

## Discourse Analysis of Obama's Inaugural Speech From the Perspective of Culture

YANG Shenghua<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Based on brief introduction of discourse analysis, political speech and cultural criticism, the thesis analyzes deeply Obama's inaugural speech from the perspective of culture, which is a new thing in discourse analysis. The article has a deep study on the origin of President's inaugural speech, the doctrines in Bible, the multicultural society and American belief, opening a new door to the study of discourse analysis.

**Key words:** Discourse analysis; Inaugural speech; Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Discourse Analysis has a history of over 50 years, since Zelling Harris published his thesis paper titled *Discourse Analysis in Language* in 1952. Discourse analysis is used widely as a term of modern linguistics. It centers on news report, literary works and official documents and so on, analyzes language environment of life and social and historical background, resulting from formation and spread of public paper, and aims at revealing social and interpersonal relationship by means of the superficial language forms. In 1970s, it is introduced into linguistic and other branch subjects such as functional

grammar, semantics, linguistics and computer linguistics. Pragmatics, functional linguistics, linguistics and social linguistics are the source of the theory of discourse analysis. The method of discourse analysis is based on systematic and functional linguistics. Since 1960s, the researches of Hymes, Austin, Searle, Grice, Halliday and Leech have promoted the rapid development of discourse analysis. Among them, Van Dilk, an expert from Neitherland has contributed the most. His early research is called Text Grammars. In 1972, he published *Some Aspects of Text Grammars* and published other books later. In 1985, Van Dijk published *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, which is a milestone in the history of discourse analysis. Van Dijk holds that this book marks the formation of a new subject. Since 1981, discourse analysis has its own periodical TEXT.

According to Halliday, "the basic statement about language is functional." (Halliday, 1994, p.46) In the systemic functional grammar, function refers to the three functions that almost all the languages perform simultaneously which he names respectively as ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Many experts and scholars play active roles in the field of discourse analysis, who study human languages from different angles, such as human methodology, social linguistics, philosophy, functional linguistics and social semiology. Every theory has brought forth one or several analysis methods, which has provided solid foundation for discourse analysis, offered broad practical fields and exerted far-reaching influence on language study. As for linguistics, discourse analysis theory is based on pragmatics, functional linguistics, linguistics and social linguistics. Therefore, there are many research methods. First, cooperative politeness principle is a very important theory, which has offered method to operate. Discourse meaning is significant in the process of proper understanding of discourse. Second, Speech Act Theory is necessary for functional discourse understanding and successful communication through

forms and circumstances. Third, Systemic Functional Linguistics is also important. Its representative Halliday considers language as social signs and his systematic and functional linguistics works great upon discourse analysis. With the development of semiology, anthropology, artificial intelligence and sociology, discourse analysis has absorbed the fruitful results of those researches and new methods, and systematic theories of discourse analysis appeared.

Speech can be called address and lecture. It is an art of communication by means of sound languages and body languages, focusing on the reality and the future of society, expressing opinions and emotions, and also calling on the listeners to take actions. Speech, which can be divided into different types, is also considered as the advanced and effective oral expression, containing broad contents and extensive systems. Generally, information is the key to successful speech, combining the subject and object of speech. Contents determine styles. Therefore, the criterion of classification in speech is around the content, concerning politics, military, economics, science, morality, law, religion and social life. The speech can be classified as the following styles: political speech, economic speech, military speech, academic speech, law speech, moral speech and ceremony speech.

Political speech is concerned about domestic affairs and foreign relations, expressing standpoints and opinions. It sprang up in ancient Greece. Democracy, political and class struggle laid the foundation for the development of political speech. Many political speakers appeared and political speech took up the important position in the field of ancient speech. In the Middle Ages, tyranny limited all rights of political speech and led to the decay of pure political speech. However, political speech as a means of spiritual culture was preserved and passed down from generation to generation. In modern society, political speech occupies the unique position again and is regarded as the important weapon of political struggle. It has become the most popular speech. Diplomatic speech, military speech, government report, political debate, inaugural/assignment speech and campaign speech are the branches of political speech. As inaugural speech and campaign speech are achievements of political groups, representing typical opinions and plans. Its deep thought, conscientious demonstration, refined language and rich language materials are the centers of this paper.

Political speech has powerful eloquence and agitation. It aims at convincing, conquering or frightening listeners through clear standpoint, logic argument and conscientious demonstration. It is natural that listeners are stirred to accept the opinions and plans of political groups, and to take actions correspondingly. Political speech is the important weapon of political struggle concerning rich contents. Its distinguishing features in content are as following: clear standpoint, logic demonstration and powerful agitation.

The purpose of political speech is to publicize political party, groups and personal views and claims to stir up listeners. Therefore, successful political speech is filled with deep thought and clear standpoint. Winston Churchill, the British politician, once delivered a speech:

You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.

Here, he expressed his strong determination to win at all costs.

In political speech, telling the truth is far enough to defeat the opponent. Logic demonstration, wise strategy and forceful language are also essential. John Kennedy once said in his inaugural speech: "my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." He called up Americans to have more responsibilities and sacrifice more for the development of the country.

Powerful agitation plays an active role in a successful speech. The speakers publicize or reject. Their clear standpoints, explicit views, logic demonstrations and sincere emotions often touch the heart of the listeners easily. Martin Luther King, the American civil rights hero, organized a march in 1963 and delivered the famous speech *I Have a Dream*. He used parallelism and repetition in his speech. "We can never satisfy as long as" appeared six times in the speech, expressing the strong resolution of winning equality and civil rights. The repetition of "I have a dream" described their ideal of pursuing equality and freedom, clear standpoint of fighting against racial discrimination and gaining racial equality.

Furthermore, political speech has its distinctive feature in the structure. The organization of structure in political speech is so significant that we need to pay special attention to it. Firstly, proper structure is related to listeners' comprehension and recalling. That is to say, it is very difficult to understand and recall disordered speech. People have found that preview before talking, short conclusion of important points and proper review are helpful in understanding a speech. Secondly, structure exerts influence on the degree of listeners' trust. Generally, a disordered and ambiguous speech is the reflection of the lack of ability. If a speaker can not express clear points and thought, he is often regarded as a person who lacks ability or does not pay enough attention to his speech. Thirdly, structure has effect on the quality of the communication between speaker and listeners. The fault of structure may lead to ambiguous viewpoints and it is not easy for listeners to draw a clear distinction between several points. It is inevitable that listeners have to spend more efforts to understand speaker's thought

with continuous disappointment and frustration. In this case, it is hard for listeners to have full comprehension and interaction. Many researchers have discovered that the structure of a political speech is brief, symmetrical and clear. To limit points and use brief, direct and definite language makes a political speech brief. To combine important points and support the theme of speech makes a political speech symmetrical. Clear structure corresponds to the rule of development and logic relation of cognition.

Political speech, as a particular style, is different from conversation in daily life and literary works such as novel, poem and drama. It has distinctive characteristics of oral and writing language. Meanwhile, it differs a lot from them. It is more complicated and formal than conversation in the field of vocabulary and sentence. As it places importance on speech sounds and rhetoric, it is more vivid and colorful than writings.

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## 1. CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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Literary criticism has entered a new time in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Various schools appeared and new theories and doctrines have their own places in the stage of literary criticism. With the decline of new criticism in 1960s, western criticism began to experience the great change from language criticism to cultural criticism. Many external methods which were once criticized a lot began to enter the field of criticism. Many literary theory schools, which sprang up in 1980s, started to focus on cultural research. Cultural interpretation of literary works has attracted more and more attentions. Cultural criticism is the research on culture. It centered on popular culture in 1950s and 1960s, and has developed into a kind of practical criticism combining different theories and methods in different subjects. It also concerns history, philosophy, sociology and literary criticism. With the help of cultural research, the academic circles value great the relation of literature and history and the relation of literature and culture. There is no fixed pattern for literary criticism and cultural criticism. But the ideal critical method is to combine cultural research and text research and interpret cultural information by means of text analysis.

The listeners of Obama's inaugural speech come from different classes in America. Their cultural degree and literary mastery are not in the same level. It is not easy for the listeners to accept new ideas, admit new policies, take new attitudes and take new actions. Obama and his assistants prepare the persuasive speech carefully. It not only stirs up the public to make proper judgment, but also shares the concept, value and emotion with them. In this sense, the speech has elevated Obama's group and attacked a lot of their opponents successfully. The listeners and the purpose of the text make the speech popular, which belongs to mass culture. Therefore, interpretation of the speech from the perspective of culture is meaningful and appropriate.

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## 2. PURITAN SERMON AND LITERARY TRADITION OF ORAL ENGLISH

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It is necessary to understand literary tradition of oral English in America in order to reveal the cultural content of Obama's inaugural speech. Literary tradition of oral English in America originated from one of puritan religious activities—sermon in 17<sup>th</sup> century. Sermon is the worshiping ceremony of Christian and important procedure of other religions. Minister or priest explains the holy thought and deep meaning of the Bible in the church in the process of ceremony. Listeners are touched and enlightened under the solemn circumstance. They usually gain happiness and inspiration spiritually. In 17<sup>th</sup> century, sermon was a very popular form of literature. In the beginning of colonization, the importance of sermon was beyond other forms of literature. Sermon was the main method of recognizing God's benevolence and being converted to God. It was also the indispensable condition for religious life of puritans and the bridge to link God's will and ordinary disciples. People can absorb quite a lot of useful information for knowing God's meaning and gain the truth about the salvation of human beings. Generally, ministers tried their utmost to make the sermon simple, brief, clear and easy to understand in order that ordinary disciples who were not well-educated can understand religious teachings easily. Thus, this religious and literary form once became the main method of public education in America and cultural entertainment. Meanwhile this style corresponded literary style in the period of colonization.

As time flew and society developed, sermon also made obvious advancement. In 17<sup>th</sup> century, the famous ministers appeared in New England such as William Bradford and John Winthrop. They were both clergymen and administrators. Sometimes, they sent common information after the sermon. The Gospel and common information formed the basic and early pattern of literary tradition of oral English in America. Therefore, under this cultural circumstance, speech, sermon, graduation speech and campaign speech are the public demonstrations, which demonstrate the common thought and value. Oral English focuses more on the current affairs than wrot English, for it tries to explain the relation between the common value in society and man's difficulty at certain time in certain place, aiming at the people speaker faces and their problems. We can understand easily why Americans are so interested in the inaugural speech. All presidents of America are outstanding speakers.

According to sermon theory, a standard sermon is divided into four parts in the structure. The beginning of sermon is reading or explaining a paragraph in the Bible. Then, minister begins to read teachings that are the themes of the sermon. And then, he demonstrates his words. Finally, he ends the sermon with practical use. The rule is established in terms of people's understanding of

mentality. According to the popular theory, it is necessary to convince one's mind and mentality if the minister wants to touch the heart of others and dominates their will and feeling. As a result, the first three parts of the sermon are focusing on rationality, while the final part of practical function tries to stir up the reactions of listeners' feeling. This attempt is combining on purpose rhetoric theory and psychological theory. Sermon, the special style in literature, is serviceable in religious activities and common affairs. So it has become the early inaugural speech.

### 3. REAPPEARANCE OF BIBLE AND COMMON USE OF ITS DOCTRINES

The tradition of delivering inaugural speech started in 1989 when President John Washington made the first inaugural speech in New York. During the period of 200 years, presidents, from John Washington to George. W. Bush, has expressed good wishes and heroic dreams, and shown their policies with the help of inaugural speech.

America is a country of religion. One of the functions of religion in keeping social order is to take part in social control. Compared to politics and law which are full violence, religious control depends more on the restriction of thought and emotion. By using supernatural power, religious control adds holy element to the social order in reality and achieves the goal of maintaining stability. Apart from that, religion is also used to unite the whole society by means of religious belief, which makes the individual and social group to become a spiritual community. The spiritual community may develop into an organized community and hold every part in the community together. We must comprehend the classics of Christian religion in America with the hope that we can understand the cultural content in Obama's inaugural speech.

Christianity is an important part of western culture, and in the west, common people believe in God. Bible, as the main classics and spiritual support, has exerted far-reaching influence upon western society and culture, and permeated deeply in daily life. Therefore, president's inaugural speech is full of doctrines of Bible and strengthens its power with the help of God. In the beginning of the inaugural ceremony, Obama presses the Bible used by Lincoln and then takes an oath. After that, he demands everyone lower the head and listen to his pray.

As Thompson explained, "All descriptions involve language and presenting anything in or through language and involve selection. The choice of words is by no means arbitrary. Wording is not the speaker's own creation, but the representation of the social, political or religious ideas shared by the social group he or she belongs to." (Thompson, 2000, p.15) Obama uses various forms

of Bible doctrines to show his political standpoint and ideology in his inaugural speech, which touches the heart of listeners and forms the unified national feeling and patriotic passion. In this sense, religion plays an active role in social control, in strengthening unity, and in keeping social order. Obama also uses quite a lot of words which are closely linked with God such as "God", "faithful" and "guide". On one hand, he shows his piety for Christianity; on the other hand, the public is convinced that their president is guided by God to serve for people. It is easy for him to eliminate the disfavor of the public and win their sympathy and support. The speech is full of the plural first personal pronouns "we" and "our". These words can shorten the distance between the speaker and the listeners, and let the speaker become one of the public. It is natural that the speaker and the listeners can share the same feeling of participation and cooperation easily. The function of ideology is obvious through this sharing. For example,

"we" can be classified into inclusive and exclusive we. "Inclusive" that is of the listener and the speaker, as opposed to 'exclusive' which refers to the speaker plus one or more others, but does not include the addressees. The inclusive use is relationally significant in that it represents the president, the Congress, the audience and everyone else as in the same boat. (Fairclough, 1989, p.128)

It assimilates the president to the people. The solidarity is established and helps call on for the national unionism.

The speech is brief and symmetrical, as the structure of the Bible. Furthermore, there are many repetitions which are also the obvious features in the Bible. Sentences in the Bible often begin with "for", "and" and "so". The speech has the same sentence structure to achieve the goal of serving for the public. "We remain a young nation, but in the words of scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things." Obama wants to say that the speech and action of the United States of America are not immature, crude and impetuous. The country must be mature rapidly.

### 4. MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY AND AMERICAN BELIEF IN PRESIDENT'S INAUGURAL SPEECH

Obama once said the following sentences in his inaugural speech. "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth." This sentence reflects fully the fruitful results in the multicultural movement in America, which has been accepted by mainstream society.

Multiculturalism was used in 1980s. America is an immigrant country and the relation between various races and the white, who represent mainstream culture, is the mirror of the opinions about culture in American society. Within long period, American society is considered as

“melting pot”. The core of the “melting pot” is that no matter who you are, you must take part in and assimilate with the mainstream culture—Anglo Saxon culture, if you come to America. However, after a short while, “melting pot” was challenged strongly from the First World War. The distrust towards the immigrants with German origin weakened “melting pot”. During the period of Second World War, the same situation appeared. Japanese and German immigrants were the objects of isolation, rejection and attacking. Gradually, “multiculturalism”, came into the stage of history, which claimed different cultures and were against American culture, mainstream culture or “melting pot”. After Second World War, especially the Law of Immigrant 1965, the situation was improved the principle of racial difference was abolished. A new wave of immigrants appeared as a result of the Law of Immigrant. There was obvious difference from other waves: The number of western European immigrants decreased, whereas the number of Asian and Latin immigrants increased. This shift changed the original structure of immigrants and led to social conflict. In 1960s, after The Second World War, American society experienced unprecedented turbulence. Civil Right Movement, Left Party Movement, Homosexuality Movement, Feminism Movement and Anti-cultural Movement appeared one after another. Various disturbance and unrest and violent events did not stop at that time. American government took steps for the development and stability of society. Multi-cultural education was one of its policies. American society experienced great change in 1990s and Americans had to review their cultural inheritance. Nowadays, more and more Americans realize that the source of American development is the rich cultural difference and multiculturalism. So, president Obama made a conclusion of the common sense.

Obama mentioned American creed, the core value of America in his inaugural speech. “But those values upon which our success depends—honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old.” American creed stems from *American Choice* in 1944 and becomes popular in America. Although there are many differences in race, religion, region and economy, a common belief still exists in the society. This is called American belief. American creed is a special national temperament and content along with the development of history. It contains not only the values of democracy and freedom, but also the special spirit of struggle, aggression, optimism, industry and thrift. The full meaning of American creed also includes

social morality extensively. In essence, it is the reflection of the common spirit in new times and of the religious source. American creed is the product of Puritanism and enlightenment movement in American history.

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## CONCLUSION

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Based on cultural criticism of discourse analysis in Obama’s inaugural speech, this article analyses Obama’s speech from different dimensions of cultural criticism and explores political speech in discourse analysis. Obama’s using of language is determined by his purpose and social identity. And there is a dialectical relation between language and social value. On the one hand, the social practice determines the use of language, which reflects the producer’s ideology; on the other hand, the use of language brings the change of the society as well. From the analysis, we can see how Obama’s oral skill helps him achieve his aim of touching the heart of others and how his effective expression reflects the cultural source in America.

President’s inaugural speech in America is the typical political speech and president usually makes use of the speech to express his standpoint, opinion, charm, ambition and courage. As the inaugural speech can encourage and educate the public, quite a lot of cultural information is needed. Cultural research is always about literature and history. Close relationship between literature and culture is an essential part in the inaugural speech. With the help of cultural criticism, we can get the conclusion that the full understanding of the inaugural speech is due to the knowledge about president’s inaugural ceremony, the historical source of the speech, the nature of American religions, multicultural movement in America and cultural background. Through cultural studies of Obama’s speech, we can see how his linguistic devices are consistent with his identity and power relations in the speech, how his linguistic devices help him achieve his purpose of convincing people, and how the social background influence his language.

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