



An Analysis of Stylistic Features of John Kennedy's Inaugural Address

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Abstract

By focusing on the stylistic features of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, this thesis delves deeply into the rhetorical devices, language patterns, and thematic elements employed by Kennedy to convey his vision and aspirations for the nation. Kennedy artfully employed various rhetorical devices such as metaphor, which painted vivid pictures, and parallelism, enhancing the rhythm and emphasis of his words. His inclusive language was crucial in forging a bond among the diverse American populace, instilling a shared sense of unity and purpose. The optimistic and action-oriented oratorical style he adopted not only struck a chord with the audience but also laid the foundation for his presidency. The study highlights Kennedy's use of metaphor, parallelism, and inclusive language to create a sense of unity and purpose among the American people. Furthermore, the analysis explores how Kennedy's oratorical style, characterized by optimism and a call to action, resonated with the audience and set the tone for his presidential administration. By examining these stylistic features, the analysis provides insights into the power and influence of Kennedy's inaugural speech in shaping public perception and expectations.

Keywords

John Kennedy; inaugural address; stylistic features; lexically; syntactically

1. Introduction

It is of great importance in Western countries for people to be equipped with the ability to speak in public and master speech skills. The inaugural address delivered by the new president fully proves the importance of public speech. In America, the inauguration is an extremely significant event for America even for the people of the whole world. Presidents deliver their inaugural addresses which fully present presidents' ambition and aspiration to make their policies known to the public and to win the support of the audience. The addresses are all polished repeatedly and worked with great care by a specialized writing team. Therefore, they deserve people's careful research. John F. Kennedy's inaugural address is always one of the research focuses of scholars.

2. An Introduction to Stylistics

Katie Wales (1989) simply defined stylistics in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* as a discipline that studies the ways in which language is used; it is a discipline that studies the styles of language in use." Leech (1981) defines stylistics as the "study of language in literature", and considers stylistics as a "meeting-ground of linguistics and literary study". Stylistics, a comprehensive branch of learning between many subjects such as linguistics, literature, aesthetics, and psychology, is a subject that studies the style by using knowledge and theory. Literary stylistics, the interdisciplinary of linguistics and literary criticism which focuses on the study of language forms as well as the study of language

content studies the stylistic features and the language style of the literary works and explores the purpose of the application of literary language through the analysis of language skills. Phonetic analysis, lexical analysis, and discourse analysis of the text make people understand and appreciate the text better, and they help people translate the literary works better.

American presidential inaugural address is used to present the policies of the president. It fully shows the wisdom, humor, and flexibility of the president. Therefore, a variety of techniques such as phonetics, syntax, lexicality, and rhetoric are used in the addresses.

3. Stylistic Features of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

During the time in office by John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, fully showed his preeminent political ability by implementing the concept of the "new frontier", promoting the American economy and maintaining American dominance in the world. His eloquence was extraordinary and his skills of address were presented thoroughly in his inaugural address in 1961. The word of this address is splendid and highly infectious. And it is regarded as a classical creation among all the addresses. The following analysis attempts to reveal the stylistic features of this American presidential inaugural address phonetically, lexically, syntactically, and rhetorically, respectively.

3.1 Phonetically

Phonetic sound, the basis of language, is an essential part of the study of stylistics. English phonetic rhetoric uses the phonetic features of language materials to build the musical beauty of language performance and strengthen the expressive force and infectivity of language. It is of great importance to use the phonetic form to enhance the effects of speech, for the correct use of phonetic rhetoric can realize the combination of communicative function and aesthetic value of language, and produce good stylistic effects. John F. Kennedy's inaugural address has great originality not only in the use of words and sentences and overall arrangement but also in phonetics. John F. Kennedy used phonetic rhetoric, such as alliteration, quite frequently in his address to make the address smooth, and at the same time strengthen the infectivity and the beauty of rhythm of the address.

Ex. 3-1

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall *pay* any *price*, *bear* any *burden*, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the *survival* and the *success* of liberty.

In this sentence, the words "pay" and "price", "bear" and "burden" and "survival" and "success" are all used through the phonetic rhetoric technique: alliteration. It not only makes the audience feel that the address is splendid but also makes people feel strongly that the determinate mind of assisting friends, fighting against foes, and defending the freedom of the addresser.

Ex. 3-2

To those new States whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny.

In this sentence, the use of the words "colonial" and "control" is the use of the technique.

Ex. 3-3

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high *standards* of *strength* and *sacrifice* which we ask of us.

In this sentence, the words "standard", "strength" and "sacrifice" form the alliteration of three words.

Ex. 3-4

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans...

In this sentence, the word "friend" and the word "foe", though opposite in their meanings, both begin with the sound [f], which makes the language filled with musicality and a sense of rhythm and in the meantime arouses the attention of audiences.

There are many other examples in this address. This grand and overwhelming use of the phonetic rhetoric makes the addresser splendid and leaves a profound impression on the audience.

3.2 Lexically

There are 1342 words in total in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. Among these words, there are 349 words with more than six letters, accounting for 26% of the whole address (Jiao, 2020). Therefore, based on the content, function, occasion, and form of giving the presidential inaugural address, Kennedy's inaugural address is of distinct features of written language.

In terms of word classes, nouns, adjectives, and pronouns dominated the whole address. In this address, many verbs, verb phrases, or sentences are substituted by nouns or noun phrases. In the first paragraph, for instance, the nouns "renewal" and "change" can be expressed as "the office of president is continued" and "the president has changed". There are many other abstract nouns in this address, such as *civility*, *tribulation*, *generosity*, and so on. It is related to the content of the address which usually involves abstractionism or dream. The use of nouns makes the address more concise and precise, and always makes the article more formal, the content more profound, and makes people feel the author more learned, so the audiences will have confidence in the addresser.

In this address, there are 105 adjectives, accounting for 7.8% of the whole words (Lin, 2019). Most of the adjectives are subjective and emotional words, such as *fruitful*, *peaceful*, *great*, *powerful*, *solemn*, *hard*, *steady*, etc. Some of the adjectives are even in their comparative or superlative forms, such as better, more, most, longest, greatest, etc.

The first-person pronoun is used frequently in this address, especially the first-person pronouns "I, we" and their derivational form "us, our, me". In many occasions, the first-person pronouns are used to substitute the second-person pronoun "you" in this address.

Ex. 3-5

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution.

Ex. 3-6

Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our life time on this planet. But let *us* begin.

The first-person pronoun "we", including both the speaker and the audience, puts the speaker and the audience on the same position, making the audience have a sense of intimacy and the speaker easy to get the support from the audience. "In addition, this practice minimizes differences within our group, and emphasizes between group members and those on the outside." (Stephen, 2023)

Ex. 3-7

Let every nation know, whether it wishes *us* well or ill, that *we* shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friends, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

In this sentence, the first-person plurals "we, us" distinguish the Americans from the people of other nations, which arouses a sense of nation pride and the responsibility of Americans and gives the address a strong inflammatory.

3.3 Syntactically

There are 51 sentences in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. Although the length of the address is not long, its syntactic structure is flexible.

3.3.1 Sentence Structure

As far as the length of sentences is concerned, in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, the number of long sentences is more than short sentences. The whole address consists of 1342 words and the average sentence length consists of about 26 words.

Table 1. The number of sentence lengths and the respective percentage

| Number of words | >40 | 30-39 | 20-29 | 10-19 | <10 |
|---------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Number of sentences | 9 | 6 | 15 | 14 | 7 |
| Percentage | 17.6 | 11.8 | 29.4 | 27.5 | 13.7 |

There are 80 words in the longest sentence of this address. From these figures, compared with the sentence length of legal documents and daily conversation, the sentence length of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address is close to the average sentence length of all kinds. The data shows the formalness and variability of the address.

Table 2. The number of different sentence types and the respective percentage

| Types of Sentences | Simple Sentence | Compound Sentence | Complex Sentence |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Number of sentences | 16 | 4 | 31 |
| Percentage | 31.4% | 7.8% | 60.8% |

The above figures show that John F. Kennedy's inaugural address consists chiefly of complex sentences. The next is a simple sentence and the compound sentence is the last. On the one hand, the addresser needs to use language that is long in sentence length, complex in sentence structure, and strict in logic to expound his policies because it can make his address more persuasive and gain more support. On the other hand, it shows the formality of the address as well.

In addition, imperative sentences are used in the address frequently as shown in the following example.

Ex. 3-8

*“So let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that ...
Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring...
Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals...
Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors...
Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah...”*

These imperative sentences show the feeling that time is limited and we should take action right now. They express the president's urgent hope and enhance the infectivity of the address. Imperative sentences also play an important role in the address.

From the above data, a conclusion can be drawn that the American presidential inaugural address seems partial to spoken language a bit, but it still maintains its formality.

3.3.2 Tense

American presidential inaugural address is used to show the policy of the new president. The presidents should review the past, focus on the present, and look forward to the future. So the simple present, the future tense, the present perfect, and the simple past tense are necessary for their addresses.

In this address, the numbers of all kinds of tenses used in sentences are shown as follows:

Table 3. The number of tenses used and the respective percentage

| Tense | Simple Present | Simple Past | Simple Future | Present Perfect |
|------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Number | 41 | 0 | 6 | 4 |
| Percentage | 80.8% | 0 | 11.5% | 7.7% |

These figures show that the simple present is used most frequently in this address, the next being simple future tense and the present perfect being the last. In the address, the main aim of the addresser is to show his policy to the citizens, and the policy is just ready to be carried out, so future simple present is used in quantity. In the process of the address, the addresser should try his best to persuade the audience to accept and support his policy, so the simple present is also used frequently. At the same time, the addresser needs to analyze the past situation to help him to forecast the future, so the perfect present also appears in the address.

3.4 Rhetorically

The most distinct feature of Kennedy's inaugural address is the use of rhetorical techniques, such as metaphor, parallelism, allusion, synecdoche, contrast, and repetition.

3.4.1 Metaphor

A metaphor is a comparison between two unlike elements with a similar quality. Metaphor always concretizes abstract things and connects something strange for people with something familiar. It makes the language more vivid, appealing, and easy to understand. It makes the audience easy to accept what the addresser said. But unlike simile,

this comparison is implied, not expressed with the word ‘as’ or ‘like’”. It is an important rhetorical device used in Kennedy’s address.

Ex. 3-9

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion...

In this sentence, the author compares “a small beginning of cooperation” to “beachhead” and “deep suspicion” to “jungle”, which makes the sentence quite vivid.

3.4.2 Parallelism

The structure of parallelism is presented by language levels such as word, phrase, clause, and sentence. In this address, parallelism is not only reflected in the above aspects but also between paraphrases as shown in the following examples.

Ex. 3-10

The *energy*, the *faith*, the *devotion* which we bring to this endeavor will... (Parallelism reflected in words.)

Ex. 3-11

Let the world go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, *born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage* and *unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights* to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

(Parallelism reflected in phrases and clauses.)

Ex. 3-12

Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

(Parallelism reflected in sentences.)

Ex. 3-13

So *let us* begin anew, remembering on both sides that ...

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring...

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals...

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors...

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah... (Parallelism reflected between paragraphs.)

The use of parallelism makes the language concise, the structure symmetrical, and the tone powerful. The address appears encouraging and affects the audience deeply.

3.4.3 Allusion

The successful address is not only determined by correct expression but also by affectivity. It needs many techniques to address. Allusion is one of the techniques. Allusions in writing are references to well-known persons, things, or events that writers assume are familiar to their readers. This assumption is based on the knowledge or belief that their readers share with them a common historical, cultural, and literary heritage, which enables the readers to identify the allusions and understand their significance. In Kennedy’s inaugural address, there is a wonderful sentence quoted from *The Bible*: *Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to “undo the heavy burdens—and let the oppressed go free.”* This sentence is quoted from the 58th chapter 6th section of the *Old Testament*. The author uses *The Bible* which the public is familiar with to appeal to the audiences to struggle for the freedom of two powerful sides.

3.4.4 Synecdoche

This rhetorical device can deepen one’s understanding of the content. In this address, this rhetorical device is not used frequently, but it makes the address more vivid.

Ex. 3-14

...yet both racing to alter that uncertain *balance of terror* that *stays the hand of* mankind’s final war.

On the one hand, in this sentence, “balance of terror” is an abstract conception. It refers to awful military force that is a kind of power that can destroy human beings. In this sentence, the author uses an abstract conception to substitute

a concrete conception. On the other hand, “stays the hand” means forbidding human beings or nations to launch a world war. The addresser uses a part to substitute a whole to make his speech more vivid and visual.

3.4.5 Contrast

Contrast means opposition or unlikeness in things compared. In Kennedy’s inaugural address, the author uses two different contrast devices: comparing two things and comparing two aspects of one thing.

Comparing two things is to highlight the contradiction of something by using opposite words or phrases to compare two discordant things. For example, “*United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do, for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.*” In this sentence, “united” and “little we cannot do” are respectively in contrast to “divided” and “little we can do”. It vividly expresses the different influences caused by the use of “united” and “divided”, calling for nations that have the same culture and spirit to cooperate with America and fight against the strong opponents together.

Comparing two aspects of one thing means that the complicated and contrary nature of a thing is shown by using two opposite words to explain one thing. This device is also used in this address, which can be seen as follows.

Ex. 3-15

And so, my fellow American *ask not* what *your country* can do for you; *ask* what *you* can do for your country.

In this sentence, “ask not” and “your country” are respectively in contrast to “ask” and “you”. It shows the opposition and contradiction of two things. In the connected period of history and reality, it arouses the confidence and devotion of the public.

3.4.6 Repetition

Repetition is an important rhetorical device in English. The author always repeats a word or a phrase in an article to emphasize something. In this address, repetition often appears in keywords and phrases as shown in the following examples.

Ex. 3-16

Let us never negotiate out of fear, but *let us never* fear to negotiate.

Ex. 3-17

Only when our arms are sufficient *beyond doubt* can we be certain *beyond doubt* that they will never be employed.

Apart from the above rhetorical devices, there are many other devices in this address such as understatement, and oxymoron. In conclusion, the subtle use of rhetorical devices makes the address more splendid in language and with more literature appreciation value.

4. Conclusion

As one of the American presidential inaugural addresses, the one made by Kennedy not only has the same features as other inaugural addresses but also has its own distinctive features. The stylistic features of Kennedy’s inaugural address can be drawn through the above analysis as follows: firstly, although Kennedy’s address is expressed in verbal form, it is more serious and formal because it has strong written features. This conforms to the serious situation where the inaugural address is expressed. Secondly, for the purpose of making the address more vivid and motivational, this address also uses many language skills, such as the suitable use of phonetic devices to make the address grand and overwhelming; the correct use of vocabulary to equip the address with persuasion; the various use of sentence structure to make the address richer and more varied; the use of various tenses to influence the audience deeply; the reasonable use of adjectives to affect judgment of the audience; the use of rhetorical devices to arouse the audience’s passion. Kennedy’s inaugural address, logical in context and rational in structure and at the same time with high literary appreciation value, is a classical creation among all the American presidential inaugural addresses. A stylistic study of Kennedy’s inaugural address can not only broaden the scope of the stylistic study of English public speaking, but also generate some important practical significance and value, say, helping people to acquire more knowledge about the style of American presidential inaugural address, and assisting people to improve their ability of appreciation and language skills.

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