

## ANALYSIS OF THE IDIOLECT OF BARACK OBAMA

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the authors will focus on the analysis of the idiolect and rhetoric of U.S. President Barack Obama through his speeches, statements, and use of terms. As the main research method, we will use the analysis and for better description and result evaluation, we also focus on comparison with other U.S. presidents. For a deeper analysis of the discursive strategies of Barack Obama, we also apply critical discourse analysis to achieve more complex characteristics of his idiolect. Following this main goal by writing the article we suppose that the rhetoric and idiolect of Barack Obama is positively disposed and very attractive for the public.

**Key words:** *Idiolect, Rhetoric, Barack Obama, U.S. President, Critical Discourse Analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

There is power in the world. This assertion gains its strength when we talk about politics. State power bodies, their representatives, prime ministers, and presidents are the most influential people in the world political system. Because of this, their speeches are so sharply watched, especially when you are the president of the United States, the most powerful statesman in the world. Everyone is watching your political steps and way of speaking to predict your future political actions. This article is focused on the idiolect and rhetoric of the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama. We will analyse his way of speaking, use of terms, and what is typical for him with an emphasis on the national interest presentation. As the main research method, we will use the analysis and for better description and result evaluation, we also focus on comparison with Obama's predecessors. We will work with critical discourse analysis dealing fundamentally with the identity question of who we are. Given that identity is crafted through language and communication, which could be tools of soft power. Soft power is the ability to affect others through co-optive means of framing agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction, transmitted mainly in media [Nye 2011]. Soft power could be defined then as resources measurable in terms of a country's culture, political traditions and values, and foreign policy, which we will illustrate in Obama's policy. We are convinced, soft power cannot exist outside of language or discourse that gives meaning to it [Laclau, Mouffe 2001] and this language should change due the persuading countries or regions [Brhliková 2013]. Employing relevant methods and concept of critical discourse analysis, which is concerned with problematizing the role of discourse in power relations, we dissect the framing of Barack Obama. We identify three soft power discourse practices: charm offensive, Othering offensive, and defensive denial. Among the three discursive strategies is charm offensive probably most familiar for Obama's rhetoric and idiolect. It describes the sum of public diplomacy aimed at promoting positive self-images and winning hearts and minds. It's a practice of constructing the self in a positive light. Notable examples can be found in such discourse as the "American Dream", presented also in Obama's presidential campaign. Othering offensive refers to the construction of a negative and repulsive "Other" as a foil for indirectly fashioning a positive and attractive self-identity. Obama used it against his presidential precursor's foreign policy towards the Middle East and Afghanistan in his campaign, but this is the usual method used in campaigns all over the world. Othering offensive can also be used by justifying the domination and the use of hard power typical for U.S. presidents Bush Jr. and Trump. A citing example of such discourse is the "Axis of Evil" used by Bush Jr. to manipulate the negative images of those countries and support the U.S. leadership and foreign policy. By defensive denial we mean a largely reactive strategy of resisting or denying negative discourses about Self, often as a re-

sponse to an Othering offensive by other actors. For example, to refute damaging discourses about Japan's war atrocities in World War II [Pan, Isakhan, Nwokora 2020]. When Obama took the office in 2009, he faced quite a difficult situation. His mission was to show to US citizens and to the world America in a better light. American „*War on Terror*“, which was the priority of G.W. Bush's administration, lasted for seven years. It was attended by Bush's disruptive rhetoric and erroneous war in Iraq, which caused expending of soft power possibilities. Because of that Obama's top preference was to supplement them [Bettiza 2009]. *“The first shift in comparison with Obama's precursor, discernible immediately after he took Office, was in the rhetoric of the new president. Obama's first interview in his new post was to the Arab satellite TV Al-Arabiya, with the aim to address and renew his commitments to the Arab and Muslim world.”* [Kočnerová, Kasanová 2013:68]. In this nexus, he stressed the importance of soft power, and diplomacy as tools for national interest advocacy not only towards the Middle East.

## **1. MIDDLE EAST**

In relation to the Middle East, *“Obama distanced himself from his predecessor's faith-based agenda and stressed that he would not preach to other nations or impose American values.”* [Gerges 2012:8]. Many times, we have heard how Obama quoted Koran. His answer to a question about the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world was clear when he called upon its new start at the University of Cairo. According to his speech, it is necessary that the language used between the United States and the Muslim world will be the language of respect [Obama 2009b]. In an interview with Al-Arabiya, he also stressed the importance of understanding the fact, that the USA is not the enemy of the Muslim world. He added that some members of his own family are Muslims, and he has lived in Muslim countries too [Obama 2009a]. Obama was against the war in Iraq because he thought that it was the wrong war at the wrong time. But he endorsed the American move into Afghanistan after 11<sup>th</sup> September had happened and he supported the goal of this operation, which was to root out Taliban and Al-Qaeda too [Berry, Gottheimer 2011]. As he said *“I don't oppose all wars... What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war.”* [Obama, 2002]. King claims that Obama dealt far more with public rhetoric about Afghanistan and with problems of combating terrorism in comparison with his attention to ending the war in Iraq [King 2014:136]. In this connection, he used the cliché *“time to turn the page”* and aimed his effort to Afghanistan.

*“On Afghanistan - America's longest war - Obama expressed just a continued commitment to bringing the troops home, ending “our war” while theirs continues”* [Coleman, 2013]. Obama wanted to alter the interpretation of the *“war on terror”* against worldwide Islamofascism, to war against a *“far-reaching network of violence and hatred”* [Obama 2010:1], Al-Qaeda [Bettiza 2009]. His discursive strategy was othering offensive referring to G. W. Bush's activities in the Middle East. But on the other hand,

Obama eschewed his predecessor's war terminology and gave a more specific definition of the real threat, which represented Al-Qaeda [Ellis 2012]. He also added to "*do whatever it takes to defeat them.*" [Obama 2010:1].

Obama's approach is pragmatic, which means that it is reactive. He usually defines problems as they come up, concurrently and separately too. Obama also formulates a few national interest priorities, but he doesn't express his global vision of American and the world's direction. His aim was to end the U.S. engagement in the wars. For this reason, he also awaited other countries to step up as the USA steps back. American president generally separates and reduces possible threats, as we could see in Iraq. Obama proclaimed, that mission is accomplished and moved away. This step caused Iran, which is considered to be the biggest threat in this region, has shifted into Iraq. Its intentions there are to strengthen the Shiite regime and to purvey arms to jihadists in surrounding countries [Nau 2013].

## **2. HOPE AND CHANGE**

When we talk about Barack Obama, we must emphasize his "*rhetoric of hope*". Obama used this rhetoric for a long time before he became American president. It was accompanied by his post in the US Senate and his books, *Dreams of My Father and Audacity of Hope*. "*His rhetoric of hope may also be defined as a rhetoric of new politics.*" [Atwater 2009:7].

When Obama "*spoke about hope or change, or when he was forced to address himself to the race issue, the American people listened intently. He knew he had to choose his words wisely and that he could persuade, and dissuade, in an instant.*" [Berry, Gottheimer 2011:5].

Atwater gave the rhetoric of hope definition as something that thanks to the use of symbols makes US citizens take care of the country their live in. To make them trust in it and of course to trust the fact, that people are more similar to each other than different. Obama used the rhetoric of hope in his campaign to persuade Americans because his intention was to make them interested in and also take part in the political process. Finally, he wanted to get their votes. Because only if you have hope and trust in something, it is thereafter possible that Obama can be the first Black president of the USA [Atwater 2009].

"*In 2007, Barack Obama presented himself as the candidate of change and worked to lure Democrats with ads that promised that: We Can End a War*", "*We Can Save the Planet*," "*We Can Change the World.*" [Walter 2011:7]. His electoral rhetoric was focused on the slogan "Yes, we can", meaning that yes, we can do anything, we just have to make the right choice. And the right choice for the USA should be Barack Obama, the candidate for hope, peace, and change because the USA definitely needed those attributes. The call for peace has shown as one of the most important interests of the American population at that time. This charm offensive discourse practice of Obama to promote himself and the U.S. in better light was a very successful policy

and rhetoric not only towards Americans but also to the world community, what Nobel Prize for Peace could be evidence.

Ferrara sees it differently and he defined hope as a utopian ideal. According to him *“the anticipatory nature of rational utopias, like Obama’s rhetoric of hope, exploits the dialectical tension between the ideal and the existing order implicit in the forward glance.”* [Ferrara 2013:23]. In addition, his use of the rhetoric of hope clears up the difference between the need for values on the one hand and the demand of freeing them from ideology on the other hand [Ferrara 2011]

### **3. RHETORIC**

When we talk about the rhetorical abilities of Barack Obama, we have to emphasize that *“the election of Obama was also the first presidential election since Kennedy’s narrow triumph over Nixon in 1960 in which the victor’s campaign oratory was a principal reason for his success.”* [Sorensen 2011:1]

When Obama worked as a state legislator, he was inclined to the left. It changed and he started to incline more to the centre when he was a candidate for Congress in 1999. At the time when Obama was a presidential candidate, the main themes of his speech, which also became the main message of his presidential campaign, were well-known unity, responsibility, and change. The most important and influential elements of his campaign were his self-confidence and pleasant voice together with his natural stage performance and his poise in connection to his young, attractive family. Obama was something like amazement for the American nation, because his father was a black Kenyan, and his mother was a white woman from Kansas. He spent his childhood in Honolulu, Hawaii, and Jakarta. The United States and also the whole world have never seen anything like this before [Berry, Gottheimer 2011] and his rhetoric and way of communication could be influenced by cultures of different regions [Mészárosová 2006].

Speeches that were presented by Barack Obama during his campaign, gave an indication that Obama would have his rank with his predecessors like Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, Franklin, Roosevelt, and Kennedy. They all have the same feature - their oratory, which the whole world would listen to and remember. It is very important to realize, that Barack Obama as the US president was not just the instrument or a voice of his gifted speechwriters, but he was by nature a leader, as well as a thoughtful decision-maker. Obama was also a good listener, and he could reach the best opinions and advice from his team of advisers and administration [Berry, Gottheimer 2011]. *“Most of Obama’s use of folk speech comes in the form of proverbial phrases without any claim to wisdom or truth. He uses these metaphorical phrases to add a certain expressiveness, emotion, colour, imagery, and colloquialism to his writings and speeches. It is here where he shows himself to be part of the general population.”*[Mieder 2009:3]. This type of discourse we find as charm offensive because its goal is to win the hearts and minds of people.

Afra paid attention to Obama's speech at AIPAC and according to his analyse, this speech showed, that Obama's rhetoric is greatly double-edged. His intention is probably to conciliate both sides, his fans, and his objectors too. For Obama is typical to use the high-minded expression, for example, "dignity", "democracy" or "freedom". However, in the end, he deprived those expressions of any sense. That means he tried to pave his political way for political actions replete with moral relativism at best and on the other hand with a tolerance of evil at worst. Afra considers that the American president has started using words with no meaning when he commended the students present for "*engaging deeply in our democratic debate.*" [Afra 2012].

When Obama used the pronoun "we" while addressing his speech, he thought of all Americans. He wanted to make them more active, and he also wanted to make them responsible for the future of the country they live in. What was typical for him as a president of the USA is his "attempt to concentrate on the domestic issues, "nation", "*our nation*" being the most prominent words and collocations and begin a "new" chapter in the relations with "the world". At the same time, the key attribute of Obama's address is the adjective "new", which characterizes the strategy and ideas of the newly sworn president and his administration." [Horváth 2009:54]. During the presidential campaign, Obama applied a little bit of dissimilar leadership, and it happened in all facets of his rhetoric. According to Dahlgreen, he modified his optimism in the year 2012, when he applied distinct levels of Optimism and Realism, in comparison with their use while governing. Obama also used diverse levels of Optimism and Certainty during his campaign travel in the year 2010 and the year 2012. Obama had the unique look of his constituency as a national audience and that is the reason why his Commonality remained from the equal population of rhetoric. When we look at the impression of the year 2012, it was exceptionally divisive and party-centric. In connection to this, we can easily note that the contrast between how Obama spoke to the American nation and to a room of campaign followers wasn't diverse. Obama's opinion of campaign leadership was other than his view on governing leadership. But what wasn't different there was the tone of his rhetoric, which is related to defining differences [Hart 2014]. In the end, Obama's words sometimes revealed conflict reconciliation intentions; however, it happened most frequently through the concept of optimism, not through the concept of commonality [Hart 2014].

When we want to understand how Obama works with language, we can't compare him to other politicians or any other gifted orators. The fact is, that his rhetoric originates the most from some particular sources like homiletic, preaching, and also the traditions of the black Protestant churches [Berry, Gottheimer 2011]. "*In many ways, speech is action. When Obama speaks forcefully, as he did in his second inaugural address, he enables action to follow. Changing the public political discourse also changes public understanding, leading to new demands for political action.*" [Lakoff 2013:2].

The advantage of Barack Obama was his capability to connect White syntax, which was the official language of Washington together with Black style. Black style is nec-

essary to understand as a cultural way of expression of the Black population in America. This singular ability of Obama was a pivotal element in founding his identity as an American citizen, as well as Christian [Alim, Smithermann 2012].

#### **4. RHETORICAL STRATEGIES**

Efficiency of Barack Obama's speeches reside in several rhetorical strategies, he usually used and those are:

1. *The power of allusion and its patriotic associations.*
2. *The oratorical resonance of parallel constructions.*
3. *The "two-ness" of the texture, to use DuBois's useful term.*
4. *His ability to include himself as a character in a narrative about race.*

[Clark 2008:8].

##### **1. Allusion:**

In the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., Obama starts some of his speeches with quotes<sup>1</sup> from the Constitution. Barack Obama notes words like democracy, Declaration of Independence, the founders, the Constitution, liberty, justice, equal, free, prosperous, etc. It is very important to mention, that many black leaders usually use two diverse modes of their discourse when they speak to white and black audiences. Obama's wordage is patriotic. Its mission is to comfort white auditors and sober down their fears. Use of the language which betrays failures, not ideals, keeps Obama's speech from falling into a sea of slogans and cliché. When Barack Obama didn't want to disenchant potential voters with a dark vision of America, he usually reinstated familiar evocations of national history, ideals, and language. Examples:

- *"The immigrant trying to feed his family".*
- *"Where our union grows stronger".*
- *"Out of many, we are truly one ."* [Obama 2008]

##### **2. Parallelism:**

The fact is, that parallel construction in speech helps the authors make their meaning memorable. It works on the ground of equal terms to express equal ideas of the orator. Examples:

- *"This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign — to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America."*
- *"...we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction."*
- *"...embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past."* [Obama 2008]

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<sup>1</sup> "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union..."

### 3. Two-ness:

In Obama's rhetoric there is noticeable use of two-ness. Dualism affords the opportunity to produce both tension and balance. It also allows Barack Obama to present himself as the one, who builds bridges, without being too much messianic. Examples:

- "on the streets and in the courts"
- "white and black"
- "too black or not black enough"

### 4. Autobiography:

Presidential candidates usually tend to declare, that their life is accompanied by a battle against poverty and hard circumstances too. According to Obama's words, his father was a black Kenyan, and his mother was white from Kansas. He stressed that he has members of his family of every race and every hue interspersed across three continents. He spoke about the blood of slave and slave owners, and about an inheritance, which he wants to hand on his two daughters [Clark 2008].

Obama's use of rhetorical strategies leading to the persuasive effect of his speeches also confirms Rezaei and Nourali, who analysed the use of persuasive techniques in two selected speeches of Obama. Their research based on the discourse analysis concerned the summarization of used language techniques and evaluated the metaphor as the most frequently persuasive technique used by Obama.<sup>2</sup> The authors also emphasized the influence that cultural background has on the use of persuasive techniques. [Rezaei, Nourali 2016]. As stressed also by [Tökölyová 2016], analysing foreign policy and understanding the meaning of (his) words correctly, it is necessary to know the speaker's/politician's cultural background.

### 5. MEDIA

Barack Obama directed his presidential campaigns purposefully and all his steps were very effective. It proved the way how Obama took advantage of the use of mass media to his own benefit. "Obama is a Master of Communication. He has perfect command of traditional as well as new media options and is able to seed his news and messages in the media in a fast and all-embracing manner. Thanks to the effective use of the modern media environment, the incumbent U.S. President enjoys a unique position due to his global personality acumen and the sheer power of his cultural environment. As a politician, he is a celebrity although he has not been known before." [Kočnerová, Kasanová 2013:69].

Many experts came to an agreement that exactly designed website for a political campaign guaranteed Obama's victory. The Internet is a very important element in politics as well as television. Typical for this century is that the Internet gains even

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<sup>2</sup> In two researched speeches they studied what persuasive techniques Obama had used and tried to count them (concretely allusion, wordplay, lists of three, metaphor, alliteration, parallelism, repetition, puzzled or redundant questions).

more and more influence [Solo 2014]. It creates new possibilities for how to easily enter citizens into dialogues with politicians or the government.

## **6. SPEECHWRITING**

As we have already said, Barack Obama has always been a gifted speaker and gifted writer. After finishing law school, he wrote several books as we have mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Even if he wrote many of his speeches, writing took his precious time, so Obama created his own speechwriting team that caused his rhetorical and stylistic transformation [Berry, Gottheimer 2011].

Obama can be considered punctilious because he usually worked until late at night to finish his speech. However, during the presidential campaign when Obama travelled through the USA, played a key role in his speechwriting team. *“Favreau or one of the other writers would speak to Obama on the phone and then, after seeing edits from Axelrod, Gibbs and others, e-mail or fax the speech to Obama’s assistant, Reggie Love, who was on the road with the candidate. Obama would then send back his comments through Axelrod or Love or simply pick up the phone and call the writer. In some cases, Obama would e-mail comments to the speechwriter from his BlackBerry or send a document with tracked changes directly from his laptop.”* [Berry, Gottheimer 2011:18]. When it comes to president’s speeches, Obama was very hardworking and took an active part in creating his speech. He did not have problems working all night just to find the right words and argue them out with his team.

## **7. RESULT OF BARACK OBAMA’S LANGUAGE RESEARCH**

We would like to stress the research Alim and Smithermann made among the “Obama generation”, where they categorized ages 18-24, with a few in their early thirties, in America. According to their results, Obama was enormously highly considered to be a speaker and communicator too. One respondent also regarded Obama to be the most powerful speaker of our age. When respondents answered the question about describing Obama’s language, the most repeated word about his language use was eloquent. Other answers emphasized, that Obama spoke with conviction, and he frequently uses words like confident in order to define his language. The American president was considered to be poised, composed, and always in control of the situation too. Obama seemed to be highly educated, but he didn’t patronize his audience. Although the Republican view on Obama could be described as elite and too professional, many American perceived him to be able to communicate complicated ideas in an outspoken manner. Other words that described Obama’s use of language were clear, direct, careful, deliberate, etc. He made an impression of inspiring, empowering, and also motivating. Obama is considered to be a Master of Communication because he can use both ways to address his words to an audience, which means he can speak to a community as well as to individuals. Obama is in accordance with this generation like no other presidential candidate did [Alim, Smithermann 2012].

”Obama is greeted as a celebrity in the United States and the rest of the world, one who has used modern mass media Technologies to become a Master of Communication. He is considered a charismatic leader, and the key element of his rhetoric is a combination of official language with African-American slang.” [Kočnerová, Kasanová 2013:71].

Language of Barack Obama in comparison with his predecessors “*was described as “dynamic”, “captivating”, “intoxicating”, and “rhythmic almost to the point of hypnosis”. His speeches were seen as “vibrant, charismatic” and “replete with imagery”, as “prose that flirts with the boundary of poetry”. In short, Barack Obama was viewed as one helluva gifted orator, quite possibly the most effective and powerful that this generation witnessed. In Barack Obama, America heard a speaker who was “strategic” and “hyperaware” of his audience. It’s one thing to know that you gotta say “the right things” in right way in terms of style. Barack was seen as someone who could speak directly and comfortably with folks across region, generations, socioeconomic divisions, racial and ethnic groups, and political and religious views.*” [Alim, Smithermann 2012:21].

Barack Obama belongs to those American politicians, who still consider the moral value system to be the real existing phenomenon. American society adheres to freedom of the will, which provides progress for the individual. Obama confesses American values like family, generational relations, patriotism, local communities, duty to serve good to the own country, and more universal elements like justice, respectfulness, modesty, and solidarity. This is typical terminology of charm offensive discourse used in political speeches. Obama emphasizes statesmen’s moral responsibility for their verbal and written expression. According to his opinion, it is important to know, that whichever guiltless word can also have other meanings in other contexts. That is the reason why Obama dedicated himself with his speeches so carefully. He knew that he represented his political party and his voters too and this means enormous responsibility. [Dobrowolski 2008].

## CONCLUSION

Year after Obama took the office he addressed 411 speeches. With his magical rhetorical performance as the president, Obama obtained not only the public but the media too. Obama knows, that rhetoric is one of the most powerful tools of persuasion. His speeches were full of emotions, optimism, hope, and change. “*Obama embodied change, not only with his skin color, his youth, and his newness to the American national political scene, but also with his fresh approach to politics embodied in the themes of his speeches.*” [Sorensen 2011:1]. Even if Obama represented America as a designated nation, he preferred the use of soft power and diplomacy in the world political system, which has brought him the Nobel Peace Prize. After the complex discourse analysis in this article, we can describe his discursive type as a charm offensive, othering offensive is notable in his speeches criticizing the Middle East policy of G. W. Bush.

When Obama was speaking, people were listening. Typical for him was, that he wanted to get along with both sides, with everyone. In his speeches, he accosted all people, everyone, every single citizen, because he considered citizenship to be the base of the community. His words were oriented toward quality, not quantity. He usually used his own charisma and persuasion while speaking. Obama is a media star of this century.

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