used as argumentative rhetorical devices or emotive-stylistic means of persuasion, where the aesthetic pleasure, the emotion that they arouse in the listener and the atmosphere created on the text, can contribute an important part to the work of persuasion.

Cliches

The word cliché, a French word that has infiltrated into most languages, was originally a block, a mold, or a board that was used as a template in photography or printing.

The word underwent a metaphorical transformation and today is synonymous with a common, worn out expression that has lost some of its original meaning (Fruchtman, 2002). Fruchtman notes that the term does not have an exact definition appropriate for all those expressions that are termed cliché, therefore, there is a great deal of vagueness in the ability to sort clichés by type.

Fruchtman divides clichés into five categories: common idioms that include basic stereotypes (e.g. Where there's smoke, there's fire); idioms from animal life (e.g. He works like a dog); slogans with no connection to truth (e.g. We will win); conversation fillers (e.g. Really!); template examples from different domains, such as sports, politics, and media (e.g. Hitting below the belt).

An analysis of the clichés in the language of the Obama campaign speeches examined found that most were of the template variety. The following clichés have a nature theme:

January 2009 Inaugural Address*Rising tides**Still waters**Gathering clouds**Raging storms**Long rugged path**Depth of winter**This winter of our hardship*

And then there are the Obama favorites, clichés taken from the semantic fields of “hope”, “freedom”, and “a better future”. There are so many of these that we are speaking of many tens if not hundreds of examples just in the examined speeches and the fact that there are so many from the same semantic field intensifies the strength of the rhetoric and gives Obama’s speeches their power and uniqueness. Here are some examples:

2004 DNC Keynote*beacon of freedom**doors of opportunity**There are better days ahead**A brighter day will come*August 2008 The American Promise Acceptance Speech DNC*The American promise (repeated multiple times)*October 13, 2008 Economy Speech*we can overcome (echoes “We Shall Overcome”)*November 2008 Election Night Victory Speech*All things are possible... the dream of our founders...the power of our democracy**Hope of a better day**This nation’s promise**Our destiny is shared**A new dawn**Doors of opportunity*

And of course it is impossible to conclude without the winning slogan “Yes we can”.

Audience Involvement

Perlman (1984) writes that rhetoric is the art of persuading and convincing people. The study of rhetoric examines the techniques used to bring about the

agreement or deepen the agreement of the audience with the positions or arguments presented.

Kayam (2011) writes that the audience's agreement is essential. A speech can have influence only if it is customized to the audience that is supposed to be convinced by it. Peretz and Peretz (2010) contend that Obama harnesses his listeners and, in effect, makes them active partners by establishing a relationship with them, with America in fact.

Obama gives his audience decisive importance, in essence viewing them as equals among equals, and even more than that, throughout his campaign he repeatedly stressed the message: "I am not the most important thing in this election. You are the most important thing in this election." When he gives his listeners the feeling that the American people and their best interest are what is important, that we work together and our goals are shared, then it is easy to be swept away and to identify with and agree with his message.

Furthermore, Obama conducts a relationship with his opponents as well as we see in his November 4, 2008 victory speech when he said:

"And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn – I may not have won your vote, but I hear your voices, I need your help, and I will be your President too."

Examples of the use of "we", "us", "our", "together":

January 2008 New Hampshire Primary

***We** will end this war in Iraq. **We** will bring our troops home. **We** will finish the job -- **we** will finish the job against Al Qaida in Afghanistan. **We** will care for our veterans. **We** will restore our moral standing in the world.*

*For when **we** have faced down impossible odds, when **we've** been told **we're** not ready or that **we** shouldn't try or that **we** can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: **Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.***

August 2008 The American Promise Acceptance Speech DNC

*America, **we** are better than these last eight years. **We** are a better country than this.*

*So let **us** agree that patriotism has no party. I love this country, and so do you, and so does John McCain. The men and women who serve in our battlefields may be Democrats and Republicans and Independents, but they have fought **together** and bled **together** and some died **together** under the same proud flag. They have not served a Red America or a Blue America - they have served the United States of America.*

October 27, 2008 One Week

*we will not just win Ohio, we will not just win this election, but **together**, we will change this country and we will change the world.*

Rhetorical Repetition and the use of 3

Persuasive texts are characterized by, among other things, unique syntax structure whose purpose is to influence the listener. One way to achieve this end is by use of a specific linguistic structure – the parallel structure. The parallel structure contains at least two elements equal in their internal structure or in their syntactical function in the sentence. Researchers attribute rhetorical advantages to the use of parallel structures. Hughes and Duhamel (1962) contend that ideas can be effectively transmitted by the use of parallel sentences. They add that the parallel individualizes the style of the speaker, emphasizes ideas, and clarifies the relationship between the ideas.

Brooks and Warren (1970) contend that proper use of parallelisms can turn them into a very powerful rhetorical tool, where they emphasize and highlight ideas and create a debate between them. Shilo (1996) notes that repetition is a speaker's tool to present his ideas in a prominent or directed manner that can make his words more persuasive. Maadia (1985) points out that the syntactic parallel influences listeners and enables them to absorb messages more effectively and retain them for longer. She adds that this rhetorical structure allows listeners to draw logical analogies and anticipate what will follow.

Peretz and Peretz (2010) contend that Obama makes certain to repeat over and over the messages that he wishes to inculcate. He knows that the secret of inculcating messages is a combination of a simple message and repetition, similar to the brainwashing of commercials. Repetitions influence the structure of Obama's speeches and also the minds of his listeners. They transform every speech to a poem with an identifiable repeated refrain and sometimes several repeated refrains. According to Peretz and Peretz, this style of repetition does not bore the audience. On the contrary, it helps maintain concentration and helps the listener follow what is being said while deeply internalizing the message.

Peretz and Peretz (2010) state that Obama frequently uses asyndetic sentences in order to intensify his speech rate and create verbal energy and concentration on the part of his audience. Obama, who learned some of his secrets of success from former presidents, adopted this technique from Pres. Kennedy who used it in his Inaugural Address and from Pres. Lincoln who used it in the Gettysburg Address.

Here are examples of syntactic parallel structures taken from the speeches:

2004 DNC Keynote

I say to you tonight: we have more work to do.

More to do for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now are having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay seven bucks an hour. More to do for the father I met who was losing his job and choking back tears, wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits he counted on. More to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her, who has the grades, has the drive, has the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.

August 2008 The American Promise Acceptance Speech DNC

Now is the time to help families with paid sick days and better family leave, because nobody in America should have to choose between keeping their jobs and caring for a sick child or ailing parent.

Now is the time to change our bankruptcy laws, so that your pensions are protected ahead of CEO bonuses; and the time to protect Social Security for future generations.

And now is the time to keep the promise of equal pay for an equal day's work, because I want my daughters to have exactly the same opportunities as your sons.

As stated, Obama frequently uses parallel structures of three elements ("triple parallels"). According to Peretz and Peretz (2010) the use of this device enables Obama to express an idea more completely, to raise interest and emphasize the principal message and to increase the memorability of the message, which is aided by the rhythm that is pleasant to the ear. They cite studies that show that our brains are more effectively able to absorb, retain and retrieve information presented in this format.

Obama uses the triple structure in different syntactic variations: repetition of three words, repetition of three sentences and repetition of three parallel sections, and sometimes all of these together, that is, in an alternating integrated triple structure as in the examples below:

2004 DNC Keynote Address

*to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect
must be found...must be pursued...must be defeated*

January 2008 New Hampshire Primary

We will end this war in Iraq. We will bring our troops home. We will finish the job -- we will finish the job against Al Qaida in Afghanistan. We will care for our veterans. We will restore our moral standing in the world.

For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

August 2008 The American Promise Acceptance Speech DNC

cars you can't afford to drive, credit card bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach.

And for the sake of our economy, our security, and the future of our planet

November 2008 Election Night Victory Speech

This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time.

Word Repetition

Word repetition is repetition of grammatical or lexicon (i.e. content) words. This repetition is not natural usage of either written or spoken language as the monotony could bore the listener or reader and give the impression of linguistic poverty, which for sure is not the intention of the speaker. However, judicious use of this technique can be an important tool of persuasion.

Here is an outstanding example of the use of word repetition that not only is not boring it is truly inspirational:

January 2008 New Hampshire Primary

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can.

It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier...yes we can to justice and equality.

Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.

Humor

Humor in politics is the expression of a position. The politics of humor challenges the political status quo and strengthens values and dominant aspects of politics (Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

Humor in its essence is not aggressive and even when it is, the aggressiveness is concealed or softened by the humoristic structure that envelopes the contents

of the text. A political position and humor take into consideration the social environment in which they are expressed and in which they are likely to be valid and acceptable.

Another characteristic feature of humor is that it is a good means of breaking down cognitive barriers and enabling the penetration of messages to another's mind. One who addresses another using humor, is perceived by him as someone positive and friendly, one who is worth being around. At the same time the humor causes him to unconsciously open cognitive barriers and makes him receptive to messages that if heard in a different manner, without humor, he might not have been open to or agree with.

A politician who is aware of this feature of humor and has the talent to use humor to transmit messages and political positions makes use of one of the best tools for ensuring that the views he expresses will be absorbed by another, in the hope that the other will change his position to that of the politician's.

Humor has become a confrontational tool in the political domain. Politicians have learned that it is preferable to use humorous rhetoric to attack one's opponent and damage his image because of the positive attitude and receptiveness of the public to this approach. Therefore it is also recommended that every politician be able to respond in a humorous manner against such an attack by his opponent (Ridanpää, 2009; Rolfe, 2010; Tsakona, 2009).

Barack Obama's humor

Obama is blessed with a healthy sense of humor. He knows that if he can get his audience to smile, then he will probably succeed in breaking down barriers, arousing interest, giving pleasure, and perhaps, also winning support and influencing his listeners and bringing them over to his side (Peretz & Peretz, 2010). Most of the examples cited below were taken from David Remnick's 2010 biography of Barack Obama and transcribed here exactly as they appear in the original including examples from interviews on radio and television and conversations with colleagues and others.

The following are some examples where Obama chose to use his characteristic humor:

Many years ago, before Obama's presidential campaign, when he was the newly elected junior state senator of the minority party, he was asked if he wanted to be president. His answer was:

"Guys, I am a state senator. I was elected yesterday. I have never set foot in the U.S. Senate. I have never worked in Washington. And the notion that somehow I am going to start running for higher office, it just doesn't make sense.....I am going to be spending the first several months of my career in the U.S. Senate looking for the washroom and trying to figure out how the phones work" (Remnick, 2010).

Before he was sworn in as president and after publication of his book *Dreams of My Father*, Obama appeared in many places. His appearance on the David Letterman show gave him a platform to display his wit (Remnick, 2010):

Letterman: The thing about your name, it's easy to pronounce and it's cool.

Obama: Well, that's what I think, that's what I think. You know, there were some advisors who told me to change my name.

Letterman: Really?

Obama: Yeah, and somebody suggested "Cat Stevens," for example...

Here we see Obama's ability to use humor in an aggressive manner, something that politicians who have the appropriate skills are wont to do opposite their political rivals (Georgalidou, 2011). Relating to his rival for the democratic nomination Hillary Clinton he said that she was a skilled and seasoned politician who was conducting her campaign "by the book" but that "the problem is the book itself" (Peretz & Peretz, 2010). The concluding phrase "the problem is the book itself", completely changes the meaning of what he had appeared to be saying about Hillary Clinton. Here are two clearly humoristic elements: One is the transformation of the listener's format of thinking – which happens in most jokes, and the surprise which is one of the basic elements in the creation of many humorous situations (Sover, 2009; Sover, 2011).

When he attacks an opponent he does so with dignity and sensitivity interwoven with subtle humor as seen in the following examples (Remnick, 2010):

"I don't think George Bush is a bad man. I think he's a patriotic person and I don't think that the people who work for him are stupid people. I think a lot of them are smart in their own way. I think that the problem is that they've got a different idea of America than the idea we've got."

In this section, he creates meanings that are not visible and it is up to the reader or listener to discover and interpret them. This is one of the ways of transforming a text to contain humorous qualities (Sover, 2009). Note the highlighted words in the text. The words a lot, adds an additional meaning which is not said outright that some of the people who work with Bush are in fact stupid. In another point instead of saying that those stupid people are grossly mistaken, he says that they have "a different idea of America than the idea we've got". The word America intensifies the extent of the mistake that results from those of his advisors who are unworthy.

When Obama decided to run for president, during a meeting in David Axelrod's office he was handed a background memo which included questions like "Are you intimidated by the prospect of being leader of the free world?" He laughed and replied "Someone's got to do it" (Remnick, 2010).

Back in 2004 in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention he called himself: "a skinny kid with a funny name".

During the 2008 campaign Obama said: "*I don't look like I came out of central casting when it comes to Presidential candidates*" (Remnick, 2010).

Peretz and Peretz (2010) say Obama does not act in an expected manner. He laughs at himself and his weaknesses. Most people prefer to promote themselves and to play down their weaknesses. His use of this technique in the proper dosage wins him points with his audience, for a person who is able to laugh at himself proves his modesty and his humanity. He also shows integrity in that he presents himself in a natural light without trying to beautify reality or the "product".

To conclude, here is an example taken from Obama's 2004 DNC Keynote Address:

That we can participate in the political process...and that our votes will be counted...At least most of the time.

Conclusions and Methodological Implications

In this article, six rhetorical devices that Obama used extensively in his campaign speeches were examined: personal narrative, stories, metaphors, clichés, audience involvement, repetition, and humor. I showed how use of these rhetorical devices helped Obama to win over his audience. He managed to portray his own exotic background, a combination of his mother's mainstream white ancestry and his father's African upbringing and dreams and aspirations, as the epitome of the diversity of the American experience. His use of other peoples' stories allowed his audience to identify with him.

An examination of Obama's speeches from the 2008 campaign found extensive use of metaphors, both old, worn out metaphors of little rhetorical impact, and full picture metaphors, original and having great rhetorical effect.

There was also extensive use of clichés. Obama used clichés from the semantic fields of nature and "hope", "freedom", and "a better future".

His repeated use of "we" and "our" gave his audience to understand that they were not merely passive listeners but active partners in an important process.

Use of repetition, metaphors and clichés drove his message home and audience involvement turned his audience into partners. Finally, the use of humor made him more accessible.

In this article, I have shown Obama's brilliant use of rhetorical devices. Even years after the 2008 campaign the rhetoric is still impressive and inspirational and others would do well to learn from his example.

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