

Review of *Discursive Practices in Barack Obama's State of the Union Addresses*

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The study *Discursive Practices in Barack Obama's State of the Union Addresses*, written by Ms. Antonia Enache, represents a significant, highly original contribution to the domain of political communication, which is itself a complex research field, incorporating elements pertaining to linguistics, sociology, philosophy, rhetoric and other adjacent fields of study.

In an original and comprehensive manner, the author tackles the backbone of presidential political communication in the US, the *State of the Union Addresses*. Founded on a long-standing tradition, deeply rooted in American history, present-day State of the Union Addresses act as bond-creating discourses, reinforcing the incumbent president's legitimacy, enhancing his image in the eyes of the public and providing the audience with an overview of the Administration's activities. Thus, these addresses rely on a certain pre-established, partly predictable frame, presenting a summary of the achievements of the past year as well as a forecast of the president's intentions for the next year.

In the modern, technology-based, mobile society, characterized by an accelerated lifestyle, instant communication and increased media attention, having won the elections is no longer enough. Not only does access to a first term of office by no means guarantee a second one, but even if a second term exists, the incumbent president must ensure that his image is positive and popularity stays high. Election campaigns have become more flexible nowadays; besides, to the extent to which we witness a decrease in voter loyalty and political allegiance, there also exists a phenomenon inherently deriving from the first one – namely, political actors need to permanently remind the public of their existence, activities and future plans. In this respect, *State of the Union Addresses* provide a

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great opportunity for the president to inform the citizens about past achievements as well as future plans, showing his level of commitment to the welfare of the nation and increasing the level of participation of the audience in political life.

The book is structured in fourteen chapters, organized as follows: Chapter 1 (*The Obama Story – Triumph of the Impossible*), presents the story of Barack Obama, the first black president of the US who, due to the traces of racism that persist in that country to this day and to the unlikelihood of a non-WASP man ever winning the elections, has been labelled by many as the American dream come true – a black man at the White House (a trend of improbabilities that came very close to continuing but was disrupted by the surprising, against-all-odds victory of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 elections). The chapter explains Obama's victory while also providing less familiar details about his life.

Chapter 2, *A Few General Remarks on the State of the Union Addresses*, analyses the historical and philosophical background of the Addresses, their importance for American political communication, their impact on the public and the way in which they contribute to the incumbent's president permanent campaigning, to his continuous struggle to uphold a positive image and reinforce his legitimacy. Also, the chapter looks into the most commonly tackled topics: domestic issues on the one hand, such as creating new jobs, combating unemployment, enhancing education and the acquisition of skills, taxation problems, health coverage, environmental issues and energy independence, and foreign policy issues on the other hand and most importantly, American supremacy. The author tactfully points out that the favourite word Americans use to define their position on the international arena is *leadership*, a concept that others more bluntly describe as "hegemony" and an ardent desire to cling to their declining economic and political domination of the world.

In chapter 3, *Negative Campaigning – Continuity vs. Change*, Ms Enache tackles the issue of negative campaigning, a situation that frequently arises in political communication, for several reasons. Firstly, it is easier in general to tarnish the opponent's actions, plans or ideology than to put forward a brilliant plan of your own – therefore, negative campaigning is used in a wide range of situations, by most political actors. We would be doubtless right in stating that very few, if any, political actors shape their discourse without at least traces of negative campaigning.

Secondly, it seems that this type of approach raises a stronger emotional reaction in the audience, firmer beliefs and an increased willingness to cast the ballot – hence, the frequency of negative voting. It has in fact been said that even Obama won the elections as a result of what is commonly known as negative vote, that his 2008 opponent, John McCain, was sanctioned for the previous Republican administration's disastrous economic policies resulting in the 2008 crash and the subsequent worldwide recession. Along the same lines, it is possible that a non-WASP candidate never would have won the presidential elections in the absence of that particular context and of an opponent spawning strong negative reactions. The same chapter looks into the discourse of *continuity* vs the discourse of *change*, highlighting those instances where, in the speech of the same politician, there appear differences between the situation where he runs for the first term of office, thus appealing to the audience to change the current status quo, and the situation where, as incumbent president, wishes to win a second term of office, therefore asking for stability and continuity.

Chapter 4, *The Narrative – Reference to Concrete Situations*, tackles a very important strategy American politicians resort to, namely the reference to concrete situations in order to boost the emotional impact of their discourse. This is not surprising, given a fact well-known to psychologists: one tragedy alone, described in detail, raises stronger reactions than cold statistics describing an important number of similar situations presented as numbers. Empathy tends to be significantly stronger in the former case, leading to enhanced support for the speaker.

In Chapter 5, *Political Correctness*, the author speaks about this very topical, highly controversial issue, dwelling on discrimination against women, minorities and also on deriving trends, like *reverse discrimination*, while in Chapter 6, *Inspirational Discourse and the Politics of Buzzwords*, the use of certain abstract values is analysed – thus, we can see Obama resorting to concepts that are abstract, but serve a strong inspirational purpose, in order to motivate the audience and keep them on his side. Among these concepts we find *justice, responsibility, transparency, dignity, trust, patience* and *compromise*. The huge emotional capital stirred by these notions, which masterfully appeal to the American unconscious, is thoroughly looked into.

Chapter 7 (*Perspectives on Determination, Resilience and the Cult of Success*) sheds light on the way success is perceived by the American mind; thus, the idea of winning appears to be deeply ingrained in people's

actions, an outlook which takes its toll on everyone, resulting in their strong competitive nature; along the same lines, Chapter 8 (*Invoking Tradition and the American Dream*) tackles the Puritan-based, well-established concept of the American dream and its implications, from the concrete ones (such as being rich and successful) to the more abstract ones, describing moral values aiming to inspire and motivate (such as its redeeming nature and the way it is perceived as conveying a certain personal as well as national triumph); also, paradoxically (since, especially in the wake of the 2008 crisis, there have been numerous voices labelling it a mere chimera), the American dream is still powerfully perceived as a generator of freedom, hope, social justice and equality.

In Chapter 9 (*Identity*), the author dwells upon the issue of American identity – a dynamic construct, difficult to put together in the first place in a nation formed primarily by immigration, and challenged to a great extent in recent years, firstly due to the shifting demands of the global world, then to rising nationalism and the deriving problems. References to nationalism are looked into in Chapter 10, *Nationalism and Immigration*, alongside Obama's outlook on illegal immigration and his endeavors to show that these initially unwelcome foreigners might turn out to eventually benefit the American economy.

In Chapter 11, *American Hegemony*, we read about American hegemony as it appears today, in the post-Cold War era; thus, we can see that, though hegemony is not mentioned explicitly (referred to, instead, by the milder *supremacy*), it is taken as a given in the American foreign policies; Ms Enache also presents some cases where we can sense the speaker's fear that this supremacy might be dwindling, hence his efforts to reassert its existence.

In chapter 12, *Overcoming Challenges*, the author shows how the politician capitalizes on the huge emotional potential of pinpointing obstacles, as this strategy sets the stage for putting forward his own accomplishments. The author highlights the difference between challenges that have been overcome already, boosting the speaker's legitimacy, challenges ahead, which require future support for the speaker, and challenges that have only partly been overcome, thus implicitly resulting in a need for continuity in present policies. Basically, entire stretches of discourse are built around the obstacles that have been identified and prevailed over, translating into a covert demand for the audience to

support the orator. This strategy greatly resembles advertising techniques, where specific problems are shown or even created, to justify the need for the proposed product.

Chapter 13, *The Populist Appeal*, identifies the populist elements in Obama's discourse; thus, he emphasizes an increased support for the middle classes, a category whose wellbeing directly translates into economic growth, as well as support for vulnerable social categories such as women and minorities; besides, the dichotomy Wall Street – Main Street is directly and indirectly referred to, as a constant struggle between the rich and the poor, in the speaker's attempt to combat what has been called "trickle – down economics" (an approach to taxation whereby taxes on the wealthy are lowered in an attempt to spawn investment and long-term benefits). Obama opposes this approach, masterfully capitalizing on the huge emotional resources of favoring the less fortunate rather than the well-off social strata.

The last chapter, 14 (*The Quest for Legitimacy*) tackles Obama's attempt to reinforce his legitimacy in the eyes of the electors. The pursuit of legitimacy appears to be a constant undertaking, with a political actor being compelled to forever remind his supporters that he is there, has done things for them and will continue to throughout the entire term of office. *Permanent campaigning* means that one can never rest, every day on the political arena being nothing but yet another effort to uphold one's position and prove one deserves it beyond any doubt. Permanent campaigning means always keeping in contact with the public.

The volume *Discursive Practices in Barack Obama's State of the Union Addresses* represents a complex, thorough research, shedding light on some less obvious aspects of political communication and looking into the practical as well as emotional triggers that make the audience maintain their support for a political actor. The approach is multidisciplinary, incorporating elements of applied linguistics, discourse analysis, political philosophy and sociolinguistics. Not only does the author provide detailed analyses of the linguistic strategies used, she also explains the extracts against the background of an accurate social, historical and cultural analysis of the relevant circumstances. The book could be extremely useful for politicians, political consultants, diplomats, journalists or students aiming to build a career in these fields, as it stands out as a highly original, detailed and relevant study.