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POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S SPEECHES ON LGBT RIGHTS AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

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Abstract: The past decade has been characterized by unresolved controversies regarding the issue of gay rights and same-sex marriage in the United States. Of all the political leaders who have played a part in the crystallization of this sensitive matter, one stands out as a stalwart defender of the rights and liberties of the LGBT community – President Barack Obama. Using Critical Discourse Analysis as a research tool, the present article attempts to reveal that President Obama's political stance revolves around the ideology of political correctness. The linguistic analysis of the President's most relevant speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage highlights the fact that political correctness has shifted from a highly lexicalized and overt manifestation to a subtle, nuanced, highly persuasive tool President Obama makes extensive use of in order to promote LGBT rights and same-sex marriage.

Keywords: Obama, same-sex, marriage, LGBT, political correctness

Introduction

Ever since the first ancient Greek city states, democracy has been the name of the game: the voices of the (presumably informed) many versus the (a priori up to no good) few. It goes without saying that the most valuable players of this game were the agora speakers, which nowadays translates into politicians. Having the power to manipulate and influence masses, today's politicians rely on excellently constructed rhetorical speeches in order to push forward their agendas.

Since the masses are the prime target of present-day politicians, the way the audiences are influenced has changed throughout the years. That, in the end, leads us to political correctness, a unique sociolinguistic phenomenon which has not been imposed by some recognized authority and does not belong to a specific ideology.

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Political correctness emerged in the United States in the 1980s and then spread throughout the entire world. Starting as an attempt to raise awareness of sensitive cultural issues by trying to eradicate the offensive and prejudicial terms from language and replace them with newly engineered linguistic structures, political correctness has undergone radical changes over the years. If initially it manifested itself in the education field, it gradually permeated many other fields, making its way into the political arena as a novel and "better" approach to most delicate matters, such as: race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, AIDS, ethnicity, culture, xenophobia, etc.

Controversial ever since its emergence, political correctness has proved very hard to define. While some see it as a tool of those on the Left (liberals), others consider it to be exactly the opposite – a tool of the ones on the Right (neoconservatives). Some researchers do not espouse either of these views, seeing it as a myth. However, most thinkers agree that it is an ideology whose main foci are minority rights and issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, disability, etc.

Review of theoretical background

This study focuses on the persuasive function of the political speech and some of the persuasive strategies that the U.S. President Obama employs in the speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. The analytical framework I have used is centered upon Fairclough and Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, placing great emphasis on the way in which actors, actions and events are represented.

Referring to the formal features of a text, Fairclough[1] distinguishes between three types of values that these may have: experiential, relational, and expressive. Since a formal feature with experiential value is a "trace of and a cue to the way in which the text producer's experience of the natural or social world is represented,"[2] it is the formal features with experiential value that the study focuses on.

The representation of actors, actions and events is best revealed by choices speakers/writers make at the lexical and syntactic level. According to van Dijk[3], the lexical style is "a major means of ideological expression in discourse. Depending on any contextual

[1] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power (London: Longman, 1989), 112.
[2] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 112.
[3] Teun van Dijk, Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach (London: Sage, 1998), 205.

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factor […] language users may choose different words to talk about things, people, actions or events". He further states:

Given the obvious ideological implications of lexical choice, we may also expect that language users are often (made) aware of their style, and may hence also partly control it, and thereby either emphasize or precisely conceal their "real" ideological opinions. The current debate on "politically correct" language precisely focuses on this aspect of ideologically based lexical style, and especially shows people's positions in the relationships between dominant and dominated groups.[4]

Lexicalization

Concerned with word selection, lexicalization is of the utmost importance in the decoding of the ideologies hidden in political discourse.

As regards the experiential value of words, it has to do with the terms a language user chooses in order to refer to a certain action or event. Thus, the respective action or event may be depicted in positive or negative terms, depending on the speaker/writer's intended message. Also, it deals with the way words co-occur or collocate.[5]

Another significant aspect identified by Fairclough is "overwording," i.e. "an unusually high degree of wording, often involving many words which are near synonyms".[6] As Fairclough points out, overwording "shows preoccupation with some aspect of reality – which may indicate that it is a focus of ideological struggle".[7]

Finally, the experiential value of words is to do with the *meaning relations* between words, the most relevant being *synonymy*, *hyponymy*, and *antonymy*.[8] According to Fairclough, these meaning relations are usually ideologically determined and "can often be regarded as relative to particular ideologies; either the ideology embedded in a discourse type, or the ideology being generated in a text".[9]

Sentence syntax

[4] Teun van Dijk, Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach, 205.
[5] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 113.
[6] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 115.
[7] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 115.
[8] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 116.
[9] Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 115-116.

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Syntax is a capital concern of present-day rhetoric research since it tackles word order and since it is plays such an important role in the creation of meaning. Though less clear and more discrete compared to lexical style, for example, are the devious artifices including the political manipulation of the syntactic structure, be it the utilization of pro forms, changes regarding word order, the utilization of certain syntactic markers, active vs. passive constructs, nominalization, the way clauses are embedded, the complexity of certain resonant sentences, and many other means of expressing essential meanings in certain sentence formats.

As far as sentence syntax is concerned, I have concentrated on the passive voice as a tactics deployed in political speeches to represent actors, actions, and events.

Statement of the problem and purpose of the study

Studying the types of discourse that politically correct vocabulary has permeated, Geoffrey Hughes has arrived at the conclusion that official discourse contains the highest degree of politically correct terms.[10] Starting from these findings, I have endeavored to study political correctness in the political discourse. The present study therefore started as an attempt to reveal how and why the politically correct vocabulary is employed in political discourse.

Since the political speech, as a subgenre of political discourse, is par excellence persuasive and highly ideological, political correctness as it is employed in political speeches. I have selected U.S. President Barack Obama's most relevant speeches on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage for two reasons: first, because the United States has been the main "battlefield" as far as the phenomenon of political correctness is concerned; second, I consider U.S. President Obama to be the most powerful and representative porte-parole of the democratic world.

The present study aims to show that President Obama uses political correctness as a persuasive tool in order to promote LGBT rights and same-sex marriage.

Data analysis and discussion

Since equality, fairness and freedom are an important part of the American consciousness and are also central to the liberal ideology, these values are frequently

[10] Geoffrey Hughes, Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 292.

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reiterated by President Obama in his political speeches. Therefore, his support of LGBT rights and same-sex marriage will come as no surprise, being grounded on these values.

The President opens his first two speeches by thanking the LGBT community and their supporters for the work they do "in pursuit of equality." Notice the similar structures he employs: [1] *[…] the work you do every day in pursuit of equality on behalf of the millions of people in this country who work hard and care about their communities – and who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. (Applause.)*[11] [2] *[…] the work you do every day on behalf of the millions of people in this country who work hard in their jobs and care deeply about their families – and who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.*[12]

President Obama therefore identifies equality as the goal of the struggle for LGBT rights. The whole construction may be considered a strategic one: by using the phrase "in pursuit of equality" the President implies the idea of existing inequality, of discrimination, while the noun "millions" signals the fact that the LGBT community is no longer a minority. Consequently, pursuing equality on behalf of such a large number of people is all the more justified. On the other hand, the identification of the Human Rights Campaign activists as the ones "in pursuit of equality" could imply that their mission is a noble one.

The President refers to the LGBT people by using the three defining relative clauses "who work hard" (x2) and "[who] care about their communities," which is intended to highlight the positive traits of these people primarily as *U.S. citizens* (because they "work") – *honorable U.S. citizens* (because they "work hard").

Given the fact that in "democratic political contexts we will know initially when a politician has persuaded as audience through its response,"[13] the audience's applause is evidence of the fact that they have taken to heart President Obama's words, thus proving the effectiveness of this strategy.

The LGBT are also portrayed as "those without a voice": *For nearly 30 years, you've advocated on behalf of those without a voice.*[14] Thus indirect reference is made to the idea of discrimination, inequality and, most importantly, victimhood. The noun "voice" could be interpreted here as "(equal) rights."

[11] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 29, 2009).
[12] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[13] Jonathan Charteris-Black, Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 14.
[14] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).

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The rhetorical operations discussed above demonstrate the fact that President Obama's intended message is that the LGBT community are honorable U.S. citizens who have been victims of discrimination.

The instances of the LGBT community being depicted as victims are numerous: [1] *folks who had been marginalized*;[15] [2] *those without a voice*;[16] [3] *those with little influence or power*;[17] [4] *the victims of attacks*;[18] [5] *those … who've been denied the rights and responsibilities of citizenship*;[19] [6] *denied their basic rights*;[20] [7] *who've been told that the full blessings and opportunities of this country were closed to them*;[21] [8] *were denied the chance to comfort their partner*;[22] [9] *I don't have to tell you how many are still denied their basic rights – Americans who are still made to feel like second-class citizens*;[23] [10] *forced to look over their shoulder because of who they are*;[24] [11] *some … who have experienced pain in their lives, who … have been – felt like outcasts, who have been scorned or bullied*;[25] [12] *partner or spouse denied the chance to comfort a loved one in the hospital*;[26] [12] *picked on or pushed around because they're different*;[27] [13] *picked on, pushed around for being different*.[28]

The use of passive constructions is destined to highlight the *victim* status of the LGBT community. Since political correctness is primarily concerned with the rights of the ones who have been marginalized and/or oppressed, the President's constantly foregrounding the LGBT community's victimhood in his speeches is clearly an indicator of the fact that the ideology of political correctness is employed as a persuasive tool.

The LGBT community are often depicted as "second-class citizens": [1] *That's the story of America: […] of Americans fighting to build for themselves and their families a*

[15] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 29, 2009).
[16] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[17] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[18] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[19] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[20] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[21] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[22] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 22, 2010).
[23] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign's Annual National Dinner (October 1, 2011).
[24] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Reception Commemorating the Enactment of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (October 28, 2009).
[25] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 22, 2010).
[26] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 15, 2012).
[27] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign's Annual National Dinner (October 1, 2011).
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nation in which no one is a second-class citizen;[29] [2] *I don't have to tell you how many are still denied their basic rights – Americans who are still made to feel like second-class citizens, who have to live a lie to keep their jobs, or who are afraid to walk the street, or down the hall at school.*[30] [3] *I don't have to tell the people in this room … how many people are still denied their basic rights as Americans, who are still in particular circumstances treated as second-class citizens, or still fearful when they walk down the street or down the hall at school.*[31] [4] *I don't have to tell you how many are still denied their basic rights – Americans who are still made to feel like second-class citizens, who have to live a lie to keep their jobs, or who are afraid to walk the street, or down the hall.*[32]

The expression "second-class citizen" makes reference to gay people not feeling valued by society, worthless, alone, even though this may not be so. The implicature is that the legalization of same-sex marriage helps gay people regain their self-esteem. It should be noted that highlighting gay people's feelings is an appeal to empathy.

The presidential speeches stress not only the victim status of the LGBT people, but also their achievements, containing a great number of references to the *positive actions* of the LGBT community and their supporters. Thus, they are depicted as the ones who "work hard," "care deeply about their families," "continue, leading by the force of the arguments you make, and by the power of the example that you set in your own lives," "brought about change," "stood up against discrimination," "defied an unjust policy," "awakened a nascent movement," "have refused to accept anything less than full and equal citizenship";[33] "helped to inspire a movement," "came to support one another and save one another," "continue to fight," "have demonstrated," "helping," "standing against," "advocating," "doing a great job and meeting their responsibilities," "never gave up," "spoke out," "organized and advocated," "have stepped forward," "organizing, agitating and advocating";[34] "helped make this day happen," "pushing and protesting," "held vigils and led marches," "rallied and organized and refused to give up";[35] "speak out against injustices," "are advocating," "...'ve shown incredible courage and incredible integrity – standing up for who they are," "…'ve refused to

[29] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[30] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 22, 2010).
[31] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Reception Observing LGBT Pride Month (June 29, 2011).
[32] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign's Annual National Dinner (October 1, 2011).
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be anything less but themselves," "…'re showing us the way forward," "are helping to build a more perfect union, a nation where all of us are equal";[36] "have devoted your lives to the cause of equality";[37] "have devoted your lives to the cause of equality";[38] "devoted their lives to our most basic of ideals – equality not just for some, but for all".[39]

President Obama's speeches abound in positive descriptions of the LGBT community and their supporters, such as: [1] *the millions of people in this country who work hard in their jobs and care deeply about their families*;[40] [2] *parents and friends, … PTA members and church members, … advocates and leaders in your communities*;[41] [3] *men and women who brought about change through quiet, personal acts of compassion – and defiance*;[42] [4] *friends; soldiers; neighbors*;[43] [5] *Americans who care deeply about this country and its future*;[44] [6] *patriotic Americans who have stepped forward*;[45] [7] *patriots … who've served this country well*;[46] [8] *folks who fight every day for the rights of parents and children and parents and citizens to be treated equally under the law*;[47] [9] *advocates for equality*;[48] [10] *folks who are worried about the economy and whether or not your partner or husband or wife will be able to find a job*;[49] [11] *Americans who want this country to succeed and prosper*;[50] [12] *Americans who devoted their lives to our most basic of ideals – equality not just for some, but for all.*[51]

By using overwording and hyponymy as persuasive strategies, President Obama constantly foregrounds the positive traits of the LGBT community and their supporters, while omitting their negative traits. Also, it should be noted that the President repeatedly stresses

[36] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 22, 2010).
[37] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Reception Observing LGBT Pride Month (June 29, 2011).
[38] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign's Annual National Dinner (October 1, 2011).
[39] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the LGBT Pride Month Reception (June 15, 2012).
[40] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
[41] Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Human Rights Campaign Dinner (October 10, 2009).
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their positive traits as *American citizens*, which is of the utmost importance in promoting equal rights. Moreover, as shown in the examples above, the President's speeches highlight the LGBT community's victim status, another significant persuasive tool employed to justify the President's demand that the LGBT community be granted equal rights.

What stands out from the President's speeches is that (1) the LGBT community are honorable American citizens; (2) they have been oppressed. As American citizens, they should therefore be granted equal rights. Also, since they have been oppressed, they should be granted equal rights in order to right the wrongs done against them.

Given the fact that the values promoted by political correctness – equality, fairness, tolerance, empathy – happen to be the same as the ones that lie at the very core of the American mindset, it is evident that President Obama uses political correctness as a persuasive strategy in order to promote LGBT rights.

Conclusion

As the comparative analysis of the Presidential speeches has revealed, President Obama systematically foregrounds the achievements of the LGBT community and their supporters, whom he repeatedly identifies as "advocates for equality" who "devoted their lives to our most basic of ideals – equality not just for some, but for all." Also, they are portrayed as "courageous pioneers" and trailblazers, and their actions as messianic.

If regarded as American citizens, the LGBT community should be granted the same rights American heterosexual citizens have. Therefore, failing to grant them the same rights implies none lesser than failing to adhere to one of America's founding principles – equality. Since the concepts of equality and fairness have been ingrained in the American nation's mindset for centuries, the ones who oppose equal rights being granted to LGBT people will be labeled as opposing equality and fairness; they will be commonly stigmatized either as un-American or – more often – as homophobic.

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