

## **Magnifying Persuasion in Obama's Democratic Nomination Speech**

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### **Abstract:**

Barack Obama's nomination acceptance speech as a Democratic presidential candidate on August 28, 2008 – in Denver, Colorado was a historic event in the American politics as the Democratic National Convention finally nominated him as the first African-American presidential candidate. Obama's rise from a zero to a hero deserves a close scrutiny in the way he powerfully and eloquently amplified the power of his persuasive messages to drive home the points of his political lines of thought, agenda, and planned course of actions for the future of the nation in his Democratic acceptance speech: "The American Promise". The speech highlighted a clear-cut line of distinction between his much stronger political position as a Democratic presidential candidate and that of his Republican rival – John McCain. This paper is an attempt to explore and elucidate Obama's outstanding rhetorical skills for asserting and highlighting his significant points of persuasion by means the sound bites, for appealing to his audience's ears of the messages being delivered by means of the sound devices, and the various means for amplifying powerfully his persuasive messages that received repeated thunderous cheers and applause of the big crowd of his 86,000 direct supporters in Denver and finally brought him to the White House in the following D-day of the U.S. presidential election in November, 2008.

**Key words:** Obama's message highlight and amplification, Obama's DNC persuasion, Obama's DNC rhetoric.

### **Preliminaries**

One of the important bargaining power leading to the success of a politician who aspires a public office could be attributable to his or her powerful and eloquent speech-making. Through this, the politician will be enabled to get across his important and distinctive lines of thought and political agenda to both his direct audience and, what is more important will be, his much larger indirect audience who intentionally or unintentionally read the political speech or its highlight on the newspapers, or listen to or hear the televised speech.

Barack Obama's nomination acceptance speech as a Democratic presidential candidate on August 28, 2008 – in Denver, Colorado was a historic event in the American politics as the Democratic National Convention finally nominated him as the first African-American presidential candidate. In this speech, Obama

brought to the front his important lines of thought and political agenda having been asserted in the preceding course of his campaign trails in the preliminary electoral processes throughout the completed Democratic primaries and caucuses that finally gave him the historic victory to be nominated as the Democratic presidential candidate. As he was also soon to face and compete with his rival from the Republican party, Senator John McCain, he was therefore also in a position to prepare his ardent and loyal voters across party lines as well as other promising supporters to join his cause for change.

Against the backdrop of those electoral events that would determine the future of America as a nation through its electoral processes, this paper is an attempt to explore and elucidate Obama's outstanding rhetorical skills for asserting and highlighting his significant points of persuasion by means the sound bites, for appealing to his audience's ears of the messages being delivered by means of the sound devices, and the various means for amplifying powerfully his persuasive messages that received repeated thunderous cheers and applauses of the big crowd of his 86,000 direct supporters in Denver and finally brought him to the White House in the following D-day of the U.S. presidential election in November, 2008.

### **Theoretical Overview and method of analysis**

Many well-known speeches often contain highlights that may be cited to stand for the speech by mass media because the prepared text of the speech is very often distributed in advance to catch up with the following day's publication of newspapers. The highlights from the speeches are called sound bites – i.e. carefully engineered excerpts intended to attract attention in advance (Beard, 2000: 37-43). Sound bite is a kind of slogan that represents a policy rather than the policy itself. To be effective, sound bite has to be brief, using language structures that are repeatable and memorable. Some of the sound bites may be exemplified by the three-part lists and contrastive pairs as follows:

#### 1. Three-part List

According to Atkinson (In Beard, 2000: 38), the three-part list is most effective to elicit audience's approval. It gives a sense of unity and completeness in some culture. As a case in point, Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address of 1863 used the three-part list in the forms of repetition by using different preposition before the word 'the people':

Government **of** the people,  
**by** the people,  
**for** the people.

(Beard, 2000: 39)

The three-part list does not always have to be mere repetitions, it may also consist of different words of almost similar meaning as exemplified in Nelson Mandela's speech on his release from prison as delivered in Cape Town in 1990 :

**Friends, comrades and fellow South Africans.** I greet you all in the name of **peace, democracy and freedom for all.**

(Beard, 2000: 39)

## (2). Contrastive Pairs

Atkinson (in Beard, 2000: 39) mentions another common feature of sound bite in political speeches that is called contrastive pairs, or commonly called as antithesis in rhetoric during the antiquity. Basically contrastive pair consists of two parts of construction that are in some ways in opposition. As a case of point, this may be exemplified by Neil Armstrong's well-known words as he became the first man to land on the moon in 1969:

One small step for man: one giant leap for mankind.

(Beard, 2000: 40)

For the analysis of the means for drawing more attention from the audience and for creating appeals to the audience's ears of the message being delivered by using the sound devices, this research refers to the employment of sound devices as stated by Perrine (1988). For the practical guide of message amplification partly refers to Leanne (2010) and the concept of message amplification in political speeches to Gunawan (2011).

The sources of the data used for this paper, from which the whole bunch of the data were derived, were taken from the prepared text of Obama's DNC nomination acceptance: "The American promise" <[http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obm\\_108.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks_of_senator_barack_obm_108.php), accessed October 27, 2009> and its video <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv8eiDvrHJ4>, accessed on November 27, 2009>.

Since the analysis was mainly qualitative, the data in the forms of numbers were only used as qualified data, i.e. the quantitative data were only used for interpreting within a qualitative context (Dörnyei, 2007:271).

## **Analysis and discussion**

### a. Sound bites

Obama's DNC speech employed the sound bites as carefully engineered excerpts intended to attract attention and served as a kind of slogan to highlight some important point of the speech (cf. Beard, 2000: 37-43). The sound bites as used were the two-part list, the three-part lists, and the four-part list. They appealed the audience's interests in that they were brief, repeatable, and memorable.

#### 1) Two part list (4):

Each of the two-part lists such as a) and c) below meets the requirement to be called as antithesis in that each list clearly expresses opposition. The two-part list in a) was used to highlight the seriousness of the problems of unemployment; that in b) was used to highlight the social responsibility of the people to take care of each other; that in c) was used to highlight the strong determination to bring change to Washington; that in d) was used to highlight the conviction in the unity of all Americans for their common goal despite their diverse backgrounds.

- a) *...more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less*
- b) *... I am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper.*
- c) *... the change we need doesn't come from Washington.  
Change comes to Washington.*
- d) *(But what the people heard instead - people of every creed and color, from every walk of life - is that) in America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one.*

## 2) Juxtaposed double two-part list/contrastive pairs (1)

The following two sets of the two-part lists can qualify as antitheses in that they express ideas in opposition. These two sets of antitheses were juxtaposed to each other to highlight the social responsibility of the government to take good care of its people.

*Our government should work for us, not against us. It should help us,  
not hurt us.*

## 2) Three part list (2)

The most natural three-part lists that commonly express three distinct but related ideas were found in the three distinct and independent sentences as found in a) and in b). In the three-part list b) Obama underscored that change is coming.

- a) *Tell that to the military families who shoulder their burdens silently as they watch their loved ones leave for their third or fourth or fifth tour of duty. These are not whiners. They work hard and give back and keep going without complaint. These are the Americans that I know.*
- b) *Because I've seen it. Because I've lived it. I've seen it in Illinois.*

## 3) Juxtaposed double three-part list (1)

Two sets of the three-part lists may also be expressed in successive words/phrases or clauses in the manner of syndetic coordination within one syntactic whole as shown below. This juxtaposition of the double three-part lists may create a much stronger highlight of the message being presented.

- a) *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.*

4) Four-part list (2):

The four-part list usually has amplified message(s) in the concluding part, either only on part 4 or both part 3 and 4.

- a) *We are the party of Roosevelt.  
We are the party of Kennedy.  
So don't tell me that Democrats won't defend this country.  
Don't tell me that Democrats won't keep us safe.*
- b) *("We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried.) "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."*

b. Sound devices: consonance (22)

To appeal to the audience's ears, Obama's DNC nomination mainly employed the use of consonance, i.e. repetition of the consonants at close intervals at the end of the words as in the following passage:

- a) *That's why I stand here tonight. Because for two hundred and thirty two years, at each moment when that promise was in jeopardy, ordinary men and women - students and soldiers, farmers and teachers, nurses and janitors -- found the courage to keep it alive.*
- b) *To Chairman Dean and my great friend Dick Durbin; and to all my fellow citizens of this great nation; with profound gratitude and great humility, I accept your nomination for the presidency of the United States.*
- c) *Tonight, I say to the American people, to Democrats and Republicans and Independents across this great land - enough!*

c. Miscellaneous: amplifying the messages

For the sake of amplifying or magnifying the power of the persuasive messages being delivered, Obama's DNC nomination speech employed the means for message amplification by applying the high structures, repetition, contrast, rejection, polysyndetic coordination, echoing, and rhetorical question.

1) High structure (3→12)

- a) The message amplification in this respect was done by repeating the common/similar frames “*in the faces of ...* .” and “*when I listen ... /hear ...*” that were applied across different paragraphs as follows:

*Because in the faces of those young veterans who come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, I see my grandfather, who signed up after Pearl Harbor, marched in Patton's Army, and was rewarded by a grateful nation with the chance to go to college on the GI Bill.*

*In the face of that young student who sleeps just three hours before working the night shift, I think about my mom, who raised my sister and me on her own while she worked and earned her degree; who once turned to food stamps but was still able to send us to the best schools in the country with the help of student loans and scholarships.*

*When I listen to another worker tell me that his factory has shut down, I remember all those men and women on the South Side of Chicago who I stood by and fought for two decades ago after the local steel plant closed.*

*And when I hear a woman talk about the difficulties of starting her own business, I think about my grandmother, who worked her way up from the secretarial pool to middle-management, despite years of being passed over for promotions because she was a woman. She's the one who taught me about hard work. She's the one who put off buying a new car or a new dress for herself so that I could have a better life. She poured everything she had into me. And although she can no longer travel, I know that she's watching tonight, that tonight is her night as well.*

- b) The message amplification in this respect was done by repeating the introductory part of the intended messages so as to create the high structure across paragraphs:

*What is that promise?*

*It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have the obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect.*

*It's a promise that says the market should reward drive and innovation and generate growth, but that businesses should live up to their responsibilities to create American jobs, look out for American workers, and play by the rules of the road.*

*Ours is a promise that says government cannot solve all our problems,*

*but what it should do is that which we cannot do for ourselves - protect us from harm and provide every child a decent education; keep our water clean and our toys safe; invest in new schools and new roads and new science and technology.*

- c) The message amplification in this respect was done by foregrounding the intended messages using the repeated frames “Now/And now is the time ...” as underlined below to be applied across paragraphs:

*Now is the time to finally keep the promise of affordable, accessible health care for every single American. If you have health care, my plan will lower your premiums. If you don't, you'll be able to get the same kind of coverage that members of Congress give themselves. And as someone who watched my mother argue with insurance companies while she lay in bed dying of cancer, I will make certain those companies stop discriminating against those who are sick and need care the most.*

*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.*

## 2) Plain repetition for message amplification (2→21)

- a) Repetition in this respect was done by repeating the initial part of two successive one-sentence paragraphs as follows:

*This country is more decent than one where a woman in Ohio, on the brink of retirement, finds herself one illness away from disaster after a lifetime of hard work.*

*This country is more generous than one where a man in Indiana has to pack up the equipment he's worked on for twenty years and watch it shipped off to China, and then chokes up as he explains how he felt like a failure when he went home to tell his family the news.*

- b) The repetitions of “*I will/I’ll*” (16 times) and “*we will/we’ll*” (3 times) were done across paragraphs to present more succinctly what were supposed to be Obama’s political agenda. These were, among other things, exemplified as follows:

*Unlike John McCain, I will stop giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas, and I will start giving them to companies that create good jobs right here in America.*

*I will eliminate capital gains taxes for the small businesses and the start-ups that will create the high-wage, high-tech jobs of tomorrow.*

*I will cut taxes - cut taxes - for 95% of all working families. Because in an economy like this, the last thing we should do is raise taxes on the middle-class.*

*And I will not settle for an America where some kids don't have that chance. I'll invest in early childhood education. I'll recruit an army of new teachers, and pay them higher salaries and give them more support. And in exchange, I'll ask for higher standards and more accountability. And we will keep our promise to every young American - if you commit to serving your community or your country, we will make sure you can afford a college education.*

### 3) Contrast for the message amplification (5→14)

The juxtaposition of the declarative clauses and the negative clauses (or their variants) was used to create a contrast functioning to magnify the argument for the power of the American promise:

- a) *This country of ours has more wealth than any nation, but that's not what makes us rich. We have the most powerful military on Earth, but that's not what makes us strong. Our universities and our culture are the envy of the world, but that's not what keeps the world coming to our shores.*

*Instead, it is that American spirit – that American promise – that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend.*

- b) *It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it. For over two decades, he's subscribed to that old, discredited Republican philosophy – give more and more to those with the most and hope that prosperity trickles down to everyone else.*



c) *We measure the strength of our economy not by the number of billionaires we have or the profits of the Fortune 500, but by whether someone with a good idea can take a risk and start a new business, or whether the waitress who lives on tips can take a day off to look after a sick kid without losing her job – an economy that honors the dignity of work.*

d) *(And today, as my call for a time frame to remove our troops from Iraq has been echoed by the Iraqi government and even the Bush Administration, even after we learned that Iraq has a \$79 billion surplus while we're wallowing in deficits, John McCain stands alone in his stubborn refusal to end a misguided war.)*

*That's not the judgment we need. That won't keep America safe. We need a President who can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past.*

e) *They have not served a Red America or a Blue America – they have served the United States of America.*

#### 4) Rejection for the message amplification (1→4)

To draw clearly the distinction between his policies and those of his rival's, Obama magnified the power of his messages by attacking the policies related closely to McCain's in the negatives.

*You don't defeat a terrorist network that operates in eighty countries by occupying Iraq. You don't protect Israel and deter Iran just by talking tough in Washington. You can't truly stand up for Georgia when you've strained our oldest alliances. If John McCain wants to follow George Bush with more tough talk and bad strategy, that is his choice – but it is not the change we need.*

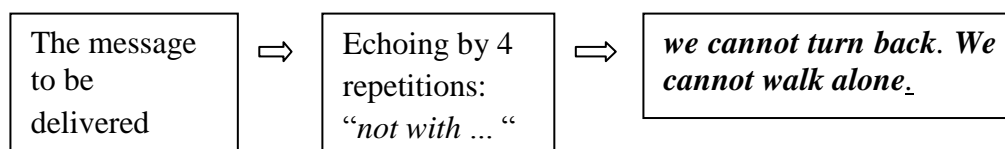
#### 5) Polysyndetic coordination for the message amplification (2)

To magnify the power of his argument regarding the unity of all Americans, Obama expressed his message by employing the polysyndetic manner of expression.

*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.*

#### 6) Echoing for the message amplification (1→4)

The echoing was done 4 times to magnify the power of the prior messages and then they were followed by a concluding repetition of the message twice in the following manner:



As found in:

*America, **we cannot turn back.** Not with so much work to be done. Not with so many children to educate, and so many veterans to care for. Not with an economy to fix and cities to rebuild and farms to save. Not with so many families to protect and so many lives to mend. America, **we cannot turn back. We cannot walk alone.***

#### 7) Rhetorical question for the message amplification (2→4)

Obama also employed the use of rhetorical questions – questions that did not need any direct and overt answers – functioning to help focus the attention of the audience toward the raised issues.

- a) *Senator McCain likes to talk about judgment, but really, what does it say about your judgment when you think George Bush has been right more than ninety percent of the time? I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to take a ten percent chance on change.*
- b) *Now, I don't believe that Senator McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans. I just think he doesn't know. Why else would he define middle-class as someone making under five million dollars a year? How else could he propose hundreds of billions in tax breaks for big corporations and oil companies but not one penny of tax relief to more than one hundred million Americans? How else could he offer a health care plan that would actually tax people's benefits, or an education plan that would do nothing to help families pay for college, or a plan that would privatize Social Security and gamble your retirement?*

#### Conclusion

This paper has explored, identified and elucidated some of the rhetorical elements that contributed to Obama's power of the persuasive text-building as could be found in his acceptance speech "The American promise". This paper has focused on the use of the means for highlighting the messages, the means for creating sensational appeals to ears by the application the sound devices, and the

various means for amplifying the power of the persuasive messages. They may be summed up in the following table:

Means for highlighting, appealing to ears, amplifying the messages	Total	Explanation
<b>1. The sound bites</b>		
a. two-part list	4	2 as antitheses
b. Juxtaposed double two-part list/ contrastive pairs	1	The two sets juxtaposed two-part list are antitheses
c. Three-part list	2	
d. Juxtaposed double three-part list	1	
<b>2. The sound devices</b>		
a. Consonance	22	
<b>3. The message amplification</b>		
a. High structure	3→12*	
b. Plain repetition	2→21*	
c. Contrast	5→14*	
d. Rejection	1→4*	
e. Polysyndetic coordination	2→2*	
f. Echoing	1→4*	
g. Rhetorical question	2→4*	

\*should be read in the following manner: 3→12 = total of this type=3; realization of this type by token= 12; applied subsequently.

From the diagram above, it is obvious that Obama's DNC acceptance speech sounded quite powerful since Obama employed quite intensively the means for highlighting the messages, the means for creating appeals to the audience's ears of the message being delivered, and the means for the message amplification as part of his persuasive text-building.

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