

Strategies Used for Concealing Dominance and Power Difference in South Carolina Speech of Barack Obama

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Abstract:

This paper explores various discourse strategies used for concealing power difference and dominance in the speeches of the political leaders in general and of Barack Obama in special. Critical Discourse Analysis studies the texts exploring how a group or individual exercises power and dominance over weaker societies, groups, or individuals. This power and dominance becomes visible in the choice of words, types of sentences, topic, and tone etc. But an expert politician like Obama uses different strategies of lexis, syntax, and content for concealing his dominance and sharing his audience's identity and interests

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Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (Van Dijk, 1985).

Critical Discourse Analysis presupposes the presence of inequality and power difference in society. The elite, the powerful class, group or individual always try to dominate and 'control' the weaker class, group, or individual. This control may pertain to action and cognition, which

means, that the dominant group may limit the freedom of action of others, and also influence their way of thinking (Dijk 1993: 254). More effective control is cognitive, which is enacted by persuasion, dissimulation, and manipulation. For this purpose, the elite use different techniques in their communication and behaviour.

CDA focuses on the discursive strategies that legitimate and 'naturalize' the social order and relations of inequality (Fairclough 1985 cited in Dijk 1993: 254). Many times dominance is hegemonized when the dominated class accepts this inequality as natural and legitimate. Mostly those who have access to discursive resources become dominant. (Dijk 1993: 255). Thus, the more access to many discourse genres, contexts, participants, and audience, the more powerful the social groups, institutions, and elites are. Similarly, lack of power of a group or society can also be measured by its lack of access to discourse (Dijk 1993: 256). There are many ways of enacting this power. One way of enacting this power is through the control of the occasion, time, place, setting, and the presence and absence of participants. Less powerful people are less quoted and less spoken about (Dijk 1993: 260).

On the basis of the shared code and linguistic culture the speakers or the writers use language for making their intention clear. "Language makes links between itself and the situation; and discourse becomes possible because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader can recognize one" (Halliday, 1971:334).

The politicians are certainly from the powerful class as they have a good access to discourse and are in the privileged position of enacting power and control over

the masses. Their control pertains to both action and cognition as they influence the minds and decisions of the individuals by delivering persuasive speeches in parliamentary discussions and also in election campaign. Their power is further highlighted by the fact that they can choose, place, time, topic, and even to some extent the audience. These people are most quoted and most spoken about by people and media, hence most powerful.

Now, in the democratic system, these politicians have to go among people during election campaign and persuade them to vote for voting in their. In such situation, the masses only appear to be more powerful but they are not because they have very limited access to discursive resources and have no power to choose place topic and time of discourse.

When the politicians have a campaign, before the arrival of the politician the masses have to wait under the open sky. They meet a further face threat in security checks. The arrival of the politician with the royal train of elites and commandos further highlights the power difference and makes the masses realize that they are powerless 'others'.

Persuading such people, with power to choose the rulers yet powerless, certainly becomes difficult. For persuading such masses, the politicians use certain strategies in their speeches, which minimize and conceal this dominance and power difference. These strategies in the political speeches give the audience the impression that the politician belongs to their group and is one from masses. He shares all the sentiments and difficulties with the masses; however, in reality it is not the case.

Use of the strategy of addressing the audience using personal relations like 'brothers and sisters' or first person possessive pronoun 'my friends' is very popular in political speeches. Some politicians try to establish rapport with the audience by touching the local problems and issues and showing concern for them. Some politicians are also seen sharing personal experiences and sometimes even intimate personal and family matters. They seldom forget railing against the other political leaders and parties, which could not solve people's problems, although in the last election those politicians and parties also did the same. By doing this they follow the principle of 'your enemy is my enemy also, hence we are friends'.

My purpose in this paper is to study the use of these strategies in Obama's speech delivered in South Carolina. The rationale after choosing Obama's speech is that Obama is the first Black President in America. He is thought to be a great orator and his speeches are compared with those of Martin Luther King Jr. This study will throw some light on the nature of the political speeches in general and Obama's South Carolina speech in particular.

This speech was delivered by Barack Obama in South Carolina on 26 January, 2008. In this speech he not only celebrates his victory but also attacks his opponents, and tries to win the confidence of the audience.

Analysis and Interpretation

Obama starts this speech by thanking South Carolina and thanking his wife and daughters. "Thank you, South Carolina. Thank you to the rock of my life, Michelle Obama. (Cheers, applause.) Thank

you to Malia and Sasha Obama, who haven't seen their daddy in a week." By thanking his wife and daughters, mentioning their full names, Obama presents himself as a responsible father and husband. The audience, most of whom are themselves fathers, husbands, wives, daughters, and sons develop a type of relation like feeling for Obama. The word thank has been used 11 times. This strategy also establishes Obama a loving husband and a caring father with a lot of love and concern in his heart. Thus he identifies himself with the community of 'loving husbands and caring fathers', thus naturally winning the support of 'the wives and daughters'. This strategy helps Obama in establishing that he is also a common family man with a loving wife and two beloved daughters.

Use of inclusive pronoun

In order to develop a fellow-feeling and group identity Obama uses inclusive pronouns (we, our, us) in his political speeches. In the present speech, he has used total 181 pronouns out of which 103 times he used inclusive pronouns.

"Yes, we can. Yes, we can change. --- Yes, we can. ---Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can seize our future. And as we leave this great state with a new wind at our backs, and we take this journey across this great country, a country we love, with the message we've carried from the plains of Iowa to the hills of New Hampshire, from the Nevada desert to the South Carolina coast...Yes, we can."

He used we 66 times, our 22 times and us 15 times. He used second person pronoun you 18 times and that also in the

phrase thank you. He used your only one time. Exact reference of inclusive 'we' is characteristically vague (Fairclough 2001:133). It may refer to 'Obama and other American politicians' or 'Americans', or 'Obama and his supporters'.

But here in this case when the supporters are also chanting "we want change" "yes we can", Obama very easily solves his purpose of establishing group identity with the audience by using the inclusive pronoun we. He makes the audience believe that his power is their power and thus they share interest and identity denoted by the use of inclusive pronoun we. He very expertly categorizes and then integrates his audience. By doing this each of the audience gets connected to him as an individual and not as the part of crowd. Distinct notice gives the audience the sense of self importance.

You can see it in the faces here tonight. There are young and old, rich and poor. They are black and white, Latino and Asian and Native American. (Cheers, applause.) They are Democrats from Des Moines and independents from Concord and, yes, some Republicans from rural Nevada. And we've got young people all across this country who've never had a reason to participate until now.

First he defines the audience as the faces, and then he categorizes these faces under the titles of young and old, rich and poor, black and white, Latino and Asian and Native Americans, Democrats and Republicans with names of places they might have come from. He pays extra-attention to the young people for whom he uses a full sentence "We have got young people all across this country' and presupposing their support he adds that

they 'never had a reason to support to participate until now'. After all this categorization Obama integrates all of them by using the inclusive pronoun we. He further strengthens his united identity with masses by rejecting the differences and establishing a nationalistic feeling. He says "the choice in this election is not between regions or religions or genders. It's not about rich versus poor, young versus old, and it is not about black versus white." With the support of all these people, he shows capacity, by using modal verb can, to change the contemporary situations which people don't like. Interesting enough to note that Obama does not explicitly defines which things need to be changed. Obama and the audience are not tired of chanting 'yes we can' 'we want change'.

Nationalistic Feeling

Obama tries to establish fellow feeling and diminish the influence of power difference and dominance by showing the shared identity and arousing the nationalistic feeling by using many words referring to places and people of America. He used such words 57 times in his speech. In his speech the word country occurs 8 times America 1 time, American/s 9 times, nation 4 times, people 10 times and names of different states and cities 25 times.

"... and we take this journey across this great country, a country we love, with the message we've carried from the plains of Iowa to the hills of New Hampshire, from the Nevada desert to the South Carolina coast..."

He named some places in America like South Carolina, Iowa, Nevada, Washington, Des Moines, and Concord.

Martin Luther king Jr. also used the same technique of mentioning the names of places in America for the purpose of integrating the masses as the United States of America with shared interests and goals and addressing them as their fellow national and their spokesman.

“And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York! Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slops of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi! From every mountainside, let freedom ring!”

Shared goals

In this speech Obama tried to win the confidence of the masses by showing that he shares interests and goals with them. His power is the power of people and he will use his power with the people to achieve that goal. He touches upon the most common problems of people, such as ‘health care that folks can’t afford and mortgage they cannot pay’. By appropriate use of modal verb can 22 times, he makes them believe that they can change the present bad condition if they collaborate with Obama in bringing change. The word change has been used 13 times.

Intentional obscurity

Obama intentionally uses obscure sentences with a purpose of not displeasing

anyone. He clearly sees a problem in defining what is to be changed and what not, so he mostly uses the word change without mentioning what to change. He cleverly uses the phrases having abstract and multiple meaning. The individuals among the audience are left free to define the thing that needs change. The crowd does not necessarily have the same attitude towards different things like immigration, Iraq war, Al-Qaeda Problem and presence of American army in Afghanistan, and various other national and international issues. Obama’s use of figurative sentences without any definite stand makes it possible for the audience to interpret the meaning of their choice. Such sentences are:

This election is about the past versus the future.

Yes, we can heal this nation.

Yes, we can seize our future And as we leave this great state with a new wind at our backs, and we take this journey across this great country, a country we love, with the message we’ve carried from the plains of Iowa to the hills of New Hampshire, from the Nevada desert to the South Carolina coast, the same message we had when we were up and when we were down, that out of many we are one, that while we breathe we will hope, and where we are met with cynicism and doubt and fear and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of the American people in three simple words: Yes, we can.

Now, what was in the ‘past’ that will not be in Obama’s ‘future’ is not clear. The audience can define it according to their

bad experiences in the past and all good expectations from future. In the second sentence above we see that Obama presupposes that his nation is 'sick' and needs to be healed but what the problem is with nation has not been made clear.

Tapping the emotions

Obama arouses animosity against other politicians and particularly his opponents by using different rhetorical techniques. He excludes himself from other politicians and categorizes them as 'other' by using the pronoun they. Their politics is termed as based on "divisions and distractions and drama that passes for politics today". Actually he denies considering their politics as genuine but a drama of distractions and divisions. For the purpose of arousing animosity he levels his opponents as lobbyists and attributes all problems of America to them. He uses repetition of "we are up against..." for this purpose.

We're up against the belief that it's all right for lobbyists to dominate our government, that they are just part of the system in Washington.

We're up against the idea that it's acceptable to say anything and do anything to win an election.

We're up against the conventional thinking that says your ability to lead as president comes from longevity in Washington or proximity to the White House

This theory is simply as clear as 'your enemy is my enemy; also thus we are friends'. He further reinforces his proposition by saying that all these evils and even more will continue for four more years in America if Obama is not elected the president.

But as hard as it may seem, we cannot lose hope, because there are people all across this great nation who are counting on us, who can't afford another four years without health care. (Cheers.) They can't afford another four years without good schools. (Cheers.) They can't afford another four years without decent wages because our leaders couldn't come together and get it done.

Use of anecdotes

Obama uses personalized examples and anecdotes to voice the problems of people. He doesn't say that that the people of South Carolina have these problems but the people whom he met told him about these problems. He gives four such anecdotes. These examples are capable of putting the audience in the correct emotional state for receiving his message. In these examples he further classifies the masses into different categories like mothers, old women, factory workers, teachers, and retired people and voices their problems by giving real life like examples.

Theirs are the stories and voices we carry on from South Carolina -- the mother who can't get Medicaid to cover all the needs of her sick child. She needs us to pass a health care plan that cuts costs and makes health care available and affordable for every single American. That's what she's looking for. (Cheers, applause.)

He gives the example of a mother "who can't get Medicaid to cover all the needs of her sick child". Now, this is not the problem of one mother whom Obama met but of every mother from less affluent class.

The policy for solving her problem can solve the problems of most of such mothers. He gives a hint that if the audience support him, he will solve this problem and “pass a health care plan that cuts costs and makes health care available and affordable for every single American”. Thus, that single mother becomes the representative of all who want reform in health care plan in America.

He integrates himself with the group of teachers by giving an example of a teacher at Dunkin' Donuts, who works in two shifts so that she may earn enough to meet her expenses.

The teacher who works another shift at Dunkin' Donuts after school just to make ends meet -- she needs us to reform our education system so that she gets better pay and more support and that students get the resources that they need to achieve their dreams. (Cheers, applause.)

Obama hints the solution of the problems of the teachers by reforming the education system so that the teachers can get a better pay and the students ‘get the resources that they need to achieve their dreams’.

Obama tries to win the favour of the working people and the unemployed by voicing the problems created by economic slow down in America. By giving the example of the Maytag worker who has lost his job because the factory he worked in has been closed, Obama voices the pain of all Americans who were hit by this Global Economic Slowdown. The reason of this crisis of employment in America is also outsourcing of work by the companies in America. The Maytag worker who's now competing with his own teenager for a \$7-

an-hour job at the local Wal-Mart because the factory he gave his life to shut its doors –

he needs us to stop giving tax breaks to companies that ship our jobs overseas and start putting them in the pockets of working Americans who deserve it -- (cheers, applause) -- and put them in the pockets of struggling homeowners who are having a tough time, and looking after seniors who should retire with dignity and respect.

Obama proposes in his speech that the problem of unemployment can be solved to some extent by stopping outsourcing and stopping “giving tax breaks to companies that ship our jobs overseas and start putting them in the pockets of working Americans who deserve it”. He shows concern for the senior citizens and the home-owners and thus he tries to integrate himself with the working class.

Obama doesn't miss to read the public sentiments about the Iraq war. He tells the audience about the woman who told him that “she hasn't been able to breathe since the day her nephew left for Iraq”. He touches the emotions of the audience by mentioning the case of a soldier who does not know his child because he is on “third or fourth or even fifth tour of duty”.

That woman who told me that she hasn't been able to breathe since the day her nephew left for Iraq, or the soldier who doesn't know his child because he's on his third or fourth or even fifth tour of duty -- they need us to come together and put an end to a war that should have

never been authorized and should have never been waged.

The solution of all these problems of soldiers and their families is the end of war. Obama strengthens his peace loving image by saying that he was always against this war.

In all these examples we see a pattern. Firstly, Obama does not give these examples as hypothetical or imaginary cases but he presents these problems as real, authenticating them by referring to the people with their places, who told Obama about these problems. Secondly, he does not refer to these People by their names but by their group identity as mother, teacher, worker, woman, and soldier. By doing so he showed concern not for the individuals but for all people belonging to these groups. Thirdly, he touched all the major problems of the day in these examples, e.g., health care, low wages, unemployment, Iraq war. Finally, he mentions the problem in the first half of the example and its solution in the second half. Interestingly, he shows that this solution is not given by Obama but necessitated by the problems of the sufferers by using the phrases like “ she needs us...” they need us...” to do this or that for the solution of the problem.

Conclusion

This investigation into the South Carolina Speech of Barack Obama shows that Obama expertly uses certain strategies in his speeches of election campaign for concealing power difference and dominance. He integrates himself with the masses by thanking them again and again, and expressing his thankfulness to his wife and daughters establishing himself as a

common family man. He expertly uses inclusive pronouns for showing shared identity and interests. He promotes nationalistic feeling by mentioning different places and people of those places. He shows concern for almost all Americans by mentioning the problems of different groups like women, mothers, workers, soldiers, teachers and the youths. He further strengthens the impression of shared identity by showing shared goals, collective power to change, arousing animosity against his opponents and giving personalized anecdotes and examples. His tone and sentences are never authoritative but inclusive. His tone and content is always encouraging and full of confidence. He used figures of speech, not with a purpose of highlighting the meaning but to obscure the meaning.

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