

# GRAMMATICAL FEATURES OF POLITICAL SPEECHES: A STUDY OF SELECTED BARACK OBAMA'S POLITICAL SPEECHES.

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## ABSTRACT

**T**his paper examined the grammatical features of Obama's Selected Political Speeches with a view to characterizing his political idiolect. The data for the study comprised three of Obama's Political Speeches. These speeches which were purposively selected included one of Obama's Campaign Speeches titled "The Change we Need", his Acceptance Speech and his Inaugural Speech.

The linguistic framework adopted in analyzing these speeches was Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The framework for this study is considered adequate because the three metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal and textual) exemplified therein are suitable for analyzing and describing the linguistic as well as the contexts or situations for discharging such. The study concluded that Obama's Political Speeches were replete with ideological matters, expressed both overtly and covertly, and communicated without producing disaffection.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of political language discourse focuses on issues such as power, conflict, control or domination (Wilson 2003). Orwell (1969) in his classic article, "Politics and the English Language" drew people's attention to the political potential of language; he is of the opinion that language is used to manipulate people.

It is not simply manipulation, that is the issue in the use of political language; it is the goal of such manipulation which is seen as problematic. Politicians seem to want to hide the negative within particular formulations such that the population may not see the truth or the horror before them. To make others believe you, do what you want them to do and generally view the world in the way most favourable for your goals, you need to manipulate, or at least, pay attention to the linguistic limit of your audience.

The essential issue in the study of political discourse is the balance between linguistic analysis and political analysis. In general, this is what distinguishes political discourse analysis from political research as found in political science. All levels of linguistics are involved in political discourse. It can be studied at the level of lexical choice, grammar, implicatures, metaphors, speech acts, pronouns and their distribution etc.

This study looked at Obama's ability to produce Political Speeches devoid of the usual disaffection. In achieving this, it looked at the mood choices, modality choices and sentence types; and how he deployed them to communicate without the usual disaffection that are notice in political speeches.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three of Obama's Speeches were selected and analysed. One of his Campaign Speeches

purposively selected his acceptance speech and his inaugural speech. This selection was made for the peculiar features of the style of language use which this study identified (the three speech contexts: Campaign, Victory and Inaugural), are keys in any political discuss.

The speeches were downloaded from the internet. The linguistic framework adopted for their analysis is Halliday's Systemic Function Linguistics as revised by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004).

## Grammatical Features Of Obama Speeches

The grammatical features that we analyse are the mood, modality and the sentence types. We analyse the mood and modality because they help the readers to understand and evaluate the speeches regarding their suitability in explaining the interpersonal metafunction of language. The interpersonal metafunction of language, according to Halliday (1994:68) is concerned with clauses as exchange. It helps the users of language establish, negotiate, and assume their position in social relationship. Mood explains the exchange of roles by the addresser and the audience, while modality shows to what degree the proposition is valid. The sentence types are also analysed because they help in revealing the intention of the speaker.

## Mood Choices

The purpose of a speech is to express the addresser's viewpoint on things in the world; to elicit or change the audience's attitudes and to arouse the audiences' passion to share the same proposal with the addresser. In a political speech, it is vital and apparent for the addresser to give information and demand services. On one hand, the addresser hopes to offer certain messages to the audience showing his political attitude and assumption. On the other hand, he tries to demand

and arouse the audience to take action to follow his instruction. The following clauses are found in Obama's speeches.

### **Declarative Clauses**

As found in political speeches, declarative clauses dominate Obama's speeches. This mood functioned as statements to give as much information as possible to the audience. Declarative clauses are used by Obama in the campaign speech to paint the state of the nation which is worst economically. It is still mostly used in the victory speech where it serves the function of recalling his presidential election campaign, expressing his gratitude to his supporters, making promises and inspiring the audience to go through the difficulties with the whole nation; and also his inaugural speech, where it is used to trace the history of the oath taken at the inauguration, making promises and inspiring the audience to go through the difficulties with the whole nation together.

### **Imperative Clauses**

Imperative clauses come next to declarative clauses in Obama's speeches. Halliday (1970) states that two kinds of messages are conveyed by imperative clauses: one is to command others to do something, the other is to invite others to do something together. Obama used both in his speeches. The last paragraph in his campaign speech contains direct command thus.

If you want ..... then I ask you to knock on some doors, and make some calls, and talk to your neighbours, and give me your vote on November 4th

However in his victory speech Obama invites the audience to do something together with him through the use of "Let's" five times:

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in.....

Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything.....

Let us resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and .....

Let us remember that it was a man from this state.

So tonight, let us ask ourselves if our children should live to see the next century.....

The imperative clause of which the

speaker is inclusive is further noticed in the final part of the inaugural speech thus:

So let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled[...]

By the use of imperative clauses that are speaker inclusive, Obama is trying to build up an equal and mutual reliant relationship with the audience. The use of this clause type in the victory and inaugural speeches suggests that Obama is trying to establish the spirit of collective responsibility. The use of speaker inclusive clause type also indicates that Obama is not giving a direct command but making a suggestion; he successfully shortens the distance between him and the audience and further calls on them to take action together with him to overcome the difficulties.

### **Interrogative Clauses**

Interrogative clauses are the least used by Obama in his speeches. Though they are not widely used like the others, they are very effective. They can help to create an intimate dialogic style: the audience consider that they are friends with the addresser and naturally share the same proposal.

I I mean where is he getting these lines? The lobbyists running his campaign? Maybe it's Phil Gramm ..... you remember Phil Gramm.

II So tonight, let us ask ourselves – if our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?

III The question we asked today is not whether it works .....

Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill.....

Examples I, II and III above are the interrogative clauses as we have in the campaign, victory and inaugural speeches respectively. The focus of these interrogative clauses is to emphasize in order to make the audience think and rouse their passion for overcoming the current difficulties. What the audience will feel for Phil Gramm is hatred in I. In II, the audience is likely to come up with different positive answers indicating their wishes for America if American children should live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper. In III, Obama uses imperative clauses to answer two questions that form the crux of his manifestoes: that the most important thing in governance is making the government work; that is, enhance development and economic stability; and that without the market being watched, it will not improve.

### Modality Choices

According to Halliday (2000), modality also plays an important role in carrying out the interpersonal metafunction of clauses showing to what degree the proposition is valid. Modality refers to the space between 'yes' and 'no' showing the speaker's judgment of the probabilities or the obligations involved in what he is saying. (Thompson 2000:57).

Obama realized modality in his speeches through the use of modal verbal operators such as 'can', 'will' and 'must'. When realized by modal verbal operators, modality involves degrees and scales about the validity of the proposition termed 'Modal Commitment' Halliday (1994). The three basic values of modal commitment are high, median and low on the scale. Different modal commitment leads to different meanings.

'Can' represents a low value modulation. Can is used by Obama to weaken his authority, to smoothen the distance between him and the audience and not to force and command them to follow his instructions. These examples are contained in his campaign and inaugural speeches respectively:

We can steer ourselves out of this crisis  
 And those of us who manage the public's dollars will be held to account – to spend wisely: reform bad habits and do our business in the light of the day because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government

However the semantic meaning of 'Can' which means the ability to do things is realized in the inaugural speech in 'Yes, We Can'. The constant repetition of (Yes we) 'Can' here is to encourage the Americans to believe in themselves.

'Will' operates at the higher modal commitment and this confirms that Obama is capable of taking decisive actions in the future.

'Will' is used in the speeches to show the future and to show a strong wish (of determination) as we have in these examples

- |   |   |                            |
|---|---|----------------------------|
| <p>I But the most important thing I will do as President is restore opportunity</p> <p>II The road ahead will be long</p> <p>III We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people.....</p> | } | <p>Future<br/>'will'</p>   |
| <p>I To help people stay in their houses, I will change our bankruptcy laws</p> <p>II To those who would tear the world down: We will defeat you.</p>   | } | <p>Expressing<br/>wish</p> |

- |  |   |                            |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| <p>III Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real...<br/>         But know this America - they will be met.</p> | } | <p>Expressing<br/>wish</p> |
|--|---|----------------------------|

'Must' has the highest scale of modal commitment. It signals the highest degree of pressure on the other person to carry out a command. Just like most political speeches, Obama used 'must' to show firm determination to call on the audience to be determined to take action in order to achieve their common objective. Excerpts I, II and III below are from campaign, victory and inaugural speeches respectively:

I. "The Federal Reserve must ensure that the plan protects the families that count on insurance."

II. "What we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow'.  
 "What began twenty-one months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night."

III. "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."

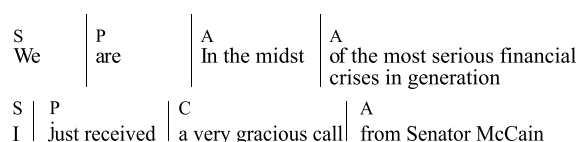
"In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given, it must be earned."

### Sentence Types

Grammatical structure employed in Obama speeches varies. There are long and short sentences used in the speeches. Obama used the various sentence types in order to prevent monotony and rather create variety with a view to forestalling boredom. The syntactic categories in Obama's speeches include simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences and inverted sentences.

**Simple Sentences:** The basic division of simple sentence is usually the subject and predicate. The subject is formed by a noun or noun group while the predicate contains the predicator, complement and or adjunct. Examples of Obama's simple sentences are contained in the following excerpts

- i) We are in the midst of the most serious financial crises in generation
- ii) I just received a very gracious call from Senator McCain



From the above, we noticed the SPAA structure in I, and SPCA in three. These structures suggest that Obama is interested in making declarative sentences, that is, he is interested in giving information. The form of reply he expects from people is not verbal but



action, which in his campaign speech indicates to vote for him and in his victory and inaugural speeches indicates to support him.

**Compound Sentences:** The compound sentences contain two alpha clauses. Examples of compound sentences in Obama's speeches include:

(I) *Monday brought the worst losses on Wall Street since the day after September 11<sup>th</sup>, and today we learned that the Fed had to take unprecedented action to prevent the failure of one of the largest insurance companies in the world from causing an even larger crisis*

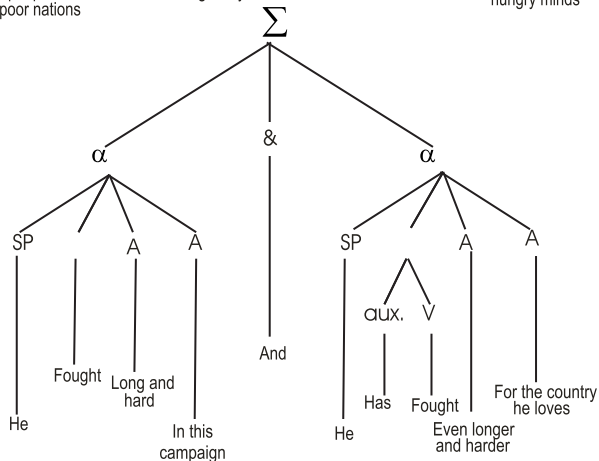
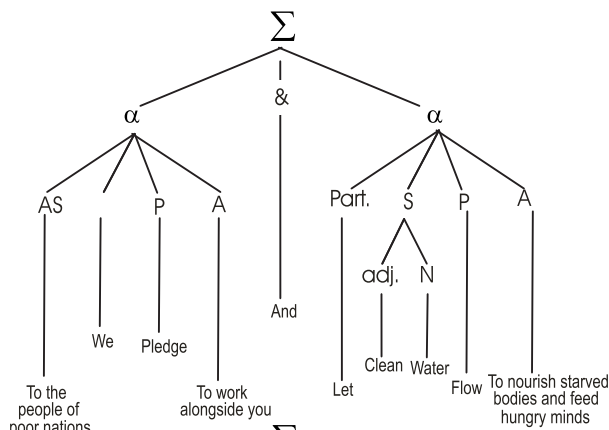
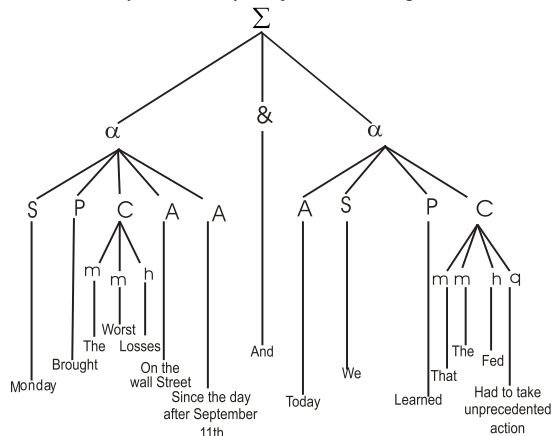
(II) *To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and to let clean waters flow, to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds*

(III) *He fought long and hard in this campaign, and he's fought even longer and harder for the country he loves*

In I above, we noticed the fronting of the adverbial 'today' in the second clause. It is to give a stylistic effect: if Monday brought the worst losses on Wall Street ... and 'today' the Fed had to take unprecedented action ..., then there is the urgent need to take the bold step and vote for Obama now! There is also the fronting of the adverbial 'to the people of poor nations' in II above; this is to place emphasis on the fact that America has concern for the poor nations (as a world leader and the most financially buoyant nation in the world).

The use of compound sentence to present the information presented in III is of great significance. It is aimed at redeeming the image of Senator McCain which he battered in his campaign speech. Here all the efforts of the Senators are acknowledged – they are important to the growth of democracy in America. The two pieces of information presented are equally important and factual: Senator McCain fought long and hard in the campaign; also he has fought longer and harder for America his beloved country.

Here are some syntactic analyses of Obama's compound sentences:



**Complex Sentences**

This sentence type is usually made up of one alpha clause and at least one beta clause. In all the speeches, Obama favoured complex sentences because of the weight of information to be given. The clauses in these sentences are mostly declarative. The use of complex sentences also enabled Obama to put forward complex ideas which could not be handled by simple or compound sentences.

Excerpt:

*“My fellow citizens, I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestor”.*

Here we noticed three clauses as follows:

I stand here today humbled by the task before us

(I stand here today) grateful for the trust you have bestowed

( I stand here today) mindful of the sacrifices borne by our...

S	P	A	A	A
I	Stand	here	today	humbled by the task before us grateful for the trust you have bestowed mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors

Complex sentence



The ellipsis of 'I stand here today' is deliberate; It is to give the speech rhythm and to avoid unnecessary repetition.

**Conditional Sentences**

Conditional sentences are 'If .....then' clauses. They present 'cause –effect' relationship.

Excerpt

But if you want real change – if you want an economy that rewards work and that works for Main Street and Wall Street, if you want tax relief for the middle class and millions of new jobs; if you want health care you can afford and education so that our kids can compete; then I ask you to knock on some doors and make some calls and talk to your neighbours and give me your vote on November 4<sup>th</sup>

Here Obama used a complex sentence.

The complex sentence has four conditional sentences, that is, 'if clauses'. The four 'if clauses' are dependent clauses:

A	S	P	C
If	you	want	real change
A	S	P	C
If	you	want	an economy that ...
A	S	P	C
If	you	want	tax relief...
A	S	P	C
If	you	want	health care...

We note here that all the dependent clauses have the ASPC structure.

The four conditional and dependent clauses are joined to another four independent clauses through the use of 'then'. The four independent clauses are

A	S	P	C	A
then	I	ask	you	to knock on some doors
(then I	ask	you	to)	make some calls
(then I	ask	you	to)	talk to your neighbours
( then I	ask	you	to)	give me your vote on November 4 <sup>th</sup>

A	S	P	C	A
If	You	want	m real an h change economy q -that rewards work and that works for Main Street and Wall Street -for the middle class and millions of new jobs -you can afford and education so that our kids can compete	
then	I	ask	you	knock on some doors make some calls talk to your neighbours give me your vote on November 4 <sup>th</sup>

Complex sentence with conditional 'if... then' clauses.

While there is the repetition of 'if you want' in the dependent clauses, there is the ellipses of 'then I ask you to' thrice in the independent clauses. This is to allow rhythm into the speech in order not to make the speech boring by using repetition throughout.

Another complex sentence type used by Obama is the 'if clause' (conditional clause) in which all the qualifiers (q) refer to one single headword (h) in the first dependent clause. Excerpt:

If there is anyone out there, who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy' tonight is your answer

Here we have four examples of dependent clauses with ASPC structure (The first has ASPC structure while the other three are deliberately elided to avoid repetition; they all also have four different qualifiers (q) ). There is also one independent clause at the end of the sentence also with the ASPC structure.

	S	P	C	
A.	If there is anyone out there	Who still doubts that America...	Who still wonders if the dream of our ...	Who still questions the power... q 4
				q1 dependent q2 dependent q3 clauses
B.	(then) tonight	is your	answer	dependent clause

A	S	P	C
(if) there	Is	h anyone	q out there who still doubts that America is a place... who still wonders if the dream of our fathers... who still questions the power of our democracy

A	S	P	C
Then	tonight	is	mq your answer

Complex sentence with conditional 'if... then' clauses

We noticed that 'anyone' is an existential subject. It has reference to the outside world. Here Obama is referring to the cynics. Also all the qualifiers are pointing to the headword (h) in the C... 'anyone'.

**Appositive Constructions:**

Another example of complex sentence used by Obama is such that the clauses act in apposition to one another. The use of appositives by Obama is to perform two functions. First is to paint a negative image of his opponents as we have in the campaign speech. Excerpt:

Maybe it's Phil Gram-the man who is the architect of the deregulation in Washington that helped cause the mess on Wall Street, who also happens to be the architect of McCain's economic plan and one of his chief advisors

Maybe it's Phil Gram NG 1

- the man who was the architect of the deregulation in Washington that helped cause the mess on Wall Street NG 2
- who happens to be the architect of John McCain's economic plan NG 3
- and (who is) one of his chief advisors NG 4

A	S	P	C		
Maybe	it	's	m	h	Q
			the	Phil Gram Man	who was the architect of the deregulation in Washington that helped cause the mess on Wall Street
			who happens to be the and one of his chief	architect advisors	Of John McCain's economic plan

The structure above has four clauses with the ASPC structure (the first is realized fully while the ASP is elided in the three). It has four noun groups (NGS) and all the headwords (h) in their complements are appositives with the first ( Phil Gram ). Secondly, the use of appositive constructions enables Obama to bring out the positive attributes of his personality as a way of showing appreciation as we have in the next excerpt in his victory speech:

I want to thank my partner in this journey, a man who campaigned from his heart and spoke for the men and women he grew up with on the streets of Scranton and rode with on that train home to Delaware, the Vice-President-elect of the United States, Joe Biden.

The structure in the above sentence has three clauses with the SPC structure. It has three noun groups (NG) and all the NGS are appositives with all the qualifiers (q) acting in

apposition to the first headword (h), that is, 'partner' in the complement

I want to thank my partner in this journey NG 1  
 a man who campaigned from his... to Delaware NG 2  
 the Vice President elect..., Joe Biden. NG 3

S	P	C		
				NG
		m	h	q
I	Want	to thank (MV)	my a the partner man the Vice-President elect	in this journey who campaigned from his heart... of the United States, Joe Biden

Complex sentence

Apposition is also used to show appreciation to his wife in the next excerpt:

I would not be standing here tonight without the unyielding support of my best friend for the last sixteen years, the rock of our family and the love of my life our nation's next First Lady, Michelle Obama.

I would not be standing here tonight without the unyielding support of my best friend for the last sixteen years NG 1

----- (Of) the rock of our family and the love of my live NG 2

----- (Of) our nation's next First Lady, Michelle Obama NG 3

S	P	C		
		M	h	q
I	would not be standing here tonight	without the unyielding	support	of my best friend for the last sixteen years
				(of) the rock of our family and the love of my life
				(of) our nation's next First Lady, Michelle Obama

**Inverted Sentences (Fronting)**

Obama speeches contain lots of inversions. The fronting allows him to give prominence to whatever he wants to give prominence to. Inverted sentences are used more in the campaign and inaugural speeches than the victory speech. This suggests that Obama is capable of inverting sentences in situations where he has to ask people for something (like in the campaign speech where he has to ask for vote and victory where he has to beg for support). However, his sentences are likely to contain less inversion in situations where he has to give thanks (acknowledging the people) like in the victory speech.

Excerpts:

- I. Everywhere you look, the economic news is troubling.
- II. And then yesterday, John McCain's big solution to the crisis we're facing is get ready for it – a commission
- III. Now, I certainly don't fault Senator McCain for all of the problems we're facing right now, but I do fault the economic philosophy he's followed for twenty-six years.
- IV. To jumpstart job creation: I've also proposed a \$50, billion Emergency Economic Plan that would save 1 million jobs by rebuilding our infrastructure, repairing our schools and helping our states and localities avoid damaging budget cuts.
- V. To help people stay in their homes, I will change our bankruptcy laws, and I'll offer a tax credit to struggling families that will take 10% off your mortgage interest rate
- VI. And tonight, I think about all that she's seen (Nixon Cooper) throughout her century in America- the headache and the hope, the struggle and the progress, the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can.
- VII. For that is the true genius of America: - That America can change
- VIII. Today, I say to you that the challenges we face are real
- IX. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for too long have strangled our politics.
- X. For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and travelled across in search of a new life.
- XI. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.
- XII. For us, They fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normady and KheSahn.
- XIII. Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

Sentences I to V coincide with the campaign speech, VI and VII with victory; and VIII-XIII with the inaugural speech. The structures presented by these sentences have already been analyzed under simple, compound and complex sentences. However, for a general overview of syntactic structure of

Obama's inverted sentences, we shall consider the analysis of I, VI and X.

Example I, is an example of inversion in a simple sentence. The fronting of 'everywhere you look' is to give prominence to the fact that the economic meltdown in America at that time is not a speculation, but real. Otherwise the sentence could have read 'the economic news is troubling everywhere you look'.

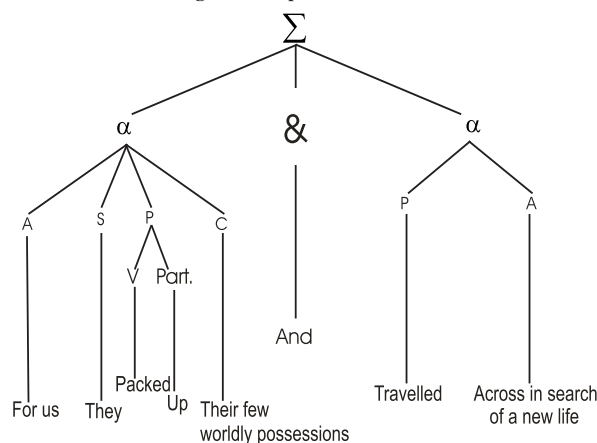
In excerpt VI, prominence is given to the action of Nixon Cooper, who voted in that election that night. The emphasis is on the importance of that night of victory in the history of American politics. Otherwise, the sentence could have read 'I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America tonight'. By fronting 'tonight', Obama is saying that all the impossibilities of the past especially the speculations that a black man cannot become the president of the United States ended that night. Hence, that night is of great significance in American history.

A	S			P	C
Everywhere you look	Det	Adj.	N	Is	Troubling
	the	economic news			

Adverbial fronting in a simple sentence

A	S	P	C
And tonight	I	Think	about all that she's seen throughout her century in America
			(about) the headache and the hope
			(about) the struggle and the progress
			(about) the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can

Adverbial fronting in a complex sentence



Adverbial fronting in a compound sentence



In excerpt X, the fronting of 'for us' is to acknowledge the selfless efforts of the American founding fathers referred to as the risk takers some of whom are the celebrated (the Whites) and more often men and women obscure in their labour (the African Americans) by fronting the adverbial 'for us', Obama is saying that the efforts of the risk-takers (the founding fathers) especially the African Americans is for all Americans. 'For us' here means the entire American population referred to by Obama as 'patchwork heritage' in his inaugural speech and as comprising young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and non-disabled in his victory speech. Without the fronting the adverbial 'for us' the sentence would have read 'they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across in search of a new life for us (to enjoy today), and the prominence or emphasis given to 'us' would have been lost. The syntactic analysis is presented thus:

#### CONCLUSION

This paper examined the grammatical features of Obama speeches. It analysed the mood, modality, and the sentence types. The analysis of the mood revealed that declarative clauses were favoured by Obama. Next favoured were imperative clauses and least were interrogative clauses. All these clauses performed different functions in the speeches. For instance the declarative clauses functioned as statements to give as much information as possible ; the imperative clauses enabled Obama to call the people to join hands in the task of rebuilding American economy together ; and the interrogative clauses performed the function of creating dialogic style between

Obama and his audience, thereby making them intimate.

In the analysis of modality, we discovered the use of 'will', 'can' and 'must' as words used to enhance the validity of Obama's speeches. 'Will' and 'can' were frequently used in the speeches. While 'will' was mostly used to promise the future and to express strong wish, 'can' was used to smoothen the distance between Obama and the audience. The semantic meaning of 'can' was also used by Obama in 'Yes We Can' to encourage the people to believe in themselves in his victory speech. The use of 'must' which is the highest on the scale of modal commitment was not frequent in Obama's speeches because he does not want to sound as a dictator. However, Obama used 'must' to show firm determination to call on the audience to be determined to take action concerning common objectives.

It was also discovered that Obama used simple, compound, complex and invented sentences. The complex sentence type was commonly used and we noticed its varieties such as conditional (if ... then) and appositive constructions. Obama favoured the complex sentence structure because of the weight of information he wanted to give which favoured such structure. The conditional variety used in his campaign speech enabled him to present the choices available to the people using the "if .... Then' trend. This puts straight his manifestoes and his programmes. Likewise, the use of appositive constructions enabled Obama to pain this opponents and their actions negatively on one hand and to positively appreciate his close allies on the other. The use of inverted sentences allowed Obama to give prominence (or emphasis) to situations or ideas he wanted, thus making his speeches emotional.

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