



A Stylistic Analysis of the Language Effect of Biden's Inaugural Address

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Abstract. As a special expression form of applied style, political speech is of thoughtfulness and tactic. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the linguistic influence on stylistic features. Taking US President Joe Biden's inaugural address as an example, in this paper, an in-depth analysis of its linguistic effect is conducted from the perspective of stylistics, to find out the influence of its linguistic features in phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and other aspects on its expressive effect, so that it could help readers better understand the influence of stylistic features on linguistic effect.

Keywords: stylistics · inaugural address · Biden

1 Introduction

“Stylistics is the study of literary style or language genre” [1]. “Style refers to the perceived distinctive manner of expression in writing or speaking” [2]. For a long period of time, its subjects were mainly literary, such as novels, poems and so on. Subsequently, it was gradually realized that “a literary text is not radically different from any other linguistic act, spoken or written” [3] and the subjects were gradually diversified. For example, research on the scientific and technological style representing the function of language and the intermediate style representing the interpersonal function was published. Inaugural speech, as one of the public speeches, usually adopts rigorous logic, standardized and proficient language, and with the help of certain rhetorical devices, to complete a highly appealing speech. Taking the speech delivered by US President Joe Biden at the inauguration ceremony as an example, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of the lexical syntax and rhetorical devices.

2 Phonological Features

“Speech needs to be handled initially at the phonetic/phonological level” [4]. Phonological means is the most direct way of oral language expression. Therefore, in this inaugural speech, phonological means plays a very important role in showing its stylistic features.

2.1 Stress

Stress is reflected in every sentence, and even every syllable. In the full text, the words emphasized by means of stress are mainly as follows: “democracy”, “nation”, “unity”, “together”, “come over”, “challenge”, etc. It is not difficult to conclude that these words are the key words relevant to the theme conveyed in this speech, that are putting emphasis on democracy and overcoming the difficult situation with unity. Therefore, in the speech, we need to put stress on the key words to deepen the audience's impression, so as to better convey the theme.

2.2 Speed

“Skillfully adjusting and using the speed of speech can make the expression image real and the sound audible” [5]. The speed of the paragraph “My fellow Americans, in the work ahead of us we're going to need each other.” It is obviously slightly slower than the normal speed. This is because this paragraph uses a narrative tone to describe the suffering caused by the epidemic to the country and the people. Therefore, choosing a slower speech speed is conducive to setting off the sad atmosphere and arousing the sympathy of the audience.

While the paragraph “my fellow Americans, we have to be different than this. We have to be better than this and I believe America is so much better than this.” It is delivered at a faster speed. Because this paragraph is about how the American people can overcome the great challenges brought about by the epidemic. The answer is to unite and move forward, and there is a smell of darkness before dawn. Therefore, speaking at a faster speed can make the audience feel strongly encouraged and reinvigorate their confidence.

3 Lexical Features

One of the important reasons why this speech can achieve magnificent and inspiring results is that it is good at using vocabulary. In the following, in-depth analysis is to be presented, in accordance with different parts of speech.

3.1 Nouns

In the analysis of different parts of speech, “words are easily identifiable and countable but also frequent, making computational methods both necessary and appropriate” [6]. In terms of the use of nouns, there are 489 nouns and 327 verbs in the total 2538 words. The ratio of nouns to verbs is about 1.5. In addition, the structure of preposition plus noun is used extensively in the whole paper, for as many as 170 times. “The combination of preposition advantage and noun advantage makes the static tendency of English more significant” [7]. The use of static structure greatly enhances the readability of speech words, makes the text features more formal and objective, and also helps the speaker's logical expression, as shown in the following example:

“We'll press forward with speed and urgency for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibility.”

In this sentence with only 21 words, preposition structures are used three times, namely “with speed and urgency”, “in this winter” and “of peril”, which concisely conveys the time-in this winter, the environment-the severe situation, and people’s attitude towards this situation in an objective and calm tone.

Secondly, in terms of word-using style, its distinctive feature is that he tends to use some abstract words, such as “liberty”, “dignity”, “security”, “triumph”, “resilience” and “oath”, and so on. As O. Jespersen said, “the reader may be inclined to attach much or little importance to the argument just presented by the abstraction” [8]. Therefore, the use of these words is in line with the requirements of the inaugural speech, making the whole article grand and magnificent, which is conducive to Biden’s establishment of his own prestige and display of his credibility.

3.2 Verbs

In the use of verbs, he prefers using direct and powerful single verbs instead of indirect verb phrases. There are 327 verbs in the whole text, of which only 43 are verb phrases, accounting for only 13.1%. Phrases are vivid, but they are rich in meaning, which easily leads to ambiguity. Therefore, single verbs with more accurate meaning are more appropriate based on the purpose of his statement on the future development plan. But this doesn’t mean that verb phrases shouldn’t be used. One of the great advantages of verb phrases is that they are colloquial and vivid. Therefore, when arousing empathy with the audience, the use of verb phrases can draw in the distance from the audience and achieve a more effective expression effect. For example, when talking about worries on the present situation of American society and their own living conditions, the use of six phrasal verbs: “worry about”, “lay in”, “stare at”, “think about”, “turn in”, and “retreat into”-effectively draws the distance from the audience, making the audience truly empathize and is also conducive to building trust in them. The whole article adopts different forms of verb use to achieve the purpose of accurately conveying information and effectively contacting feelings.

3.3 Personal Pronouns

In the use of personal pronouns, the calculating result is shown in Table 1. As is demonstrated, the first-person accounts for the highest proportion, and the frequency of the first personal plural “we” is significantly higher than that of the singular. This is because “we seem to imply that the speaker is but a subgroup of a larger group of people who also shared the quality or opinion given” [9]. The first person can close the distance with the audience by lowering the identity of the leader to resonate with the audience. The second person is also used frequently, and its purpose is to appeal to the masses and inspire their spirits, such as “but the answer is not to turn forward, to regain competing facts, disturbing thoughts who don’t look like you do, or ship the way you do, or don’t get their news from the same sources you do”. In this sentence, the second person is used to make suggestions to the audience and ignite confidence. However, the use of the third person is less, because in speeches, the third person refers to other people who are not present.

Table 1. Calculating Result

	First Person		Second Person		Third Person	
Singular	28	13%	84	39%	9	5%
Plural	84	39%			8	4%
Total	112	52%			17	9%

4 Syntactic Features

From its arrangement, the whole speech is basically segmented by sentences, similar to poetic style or biblical style, which also serves the syntactic features.

4.1 Sentence Pattern

Firstly, from the perspective of sentence pattern selection, there are 150 sentences in this paper, including 69 simple sentences, 15 compound sentences, 70 complex sentences and 20 compound-complex sentences. Among them, simple sentences and complex sentences account for the largest proportion more than 45%. "Simple sentences are short and concise, which can make the text have a light and bright rhythm" [10]. The relationship of coordination is considered loose and vaguer than that of subordination [11]. Complex sentences have the advantages of large capacity, which can express complex ideological content, which is strong in reflecting the intricate relationships.

4.2 Syntactical Rhetorical Devices

4.2.1 Parallelism and Antithesis

On the rhetoric of syntax, parallelism and antithesis are widely used, which plays the role of broadening the literary meaning and enhancing the language momentum. "Often it forms a climax, and makes one's expression more prominent" [5]. Such as the following sentence:

"We'll press forward with speed and urgency for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibility. Much to do, much to heal, much to restore, much to build and much to gain."

In this sentence, the structure of "much to" plus the original verb is repeated six times, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities faced by the American people under the test of epidemic situation, encouraging people to meet the challenges together. The use of the structure makes the language magnificent and arouses the deafening expression effect.

4.2.2 Repetition

At the same time, one of the salient features of the full text is repetition. "Repetition is frequently used for the sake of emphasis, to highlight a particular meaning" [5]. As in the following example:

“It did not happen. It will never happen, not today, not tomorrow, not ever, not ever.”

This sentence uses repetition to emphasize that the wishes of the mob were, are and will not be realized. It reduces anxiety, increases self-confidence, and is highly contagious. It greatly encourages the morale of the people.

5 Conclusion

Usually, the functional tone of political speech discourse is mostly persuasive in order to change the listener's original belief, thus promoting the listener to adopt a specific attitude. Because the discourse of political speech is based on strong persuasion and incitement, its language has rich stylistic features hidden in its pragmatic connotation. In the research on Biden's speech, we can conclude that different means of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and discourse have different influences on the realization of speech purpose.

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