

Coercive Discourse Patterns in President George Bush's 2001 and 2005 Inaugural Addresses.

By

Evans Chapanga and Isaac Choto

Department of Linguistics, University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper investigates coercive strategies employed by President Bush in his 2001¹ and 2005² inaugural addresses. The study is situated in the broad field of discourse analysis whose main thrust is to investigate the use of language in naturally occurring connected speech or written texts. In carrying out the study, the researchers used the qualitative research method where the two inaugural addresses have been used as primary sources. These sources are subjected to critical scrutiny with the intention of establishing the strategies employed by the President to rally the American audience and international community towards his vision. The study has revealed that the President employs a multiplicity of coercive discourse patterns in his quest to garner popular support for his policies, and legitimacy in their implementation. The use of binaries, collective pronouns and lexical reiteration are some of the key weapons unleashed on the audience.

Introduction

The current President of the United States of America, George W. Bush is an outspoken goal getter whose political philosophy considerably conforms to the Republican ideology of international expansion and domestic protectionism. International expansion relates to America's unbridled quest to extend its hegemonic tentacles to the outer reaches of the world whereas domestic protectionism is a philosophy driven by the need to promote and safeguard territorial integrity and the safety of the American people. This paper explores coercive strategies President Bush employs in his first and second inaugural addresses to rally the Americans, regional and international communities towards his ideological disposition. There are a number of salient linguistic and extra linguistic features that Bush consciously or unconsciously uses as weapons to mobilize people around his vision for the United States and the world at large.

¹ Full text of the address on (website) <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>

² Website of the full text of the address: <Http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005>

Methodology

This qualitative study is based on a progressive analysis of President Bush's first and second inaugural addresses. The progressive analysis is informed by particular circumstances surrounding each occasion. The main focus, however, is on the actual language used in the addresses with specific reference to the coercive linguistic strategies the President uses to manipulate the American audience and the international community to rally behind the vision and philosophy he espouses. The President tactfully uses language in a binaristic manner which leaves virtually no options to the audience except identifying with his vision (discourse), lest they be construed as enemies of the state and the world at large. The binary use of language is both explicit and implicit.

Explicit binary discourse presents the world in absolute opposites which promotes the culture of insiderism vis-à-vis outsiderism. It is basically an exclusionist strategy which condemns to the periphery those who dare oppose the ideology espoused in the inaugural addresses. The binary discourse is essentially Manichean in that it leaves no space for hybrid personalities or those who occupy neutral spaces. According to Carr and Zanetti (1999) binaries connote a struggle for predominance that powerfully suggests that if one position is right, then the other must be wrong. As Said (1978: 227) observes, 'underlying these categories is the rigidly binomial opposition of 'ours' and 'theirs'...' Implicit binary discourse is manifestly embedded in the discourse expressing commitment to propositions. In the speeches, this is marked by the use of oxymoronic features. Although it is not as starkly prominent as the explicit form, it nevertheless carries coercive properties.

Analysis of the Inaugural Addresses

The binaries used in these speeches revolve around a number of thematic issues which, according to Coe et al (2004) can be referred to as central organizing objects. In the addresses these themes or central organizing objects sometimes overlap. The first inaugural speech opens on a celebratory note where the President extols the virtue of democracy which is presented in binary terms. He says ‘... the peaceful transfer of authority is rare in history, yet common in our country’. The lexical items that dramatise the binaries are **rare** and **common**. The virtuous system of democracy which is rare in other countries of the world is common practice in the United States of America. Bush uses these two opposite lexical items in a way that subtly elevates the moral standing of the Americans as well as the uniqueness of their political system. By extension, the rest of the world is depicted as lagging far behind the United States in terms of upholding democratic principles. The American populace is naturally compelled to embrace this principle of democracy which qualifies them as a unique model in the world. Similarly, the rest of the world where this practice is rare feels morally challenged to follow in America’s footsteps lest they will risk being branded as politically deficient. The effect of the antithesis, according to Stuckey and Antczak (1995), is to build, in this case, collaborative participation in advancing the democracy that the President espouses. However it is important to note the fallacy and overtly simplistic way of portraying the world as either democratic or undemocratic.

The theme of freedom assumes central position in both addresses. There are five direct references to freedom in the first inaugural speech; indirectly, it is also referred to through the use of such terms as liberty and liberator. In the second speech the President makes an overwhelming thirty-four direct references to the concept of freedom. The same concept is also

captured by other multiple indirect references such as liberty. In pursuit of this theme, Bush extensively uses binaries. The paragraph below which is an extract from the first address highlights this strategic use of binaries:

It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, a story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer.

The centrality of freedom in America's national and global agenda is buttressed by the use of these oxymoronic features: new world and old (world), slave-holding society and servant of freedom, protect and possess and defend viz-a- vis conquer. What is significantly apparent here is the dichotomization of the world into absolute antithetical categories. There is no provision for a middle- of- the-road position and syncretic relationships which are provided for by Gilroy (1993). The audience is once again compelled to identify with President Bush's ideals. For Bush, America represents the new world which is a willing servant of freedom and a power that protects and defends its citizens and other vulnerable societies. On the other hand, those who do not subscribe to this philosophy are inevitably associated with the subaltern other. This is a simplistic view of the world since it negates the existence of other positions outside the realm prescribed by the binaries. It can be argued that this conception of the world does not reflect naivety on Bush's part, but is a calculated political strategy that is meant to advance the President's quest to establish America as an unquestionable champion of freedom and civil liberties. He successfully achieves this by using multiple binary constructions which are meant to fortify the ideal of freedom. These binaries do not widen the options, but limit the choices. In this case, if you do not protect you possess and if you do not defend, you conquer. One cannot be indifferent or assume other positions.

In the second address, freedom assumes greater prominence. In this speech freedom is **the** choice both for American citizens and the international community. According to Bush:

There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom. We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in the entire world.

The battle lines are drawn between those who love freedom and those who purportedly hate it. The key binary here is human freedom against tyranny, but in this instance there is absolutely no choice. The path to follow is succinctly defined and it leads to **one conclusion** championed by **one force**. This shows a dramatic shift from the thrust of the first address where choices are limited. Bush speaks with a tone of aggression and finality. Where he seems to be giving choices, for example where he says ‘we will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom which is eternally right’, the choice is invalidated by the negative portrayal of the other choice. In a typical bullish style, the President defines the choices and literally forces the audience to embrace his vision. The other choice is not only bad, but it also invites the wrath of the American President. Inevitably, the idea of a choice falls away. This raises questions about the President’s sincerity when he talks about freedom given that it is the same freedom that he refuses to grant to those who think otherwise. By erasing choice, the President willfully misrepresents reality. McLaren (1995) argues for the need to accommodate those who occupy border spaces and are usually displaced by normative reference codes. However, Bush is living up to the ‘great man’ tradition where, according to Beasley (2001), the President must make his power manifest through the words he uses. This view is further elaborated by Ryfe (2001) who observes that a

president convinces the audience what he wants done is what ought to be done. This is a very subtle coercive strategy which Bush employs with great profit.

The question that begs an answer is why the President speaks so forthrightly, passionately and decisively about freedom in the second address. Some of the major events which gave substance to this speech are the unprecedented and unheralded September 11 2002 attack of the Pentagon and The World Trade Center and the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The September 11 attack deflated America's bubble of an over bloated sense of security. Bush understandably emerges from the rubble frothing in the mouth. The air of invincibility is supplanted by a deep sense of vulnerability. The President feels that America has a moral responsibility to export its cherished ideal of freedom to other countries that are conceived as less democratic. This explains the invasion of Iraq ostensibly in search of weapons of mass destruction which later proved to be a farce.

The theme of security is closely related to the theme of freedom as implied in the above analysis. There is an implied suggestion in Bush's address that America is the custodian of world security and freedom as reflected in the first address where he says 'If our country does not lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led'. America is presented as the policeman of the world whose responsibility is to guarantee world security and civil liberties. In dramatizing this self-imposed responsibility, Bush speaks with force and unwavering resolve. The so-called 'enemies of liberty' are given a lecture couched in absolute and uncompromising terms which intimidate those inclined to cross America's path. With a tone of finality, Bush declares: 'The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by

history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favours freedom. We will defend our allies and our interests.... We will meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength.’

In this statement the President uses curt and crisp statements that give prominence to his non-negotiable stance against those forces that seek to threaten America’s security in particular, and world security in general. As observed by Ryfe (ibid) other American Presidents before Bush particularly President Carter rally Americans behind a grand image of the nation which is presented as the strongest in the world militarily and economically.

In the 2005 address the call for securing the borders of America becomes hysterical as Bush declares, ‘ My **most** solemn duty is to protect this nation and its people against further attacks and emerging threats’. There is a subtle attempt to woo the audience by the President who casts himself as a man whose passion for duty is unrivalled, and who is willing to give all he has in order to secure Americans from rampaging terrorists. Furthermore, Bush claims that he has been mandated by the American populace to advance the cause of security. He says: ‘From **all** of you, I have asked patience in the hard task of securing America, which you have granted in good measure.’ This claim gives American citizens the moral obligation to rally behind the President’s vision. Those who are inclined to oppose the President are therefore in denial and can be accused of abrogating duty. Bush is aware that as a president of such a mighty nation, he too must project himself as a powerful leader who has what it takes to protect the nation. He is also quick to tactfully rope in the audience by suggesting that they granted him the authority to lead and secure the nation. Beasley (op cit) succinctly notes that a president derives his power from three sources namely: the institution of the presidency, individual officeholder and the citizenry or demos. In this speech Bush appeals effectively to the last two sources.

The other coercive strategy employed by Bush is the use of collective pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ in order to foster a collective approach to his vision and governing principles. These are totalizing strategies which are aimed at obliterating differences and depicting the American society as homogeneous. In both addresses there is an overwhelming use of the pronoun ‘we’. The pronoun is used **forty-five** times in the first address and **thirty-six** times in the second address. We argue that this is not coincidental, but a well calculated strategy designed to foster commitment to the President’s propositions. America by its nature is a heterogeneous society in terms of race, religion, nationalities and other idiosyncratic affinities. This reality inevitably forces the President to inculcate a sense of patriotism to the audience. Where the President feels that he needs the support of all the Americans in order to achieve his objective of militarization, he psyches up the audience in the first address thus, ‘We will show purpose without arrogance. We will meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength’. In this instance Bush tactfully rallies the audience around the need to forcefully repulse any threat of aggression. Those who may be inclined to pursue diplomatic means to solve threats of aggression are denied that option. In the second address the same strategy is used to heighten the sense of unity and patriotism at the aftermath of the September 11 attack and the invasion of Iraq where he says ‘**We** felt the unity and fellowship of **our** nation when freedom came under attack, and **our** response came like a **single hand** over a **single heart**’. Here Bush claims a false sense of unity of purpose among all the Americans notwithstanding dissent from other quarters. To claim total agreement on any subject however sensitive is a fallacy. Generally, the use of the pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ revolve around organizing thematic concerns such as freedom, security, unity, social and economic development. The effect of the use of these collective

pronouns particularly the inclusive ‘we’ as Fairclough (2001) notes is to assimilate the people to the leader or leadership. In so doing, Bush demonstrates that he has authority to speak on behalf of others and indeed all right-minded Americans. In addition to this, Shea (1998) maintains that the speaker uses collective pronouns to bond himself with the audience. For any political leader this bond is priceless.

Although the President is overall consistent in the use of the collective pronouns, there are situations where he notably deviates from this strategy by creating some distance between himself and the audience. A typical example which appears in both addresses is the use of the first person singular pronoun ‘I’ and ‘my’. In the first address Bush uses a combination of the collective pronouns and first person singular pronouns to achieve maximum effect on the audience. The following statement illustrates the strategy:

We do not accept this, and we will not allow it. Our unity, our nation,
Our union is the serious work of leaders and citizens in every generation.
And this is **my** solemn pledge: **I** will work to build a single nation of justice and
opportunity.

In the first part of the quotation, the President identifies himself with the audience in advancing the cause of unity and liberty, but in the second part he ‘abandons’ the audience and elevates himself to the higher position in the fight for the same principle. Medhurst (1996) confirms the Aristotelian view that a speaker exploits three sources of persuasion namely ethos (character of the speaker), logos (reasonableness and rationality of speaker’s arguments) and pathos (appeal to emotions and feelings). Bush successfully exploits the three sources of persuasion, which in this instance are imbued with coercive potential.

This is a strategy which diplomatically forces the audience to bear the moral obligation of rallying behind the President who has given a ‘solemn pledge’ to serve them. Similarly, in the

second address Bush declares ‘My most solemn duty is to protect this nation and its people...’ Although there is this self elevation and distance between Bush and the audience, he successfully casts himself as a servant of the people which compels them to render him full support.

So far one observes that Bush predominantly creates a collective sense of responsibility, then proceeds to assume greater responsibility to the vision and then, as we will show in the ensuing analysis, he sometimes apportions responsibility to the people. This is achieved through the imperative use of the second person pronoun ‘you’ as illustrated in the following statement from the first speech:

What **you** do is as important as anything government does. I ask **you** to seek a common good beyond **your** comfort; to defend needed reforms against easy attacks; to serve **your** nation beginning with **your** neighbor. I ask **you** to be citizens...
Bush continues in similar vein in the second address declaring:

Make the choice to serve in a cause larger than **your** wants, larger than **yourself**- and in **your** days **you** will add not just to the wealth of our country, but to its character.

In both instances, Bush shrewdly defines the expected code of conduct for the Americans. He does this in definitively mandatory terms where individuals are asked to behave and relate with each other in a manner that specifically advances the President’s agenda of achieving popular loyalty to government policies, particularly those related to patriotism and unity. He uses the second person pronoun to reach at individuals who are forced to introspectively reflect on their conduct in view of the prescribed obligations. Fairclough (ibid) in his analysis of the discourse of Thatcherism observes that the use of indefinite pronoun ‘you’ fosters solidarity and commonality of vision. Through the use of this strategy Bush passes off his vision, political perceptions and ideologies as those of ‘the people’ in general. The implication is that he claims to be one of the people thus encapsulating the polity in his being.

Use of religion is yet another strategy Bush employs to coerce people to rally behind him. This strategy is evidently used in both addresses. In the first address, he says ‘...we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image’. This statement is preceded by the President’s call for unity among all Americans. In order to bring together Americans who naturally have different ethnic, racial, political and religious affiliations, Bush claims that in espousing his vision he is guided by the Almighty God. This makes it difficult for people to express divergent views. In both addresses, Bush concludes his speech by committing the people and America to God. We maintain that the strategy here is to appeal to all and sundry. Use of religion as rhetorical strategy is meant to show the righteousness of his vision and the immorality or evilness associated with the other choice. By implication, those who may want to oppose the President’s vision and policies are deemed to be on the devil’s side. This implication is strong enough to dissuade some people from opposing the President, particularly the Christians and other God fearing religious groups.

Lexical reiteration is another strategy extensively used by Bush in the two addresses. Basically, lexical reiteration is a repetitive use of certain words in a text in order to achieve maximum effect to the audience. In both addresses, there is a proliferation of the following words: **freedom, liberty, citizens, we, our and America**. Persistent reference to these words has the effect of psychologically conditioning the audience into religiously believing in the ideology they encapsulate. We argue that the President engages in psychological warfare in order to force the audience to succumb to his vision. This psychological conditioning is an act of force

although this force is subtle. There is an old adage which says persistent reference to an idea renders it believable and ultimately sacrosanct.

When proposing radical action such as militarization and aggression against other countries Bush cunningly over dramatizes the grave consequences of inaction. This strategy is used in the first address where the President sought to mobilize American support for, among other things, his intended military assault against Iraq. The following quotation illustrates the strategy:

We will build our defenses beyond challenge, lest weakness invite challenge
We will confront weapons of mass destruction, so that a new century is spared
new horrors.

The radical action proposed is juxtaposed with an undesirable possibility that inaction invites. The yoking together of two extremes and their presentation as the only available options is strategically meant to force people to opt for the less damaging alternative. In this respect the commonly undesirable militarization crusade is presented as the best option which guarantees the security of American citizens and the status of the country as the global superpower. Americans are made to support this policy, although successive American governments have always championed the demilitarization programme in other countries irrespective of the insecurity such demilitarization posed to the targeted countries. As Roberts (1995) correctly observes, semantic framing using juxtaposition operates by a very simple principle of putting two opposite images or discourses side by side so that they semantically interact to enhance the audience's positive perception of the speaker's propositions.

Where the President wants to show personal commitment to proposed policies and cherished American ideals, and to instill the same commitment to the populace, he makes extensive use of

deontic modality. According to Steele et al cited in Palmer (1986) deontic modality refers to ‘... probability or the related notion of obligation, certainty or the related notion of requirement’. In the two addresses the modality is marked by the words **must** and **will**. In this instance modality is mainly related to the notion of obligation and requirement. The use of **must** and **will** excludes the possibility of choice and is essentially coercive. In the first speech the President categorically states that:

Now we **must** choose if the example of our fathers and mothers will inspire us or condemn us. We **must** show courage in a time of blessing by confronting problems instead of passing them on to future generations.

Bush continues with the same strategy in the second address thus ‘And our country **must** abandon all the habits of racism, because we cannot carry the message of freedom with the baggage of bigotry at the same time’. Although the President seems to be giving options in both cases cited above, the other options fall away because the **must** modality compels the audience to discard them since they are untenable and repugnant. In the second quotation, the use of **must** and **will** is commonly prefixed with the first person plural pronoun **we** which is meant to show that the President and his administration will not prevaricate in the execution of their duty. The audience feels compelled to support their president against all odds. Apart from that, the President’s forthrightness and unwavering stance assume intimidating proportions to the extent that expressing dissent becomes an unlikely course of action for the audience. Apart from this, Bush is essentially pandering to the popular belief that Americans like their presidents to be assured and active rather than being feckless, reckless or sedentary (Hart, 2000)

The consistent use of the present continuous tense in both addresses is a strategy which, one can argue, is meant to give an element of immortality to the values and philosophies which guide the President in policy formulation and implementation. It also gives a sense of urgency to the need for policy implementation. The following extract from the first address shows how the President uses the present continuous tense to good effect:

America has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests and teach us what it means to be citizens. Every child must be taught these principles. Every citizen must uphold them.

There are three issues that emerge from this quotation which are made apparent by the use of the present continuous tense. Firstly, the ideals which define the nation of America are presented as enduring since they have stood the test of time. In other words, these ideals defined the American nation in the past, define the nation today and will define it in future. Secondly, the audience is compelled to uphold these ideals since they define their identity. Last but not least, the audience feel obliged to execute policies that are meant to safeguard and perpetuate the ideals which define America with a sense of urgency. The coercion in this strategy is subtle, but effective especially when it is linked to the appeal to God to watch over the United States as a characteristic conclusion to both addresses. The strategy can be viewed within the context of persuasive communication. Bush adroitly appeals to the audience's pathos and ethos with the intention of moving the audience into action. We argue that this is a conscious attempt to rein in the American populace within the framework of his vision. Even though it is done persuasively it nevertheless amounts to subtle coercion. This is in line with Bettinghaus (1980: 15) observation that, "Persuasion is an attempt to control one's environment and people are an important part of that environment." An acceptance or inaugural address is a partisan political address which inevitably should serve as a strong persuasive message (Trent and Friedenber, 1983).

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing analysis, one notes that Bush strategically uses coercive discourse in order to rally American people and the international community at large around his policies. He does this by using what can be termed Bushspeak dualisms where the world is presented in Manichean terms, positing a binary opposition between his preferred policies and others which are deemed retrogressive and damaging to the American nation. A combination of other strategies like deontic modality, lexical reiteration, collective pronouns, religion, oxymoronic features and other linguistic features achieve the same effect.

It is recommended that future research may attempt to determine the extent to which other political leaders employ these strategies to rally their people behind their vision. It will be interesting to establish whether coercion is a strategy characteristically used by politician to mobilize political support or simply 'Bush speak'.

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