

# LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES OF EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEECH

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**Abstract.** Public speaking comes in many different forms and has many uses but the main aim is to inform, educate and successfully influence the public with motivational and powerful statements. The majority of public speakers that an individual might encounter are political figures. In order to demonstrate competence and credibility, they evoke different language techniques. Carefully chosen type of speech (demonstrative, informative, ceremonial or persuasive) alongside with particular linguistic devices (lexical and stylistic) allow any influential orator to create a notable impact on the target audience and manipulate the mind-set of the masses. The purpose of the research was to unveil the effectiveness of linguistic devices used in the speeches of three US presidents, to compare as well as to indicate the predominant lexical and stylistic means that ensure oratory success. The methods of theoretical analysis and descriptive comparative linguistic analysis were applied. 45 lexical devices were identified while analysing the speeches, out of which 23 were chosen for a more thorough examination. 162 stylistic devices were identified and 45 of them were analysed in the research.

The article reveals that lexical means create a more cohesive but less creative speech, whereas stylistic devices serve to reflect the speakers' idiosyncrasy. The speeches of Barack Obama, Joe Biden sound clear and knowledgeable, whereas Donald Trump creates a sense of informality, forcefulness or even aggressiveness.

**Keywords:** public speech, linguistic devices, political figures, effectiveness.

## Introduction

Public speaking serves as an effective tool to influence the audience by using linguistic means and achieving desired results by utilizing manipulation. Manipulation is attained by using carefully selected words or specific rhetorical techniques. The majority of public speakers that an individual might encounter are political figures who, according to Chilton & Schäffner (2002), rely on persuasive and manipulative functions of the language to win the election. They strive to give the impression of being powerful and trustworthy leaders that are capable of protecting their country from internal and external harm. Politicians make speeches to demonstrate their competence and credibility in making vital decisions. Hobbs (2008) claims that they attempt to justify some of the performances, especially in the areas that they have failed to function efficiently. To legitimate their actions, appear reliable and genuine, public speakers use many different linguistic devices to send a well-crafted message to their target audience.

More often than not, the message is not conveyed directly, but rather in a cleverly hidden manner. Indirect or hidden messages are quite common in political speeches since they are extensive and usually have persuasive intentions. If a speaker wants to establish a sturdy relationship with the audience, he has to communicate his thoughts fluently, accurately and confidently. That is because the audience is more likely to support the speaker's moral values and beliefs if they receive reasoned arguments on the subject matter. Albeit

each speech elicits a different message, the main objective of any orator is to receive support and trust from the audience, which might enable to achieve the set goals, win the audience over or gain personal benefit from the emotions experienced. Having analysed a number of researches on the effective public speeches, it is necessary to outline that some scholars, for instance Khajavi & Rasti (2020), argue that not all strategies used by politicians are intentionally or sensibly targeted at influencing the audience. However, a majority of discourse analysts (Benoit et al., 2003) share the view that any actions or words inevitably bring intended or unintended consequences. Contemporary analysts have scrutinized political ideology, notions of identity and power (Charteris-Black, 2014), as well as investigated different approaches to discursive strategies of public speeches (Khan et al., 2019; Liu & Lei, 2018; Wang & Liu, 2018). In-depth theoretical analysis is presented in the texts of Hamilton (2012), Harris (2017), Yule (2017), Kostadinovska-Stojchevska (2018), Murphy (2018), Jones et al. (2012), Bridges (2018), Mamedova (2019), Gablasova et al. (2017), Yuldoshev (2017), Nizomova (2021), Burgers et al. (2016), Walton (2017), Speed et al. (2019), Liu et al. (2018), Tartakovsky et al. (2019), Foley & Hall (2012), Mokhlosa & Mukheefb (2020), Biezma & Rawlins (2017), Melion & Ramakers (2016), Assaiqeli et al. (2021), Tsao et al. (2020) and Caro (2017). These authors suggested the valuable insights on public speech as a method to influence individuals and elaborated what linguistic means help to achieve such ambition. Despite numerous studies on the subject area, few scholars

endeavoured at elaborating on the analysis of a wider range of lexical and stylistic devices to produce an effective public speech that resulted in a successful political campaign. Reasoning as such, makes the research on the topic most relevant.

The **subject matter** is linguistic devices found in the speeches of US presidents, namely Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden who are acknowledged as skilful speakers worldwide. The article strives to disseminate what distinguishing features of the mentioned politicians' public speaking contribute to effective shaping of the audience opinion and gaining the recognition of the electorate; what are the most common lexical and stylistic devices that outline the idiosyncrasy of each president. Thus, the **aim of the research** is to reveal, what linguistic devices used in public speeches of the famous political figures dictate their oratory success. To achieve this aim, the **objectives** to conduct theoretical analysis of what public speech is from the perspective of linguistic (lexical and stylistic) devices as well as to identify practical application of linguistic devices in the speeches of the mentioned US presidents were set.

The research is **relevant** to an outstanding number of people because public speaking is a massive part of everyday life, especially to the ones whose career deals with influencing the opinions of the public, shaping the image as well as spreading the organization's message. **The methods** of theoretical analysis and descriptive comparative linguistic analysis were applied. The practical analysis focuses on the samples found in three transcriptions of popular and influential politicians' public speeches.

### Concept and aims of public speaking

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary* (2021), public speaking is the act of speaking about any topic to a large or small audience. Usually, public speech is used by many influential people to inform or educate the public about any occurring crises, controversial topics or changes to the law. However, a lot of times public speech can be used as a manipulative tactic to obtain support or power over society. Moreover, according to Janoschka (2010) political figures frequently tend to convince people of their actions in order to attain their political goals.

An often overlooked part of being a public speaker is ethical behaviour (Hamilton, 2012). Refusing to tell the unfiltered truth can cause tremendous damage to the speaker's reputation – they have a high chance of losing public interest or even their job. As was stated by Hamilton (2012), common reasons for unethical behaviour are

pressure from society and feeling apprehensive about the speech. When experiencing feelings of self-doubt, the speaker has a higher chance of distorting the facts by making them seem astronomical or, in contrast, insignificant. Distortion is a method used to conceal controversial information, usually to protect oneself. This type of information bias is predominantly encountered in political fields. The type of speech required for the occasion completely depends on the subject matter. There are four types of public speeches: demonstrative, informative, ceremonial and persuasive (Hamilton, 2012). The demonstrative speech type is frequently used to explain a complicated process to a group of people, to show what actions should be taken or avoided. As Harris (2017) holds, the principal purpose of informative speeches is to share information that the listeners had no previous knowledge about or, on the contrary, to further explain commonly discussed material. During informative speeches, the audience is presented with facts and speaker's personal opinions that serve to inform rather than to impact public standpoint. The ceremonial speech type, also known as the entertaining speech type (Harris, 2017), is observed during special occasions. This is the most unique speech type due to its content – it does not contain any manipulative motives or crucial information; it involves expressing your sincerest emotions and feelings. The persuasive speech type is most common among the people in authority or individuals who find it necessary to justify their behaviour. The scholar claims that persuasive speeches serve as a pivotal tool for elected officials in achieving their goals and career ambitions (Harris, 2017). Chilton & Schäffner (2002) complement the idea by stating that competent politicians demonstrate high proficiency in using persuasive language in different situations since it is mandatory for them and the party they represent to be successful. This speech type is often employed to influence and manipulate opinions, beliefs and actions of incredulous individuals.

Out of all previously stated speech types, persuasive and informative types are the most similar in regards to their content. As described by Hamilton (2012), it is a gruelling task to persuade the audience without providing them factual information. Without facts, a persuasive speech does not hold any power due to the lack of evidence to support the speaker's opinion. The difference between the two speech types is that informative speeches might influence listeners indirectly, while persuasive speeches tend to disclose controlling intentions in a direct manner.

When preparing a public speech, it is crucial for the speaker to acknowledge the two most important

parts of the speech: the introduction and the ending (Hamilton, 2012). The introduction is the part, which entices the target audience to listen and be present during the speech. A way to create a gripping introduction is by sharing a story from your personal life, stating a few hasty examples, asking an engaging question, or telling a joke that directly ties in to your prepared speech (Hamilton, 2012). By using such techniques, the orator has a higher chance of gaining audience cognitive involvement for the duration of the speech. While a gripping introduction is needed to obtain genuine attention, the ending also plays a vital part in any speech. Hamilton (2012) claimed that an orator's duty is to regulate what the audience remembers after the speech has finished. To have control over the audience's memory, only the key elements should be highlighted in the end. As Hamilton (2012) asserts, there is no room for disorganisation when trying to create a meaningful and persuasive message. After mastering these two components, the public speaker will be seen as a charismatic and dependable individual, worthy of public attention.

### Research methodology

The theoretical analysis helped to determine the ways of exhibiting specific linguistic means and descriptive comparative linguistic analysis was applied to disseminate how they directly influence the audience in order for the speaker to benefit from the manipulation that they used through speech. The chosen texts for the research were accumulated from websites such as "the garden", "time" and "rev". These speeches were the best fit, as they are political speeches of influential political figures and possess numerous linguistic devices that serve a specific purpose.

The linguistic (lexical and stylistic) characteristics were selected manually. 45 lexical devices were identified while analysing the speeches, out of which 23 were chosen for a more thorough examination. 162 stylistic devices were identified and 45 of them were more thoroughly studied in the research.

Descriptive comparative linguistic analysis was chosen to recognise and compare the different types of lexical and stylistic means in political speeches: in what contexts they are used, what sort of message they portray, how they affect public opinion. The attributes of the expression of lexical and stylistic devices in all three speeches were examined; their functions were evaluated. During the comparative analysis, the effectiveness between lexical and stylistic characteristics in political speeches was established.

### Lexical devices in politicians' public speeches

The researched and analysed theory was used as a stepping stone when selecting different lexical means from chosen political speeches. After analysing three speeches of famous US politicians, such lexical devices as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, homophones, homonyms, polysemy and collocations were retrieved.

Synonymy in political speeches is used as a way to reduce repetition, show the importance of the person's spoken words and how officially or unofficially the speaker would like to communicate with the people. The entirety of these characteristics dictate how successful the speech will be and how the politician would like to be perceived by the public.

Antonyms in political speeches are commonly used as oppositions; a way to differentiate how one must act, perceive a situation or how to view people.

Moreover, the order of used antonyms play a part in what the audience will notice when listening to the speech. As an unwritten rule, the positive word comes first in a sentence and the negative word (or words) comes after. This unconsciously forces the audience to focus more on the positivity rather than on the negativity. This precise order of terms psychologically alternates emotions. Antonyms in political speeches create a sharp contrast between what the speaker wants the audience to maintain after the speech is over and what should be avoided or changed. Additionally, the usage of antonyms shows what the politician's opinions and viewpoints are regarding peculiar subject matters.

Hyponyms allow the speaker to specify ideas without the audience misinterpreting the message or, on the contrary, instead of cluttering the speech with unnecessary information the speaker can use an "umbrella" term to reduce the chance of confusion with the amount of subject matter to remember.

Homophones cannot be understood without the context of the speech since those words are pronounced the same yet have different meaning and spelling. However, a person with substantial knowledge about English grammar could easily distinguish what words were actually used in a speech and what their meanings are.

The usage of homonyms is a tedious task since the understanding of the words must be a priority if one wants to sound competent while giving a speech. This is extremely important to orators who would like to influence their audience.

In example BO 1, the term *race* is used while speaking about separate things. At first, *race* is used to describe a generalised group of people, and in the next sentence, it is used to explain a competition in which the politician is participating.

*That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. BO 1*

Correspondingly, in example JB 1, the term *right* has two different meanings depending on the context – on one hand it means to have some form of privilege, and on the other hand, it is used to describe the time in which something is taking place.

*[...] but I've never been more optimistic about America or the American people than I am right today. JB 1*

Polysemy provides public speakers with more ways to use words instead of only utilizing their most commonly known meanings. This lexical device assures the speaker that the speech will stand out from the rest and in some instances seem more coherent.

In the example below (BO 2), the word *trumpet*, customarily known as a brass instrument, can be used as a verb that is synonymous to the words *exclaim* or *announce*.

*[...] all of us will trumpet those qualities we believe make us uniquely qualified to lead the country. BO 2*

Collocations show how some words are related to others and how by saying one word a person might group them with another.

In Donald Trump's speech, a most noticeable collocation is *Obama* (DT 1). When the listener hears that surname, their subconscious mind almost immediately pairs it up with the terms *Obamacare* and *White House*. Of course, if the listener has known about the former US president beforehand.

*Obama is going to be out playing golf. DT 1 And it's going to get worse, because remember, Obamacare really kicks in [...]*

*[...] I have one right next to the White House [...]*

After analysing all three political speeches from a lexical point of view, the politicians that used the majority of lexical devices were Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Firstly, synonyms and antonyms, used by D Trump, left much to be desired – they were quite simple and at times informal and disrespectful towards specific people. Consequently, his reputation was tarnished. Joe Biden's speech was the opposite of Donald Trump's – he shared his opinions without using hurtful terminology. Moreover, Joe Biden's clever usage of antonyms and polysemy depicted his devotion to appearing as professional and direct as possible. Lastly, Barack Obama's speech, while not overcrowded with lexical devices, appeared successful and professional. Tasteful usage of synonyms and competent usage of polysemy created an admirable speech.

## Stylistic devices in public speeches

When it comes to stylistic devices in political speeches, they are easily more recognisable and appear more frequently than the previously mentioned lexical devices. Stylistic devices provide the speech with more versatile and unconventional ways of expressing opinions or ideas, and assist public speakers in portraying competent statements that coerce the audience to think and act in a way that benefits them.

The most continually used stylistic devices are alliteration, hyperbole, understatement, metaphors, simile, repetition, litotes, rhetorical questions, personification, inversion, oxymoron, irony, and epithet (Yuldoshev, 2017). They all create extravagant statements, which evoke an emotional response from the listeners.

After analysing three public speeches from famous US politicians, 45 stylistic devices were identified.

Alliteration is a way to create a rhyme, which is easier to remember and accentuates a statement.

Firstly, alliteration might happen mistakenly. When the politician verbalised the amount of money that was spent, he repeated a harsh sound with the statement *two trillion* (example DT 2). Due to the added repetition, the listeners subconsciously will be able to recollect that number if they were asked about it after the speech had ended.

*We spent \$2 trillion in Iraq, \$2 trillion. DT 2*

Hyperbole accentuates the greatness of the circumstance, even though in some cases it cannot meet the set expectations.

In the example below (BO 3), *endless possibility* intensifies the abilities that the politician, alongside the entire nation, will be able to acquire if certain requirements are met:

*[...] and see as I see, a future of endless possibility stretching before us [...]* BO 3

If the orators want to be seen as more appealing and worthy leaders, they can call themselves *the greatest*. To exaggerate their excellence, they could end the statement with *in the world, to ever exist*, or, as demonstrated in example DT 3, *that God ever created*.

*I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created. DT 3*

By using hyperbole, politicians have a greater chance of persuading the audience into thinking that they are worthy of their votes and support. Moreover, it can help to illustrate how society's actions or reactions will dictate future events and achievements.

Understatement creates a sense of false hope, especially if the reality of the situation is not as minute as it might seem. With the help of

understatements, the speaker can conceal the truth about a specific subject for there to be less chaos within society.

Metaphors are a clever way of describing a situation with an item that has no relation with the main object of the statement.

In the example depicted below, Donald Trump belittles a situation by referring to it as *small potatoes*.

*Be careful of a bubble because what you've seen in the past might be small potatoes compared to what happens. DT 4*

Another way of using metaphors is by describing emotions with something tragic and current. Joe Biden compared the feeling of hopelessness and unfairness to what had happened to George Floyd during active protests. This metaphor could evoke a bittersweet reaction due to its origin and inevitably cause to feel negative emotions.

*But much of it is a cry for justice from a community that long had the knees of injustice on their necks. JB 2*

Such unconventional ways of describing situations or feelings create a memorable presentation, which could be quoted by the audience many years after the public speech took place. By referencing specific ideas, the “authors” get more recognition and as a result become more popular.

Repetition is the most favourite stylistic device among politicians. This stylistic device is used to intensify the gravity of the situation and to further motivate the audience to act.

The example below depicts the possibility of a better future for the people by repeating the phrase *let's be the generation*. This insinuates the need to take drastic measures in order to have a brighter tomorrow.

*Let's be the generation that finally tackles our health care crisis. Let's be the generation that says right here, right now, that we will have universal health care [...]. Let's be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil. Let's be the generation that makes future generations proud of what we did here. Most of all, let's be the generation that never forgets what happened on that September day [...]. BO 4*

Another way repetition is utilized in political speeches is by shining a light on the actions people would have to take a situation to become more manageable. This example (JB 3) outlines the result of taken actions as well – 100,000 lives will be saved.

*It's estimated that **if we wore masks the next few months**, by his own experts in the CDC and other agencies, **if we wore this mask the next few months**, we'd save **100,000** lives. **100,000**.*

JB 3

Although repetition might seem inappropriate to some, it allows orators to skilfully and subconsciously persuade their target audience to follow their footsteps, as well as be of service to themselves by helping them to continue the speech.

Litotes are used to show a negative situation in a positive manner. The words that are used by influential people are most likely to be remembered, so in order to have the audience perceive the speaker in a positive light – optimistic terms should replace pessimistic ones. Instead of representing the situation by stating, “*it will be difficult*”, the speaker opts to use a more encouraging approach:

*And it won't be easy. BO 5*

Rhetorical questions are used to engage with the audience but usually without expecting a response. If a politician uses rhetorical questions, he wants to create some form of relationship with the target audience for his own benefit.

With the rhetorical questions shown below (DT 5), the politician expresses his dissatisfaction with how the country is run.

*How stupid are our leaders? How stupid are these politicians to allow this to happen? How stupid are they? DT 5*

This stylistic device can create a more relaxed atmosphere where the listeners feel as if their opinions on the subject matter have meaning.

Personification gives a human-like resemblance to objects that lack those qualities. In the example BO 6, former president Barack Obama personifies the object *Empire* by describing its downfall with a human body part. When something is *brought to its knees*, it means that it was devastated.

*[...] a band of patriots brought an Empire to its knees. BO 6*

With this stylistic device, the speaker has a chance to create more astonishing and vivid images, which as a result, create an intriguing speech. Another use of personification is to subconsciously elicit specific emotions: sadness, fear or even fascination.

Inversion is just another way of emphasising the more important parts of a sentence. In the case of inversion, the speaker says the most important information first and only after provides more detail. This stylistic device not only focuses on the more important part of the message, but it also helps the audience to understand the meaning of the statement.

*Divided, we are bound to fail. BO 7*

Oxymoron is a peculiar stylistic device, which puts two antonymous or contradicting words back to back, creating an ironic meaning.

The example BO 8 creates a contradicting statement with the expression *sight unseen*. After hearing such statement, one might question how a

sight (something that is, by definition, seen) might be unseen.

*And I accepted the job, sight unseen [...] BO 8.*

Even though oxymoron might appear confusing at first, it helps to express the polarity of life. Moreover, it adds a certain charm to the speech.

The usage of epithets creates a more graphic speech where the audience does not have to interpret what the speaker meant. Due to the descriptive nature of adjectives, the speaker has the ability to clearly and coherently portray opinions.

After careful examination, it was observed that the most expressive politician out of all three is Donald Trump. In his speech, there was a lot of repetition, many litotes, rhetorical questions and epithets. As a result, his speech appeared to be longer. As a public speaker, Donald Trump might not be as successful as Barack Obama or Joe Biden since his speech was cluttered with unnecessary information and seemed unprofessional due to the informal and aggressive nature of some of his statements. The second most expressive politician is Barack Obama. His skilful usage of simile, personification, inversion and epithets showed how effortlessly he was able to portray his message to the people. The tasteful and effective usage of repetition expressed his genuine intentions to make America a better place for all. Barack Obama's speech was the most formal of them all when it comes to the usage of stylistic devices. Lastly, Joe Biden's speech lacked stylistic devices, though his speech did not suffer as a consequence. His powerful usage of hyperbole and metaphors proved him as a great orator and leader.

## Conclusions

1. Theoretically, public speech, alongside lexical and stylistic devices, serves a number of purposes:

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- 1.1. Public speech is used as a communication tool to inform, persuade, teach or express one's emotions.
  - 1.2. Lexical devices provide the speaker with comprehensible ways of portraying thoughts, ideas and emotions without cluttering the overall speech with needless terminology.
  - 1.3. Stylistic devices allow speakers to use their creativity and express manipulative intentions while giving a public speech.
  2. Descriptive comparative linguistic analysis served as a template to identify the usage of lexical and stylistic characteristics in three politicians' (Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden) speeches:
    - 2.1. Lexical means in public speeches show the direct meanings of the speaker's message; most frequently, lexical means create a more cohesive and less creative way of sharing information with the public.
    - 2.2. Stylistic means in public speeches show the indirect or hidden meanings the speaker is trying to convey; usually, stylistic means show the speaker's competence in using words or phrases in a less literal manner, which makes the speech unique.
    - 2.3. Barack Obama and Joe Biden use lexical devices to sound more professional, clear and knowledgeable.
    - 2.4. Barack Obama and Joe Biden utilize stylistic devices in a way that portrays a deeper meaning within their speeches and asserts their position as being almighty leaders of their country.
    - 2.5. Donald Trump's usage of lexical means creates a sense of informality when communicating with the people.
    - 2.6. Donald Trump uses stylistic means to aggressively and forcefully exclaim his views towards situations and people; thus, appearing less appealing.

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## EFEKTYVIOS VIEŠOSIOS KALBOS LINGVISTINIAI YPATUMAI

### Santrauka

Galima išskirti keletą viešojo kalbėjimo formų ir būdų, tačiau pagrindinis tikslas yra informuoti, ugdyti bei sėkmingai paveikti visuomenę, pasitelkiant įtaigią ir motyvuojančią kalbą. Politikai, kurių kalbos yra dažniausiai girdimos, siekdami pademonstruoti savo patikimumą ir kompetenciją, į pagalbą pasitelkia įvairias kalbėjimo technikas. Atidžiai parinkta kalbos rūšis (skaitomoji, informacinė, proginė ar įtaigos) kartu su tam tikromis kalbinėmis priemonėmis (leksinėmis ir stilistinėmis) bet kuriam įtakingam oratoriui suteikia galimybę ženkliai paveikti auditoriją ir manipuliuoti visuomenės nuomone. Šiuo tyrimu buvo siekta atskleisti, viešosiose trijų JAV prezidentų kalbose vartojamų lingvistinių priemonių efektyvumą, atlikti lyginamąją analizę bei išsiaiškinti, kokios leksinės bei stilistinės priemonės lemia oratorinę sėkmę. Tyrime buvo taikomi teorinės medžiagos analizės bei lingvistinės analizės, pagrįstos aprašymu ir palyginimu metodai. Analizuojant prezidentų kalbas, buvo aptiktos 45 leksinės ir 162 stilistinės priemonės, iš kurių atitinkamai -23 ir 45 pasirinktos detalesniam tyrimui. Straipsnis atskleidžia, kad leksinių priemonių dėka, kalba tampa vientisesnė, nors mažiau kūrybinga, kai tuo tarpu stilistinių priemonių vartojimas atspindi oratoriaus išskirtinumą. Galima teigti, kad Barack Obama ir Joe Biden sudaro aiškumo ir sumanumo įspūdį, kai tuo tarpu Donald Trump kalbos pasižymi neformaliu, įtaigiu ar net agresyviu stiliumi.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** viešoji kalba, lingvistinės priemonės, politinė figūra, efektyvumas.

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