

A Fantasy-Theme Analysis of Joe Biden's Presidential Inaugural Address

Yingjing Xu^{1, a}, Zhongyong Wang^{2, b,*}

¹Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology, Maoming, China

²School of Automation, Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology, Maoming, China

^a38205321@qq.com, ^b383858484@qq.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: Taking Biden's presidential inaugural address as the research subject, from the perspective of Bormann's rhetorical criticism of fantasy theme, this paper analyze the fantasy theme and rhetorical vision constructed in his speech, revealing how the speaker guides the audience to construct rhetorical vision through fantasy theme in political speech, so as to effectively help the audience understand how to achieve a common understanding. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how the president of the United States uses effective rhetorical strategies to gain public recognition, and to explore the speech motivation behind in order to achieve the political purpose successfully.

Keywords: fantasy-theme, presidential inaugural address, rhetorical vision

1. Introduction

In the United States, every newly elected president will deliver a presidential inaugural address when he takes office. The presidential inaugural address is a special form of political discourse, which is considered not only as the most glorious moment in the life of every newly elected president, but also as a major celebration in American political career. Many U.S. presidents utilize their inaugural addresses to call on their citizens to be proud of their motherland, cherish their traditions, abandon their old disagreements, and unite for the common good. Therefore, the presidential speech is an opportunity for presidents to state their political ideas and express their common hopes and ideals. [1] Political concept is the foundation of government, and the president is the most important spokesman of the country. Therefore, the presidential addresses can not only disseminate their national policies, but also establish the national and individual images.

To explore the rhetorical features of American presidential inaugural address from the perspective of fantasy-theme rhetorical criticism can facilitate in understanding of the messages conveyed to the deep level of rhetoric, rather than merely focus on the surface of language. This essay is intended to explore the strategies adopted by President Biden to normalize a new state so that participants during the time of transition can be unified, for the purpose of providing insights into the shared worldview of groups.

2. Description of the Artifact and Its Context

2.1. Analysis of the Artifact

Political speech is a kind of speech in which people express their position, clarify their views and publicize their opinions on national internal affairs and foreign relations. It is an important weapon in political struggle, with rich connotation and wide adaptability. Political speeches include election speeches, policy speeches, inaugural speeches, speeches by leaders at all levels to publicize major policies and implement plans, and speeches made by people on behalf of certain classes, political parties or individuals at political gatherings. The purpose of political speech is to publicize the political ideas and opinions of Party groups or individuals, and to make the audience accept the views of the speaker and put them into practice with rigorous logic and powerful motivation[2].

On January 20, 2021, Biden was officially sworn in as president of the United States, marking the beginning of Biden's presidency and the official ending of ex-president Trump's transitional reigning

period. As a typical symbol of American democracy, the American presidential inaugural address has always been the focus of the world, especially in the potentially volatile and problematic situation.

2.2. Analysis of Its Context

Joe Biden briefly worked as an attorney before turning to politics. He became the fifth-youngest U.S. senator in history as well as Delaware's longest-serving senator. His 2008 presidential campaign never gained momentum, but Democratic nominee Barack Obama selected him as his running mate, and Biden went on to serve two terms as the 47th vice president of the United States. In 2017, at the close of his administration, Obama presented Biden with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Two years later Biden launched his campaign for U.S. president and was elected as the 46th president of the United States. [3] On November 7, 2020 (U.S. time), Biden has won more than 270 electoral votes, and updated his twitter account on that day to authenticate him as "President elect" of the United States. On December 14, the electoral college confirmed that Joe Biden officially won the US presidential election. On January 7, 2021, the nearly 15 hour joint session of the US Congress ended after the twists and turns of the violent impact of the protesters on the Capitol. The meeting confirmed that Biden won 306 electoral votes, Trump won 232 electoral votes, and Biden was elected the next president of the United States.

With intensifying conflicts between the Democratic and Republican Party, the terribly increasing number of death tolls in the U.S. reaching 40,000, Biden has to face the pressure of polarized and torn public opinion, uncontrollable Senate and factional differences within the party. His campaign promises of preventing and controlling the epidemic, reviving the economy and adjusting foreign policy may not be fulfilled quickly. The newly elected president is confronted with unprecedented challenges and seemingly intractable troubles. In the face of disputes and challenges, how to better make the people understand and identify with himself is an important agenda goal of Biden's presidential inaugural speech.

3. Method of Criticism

This paper will analyze President Biden's presidential inaugural address from the perspective of fantasy-theme analysis, a method which was created by Ernest G. Bormann, and designed to provide insights into the shared worldview of groups. Impetus for the method came from the work of Robert Bales and his associates in their study of communication in small groups.

Bormann extended the notion of fantasizing discovered by Bales into a theory (symbolic convergence theory) and a method (fantasy-theme criticism) that can be applied not only to the rhetoric of small groups but to all kinds of rhetoric in which themes function dramatically to connect audiences with messages. [4] In contexts larger than small groups, fantasizing or dramatizing occurs when individuals find some aspect of a "message that catches and focuses their attention until they imaginatively participate in images and actions stimulated by the message." [5]

Symbolic Convergence Theory is based on two major assumptions: (1) communication creates reality; (2) symbols not only create reality for individuals but that individuals' meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality or community consciousness. Convergence, in the theory, refers "to the way two or more private symbolic worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap during certain processes of communication." Convergence also means consensus or general agreement on subjective meanings. Participants "have jointly experienced the same emotions; they have developed the same attitudes and emotional responses to the personae of the drama; and they have interpreted some aspect of their experience in the same way.

As the basic unit of analysis of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme criticism, the fantasy themes that describe the world from a group's perspective are of three types, corresponding to the elements necessary to create a drama: setting themes, character themes, and action themes. Statements that depict where the action is taking place are setting themes. Character themes describe the agents or actors in the drama and ascribe characteristics and motives to them. Action themes deal with the actions in which the characters in the drama are seen to be engaged.

The second primary unit of analysis in fantasy-theme criticism is the rhetorical vision. A rhetorical vision is a "unified putting together of the various shared fantasies" or a swirling together of fantasy themes to provide a particular interpretation of reality. It contains fantasy themes relating to settings, characters, and actions that together form a symbolic drama or a coherent interpretation of reality. The

motives for action for a rhetorical community reside in its rhetorical vision. Each rhetorical vision contains as part of its substance the motive that impels the participants to act in particular ways.[2]

4. Findings of Fantasy-Theme Analysis

Analysis of an artifact using fantasy-theme analysis involves two steps: (1) coding the artifact for setting, character, and action themes—and the sanctioning agent, if there is one; and (2) constructing the rhetorical vision from the fantasy themes. This paper applies rhetorical criticism of fantasy theme to analyze the fantasy theme and its construction of rhetorical vision in this speech, and reveals how President Biden successfully achieved the rhetorical purpose by guiding the audience to construct rhetorical vision through fantasy theme. [4] As the first official language issued by the new president, the presidential inaugural speech is a speech that lays the tone for the future governing policies. The president needs to rely on his inaugural speech to win more people to support his government and parties. As the newly-elected president of the United States, Biden made his speech not only to express his own voice, but also to represent the image of the Democratic Party and the government, in order to win the support of the people. After careful and elaborate exploration, the findings of fantasy-theme analysis of President Biden's Presidential Inaugural Address are listed as follows:

4.1. Setting Themes

In his speech, Biden established a setting theme closely related to his discourse and actions advocated. He made a sharp contrast between the status quo of the United States in every aspect and the bright future the Americans will embrace by following his advice.

Before the inauguration ceremony, numerous crises stemming from both man-made and natural catastrophe have already cast a horrible shadow over the United States. The sentences vividly depict the dilemma of contemporary American society, such as "just a few days ago, violence sought to shake the Capitol's very foundation", "Once-in-a-century virus that silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II. Millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed.", "a rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism", "racism, nativism, fear, demonization have long torn us apart", "We face an attack on our democracy and on truth, a raging virus, growing inequity, the sting of systemic racism, a climate in crisis, America's role in the world." [6] Without doubt, the violence and the pandemic spreading all over America has struck a devastating blow to welfare of American people.

The speech also conveys Biden's deep understanding of and sympathy for those suffering Americans, in the sentences such as "many of my fellow Americans view the future with fear and trepidation", "they worry about their jobs. I understand, like my dad, they lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering, can I keep my health care? Can I pay my mortgage? Thinking about their families, about what comes next."

By presenting the aggravating situation and the pessimism among American public, Biden attempts to emphasize the setting themes that Americans are confronted with, i.e., the fragile economy and the increasing discrepancy in terms of politics, social issues, environmental protection, etc.

4.2. Character Themes

In Biden's 2665-word inaugural address, the word "we" occurs altogether 98 times, and "us" 26 times, by which Biden intends to achieve the effect that as a newly elected president, he and his fellow Americans are meant to be united together as a whole, instead of separating from each other.

He uses words with positive meanings, such as "democracy", "hope of renewal and resolve", "triumph", "opportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honor" as well as "the truth" to build the images of "fellow Americans" in terms of character themes. By calling upon Americans to "fight the foes we face: anger, resentment, hatred, extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness and hopelessness", "political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism", as well as "racism, nativism, fear, demonization", Biden constructs an ugly world contrary to the bright and buoyant future. By distinguishing between "fellow Americans" or "folks" and the mobs who commit "political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism" or "racism, nativism", Biden has successfully built the structure of character themes, guiding Americans in a natural way to be united together in the fight against the dark side of society.

4.3. Action Themes

Biden's speech involves two action themes: the violent turbulence that was intended to despair the result of presidential election and what Americans should do in order to obtain victory over the current dilemma. The rampancy refers not only to the devastating calamities such as "political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism" incurred by human beings, but also to the natural catastrophe such as COVID-19 that took the lives of millions of Americans, leading to even more aggravating crisis in economic and other aspects of American society.

In order to combat all these natural and man-made disasters, Biden calls upon all Americans to be unified together and "start afresh" by setting aside all kinds of discrimination and prejudice. At the very beginning of his speech, Biden states clearly that his inauguration day is "democracy's day", and justifies his election as the triumph of "the cause of democracy" as well as the representation of people's will. Then he illustrated his point of view by pointing out the urgency for all Americans to be unified in the face of adversities. He asks "every American to join me in this cause", in which "every American" involves not only people "who supported our campaign", but also "those who did not support us". Most importantly, he displays his charisma when he talk about those who are not his side: "That's democracy. That's America. The right to dissent, peaceably, the guardrails of our republic is perhaps this nation's greatest strength".

All throughout his speech, he makes promises and pledges about what he will do as a president, as well as demonstrates his confidence in winning this battle at the end of his speech by using sentences like "Democracy and hope, truth and justice did not die on our watch, but thrived. That America secured liberty at home and stood once again as a beacon to the world".

4.4. Sanctioning Agent

Sanctioning agent refers to an authority who lends credibility to the vision or authorizes its telling and retelling. Biden presents several sanctioning agents in his speech, which serve as a source of "justification for the creation, acceptance, and promotion of the vision". [4]

The first sanctioning agent in his speech is the the famous saying "my whole soul is in it" by their "predecessors" Abraham Lincoln when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Biden quotes it to reveal his determination for the sake of "bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation". The second sanctioning agent is the quotes from the Bible: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning". Biden tries to convince all Americans that they will savor the joy of victory despite all the difficulties they are confronted with. At the end of his speech, Biden attempts to calm down all the public and relieve them of their discomfort and disbelief by articulating sentences such as "May God bless America and may God protect our troops".

4.5. Construction of Rhetorical Vision

Confronted with the unprecedented troubles and threats, the newly-elected President Biden has elaborately woven the setting theme of the suffering and distressing United States threatened from both natural disasters and human-incurred crisis. By interpreting his inauguration ceremony as "a day of history and hope of renewal", Biden cleverly integrates the character theme of "fellow Americans" into the setting theme, justifying "the cause of democracy", with the aid of persuasive and powerful sanctioning agent of "predecessors", "the Bible" and "God".

Biden first praises the American people and the United States by stating "This is a great nation. We are good people", then told with emotion about the foundation and development of the country that has been "through storm and strife, in peace and in war", and naturally calls upon all Americans to have the sense of "unity".

The sentences in Biden's speech that describe the harsh reality like "Our history has been a constant struggle" and "The battle is perennial and victory is never assured", have aroused the American people's sense of responsibilities. The hero story is a part of American culture. Under the influence of strong patriotic enthusiasm and national pride, when American people's fantasy themes are linked, they unconsciously accept the ideology behind rhetoric based on shared knowledge, beliefs and values, that is, the only way out for them is to be unified with each other, and conduct behaviors such as "hear one another see one another, show respect to one another". In this way, the rhetorical vision has been formed, and thus achieved the satisfactory effect of persuading American people to get rid of all kinds

of discrimination and prejudice and fighting together as one nation.

5. Conclusion

Fantasy-theme rhetorical criticism is an effective method of rhetorical criticism and social research, which can help people analyze the use of languages and better understand languages. Through the analysis of the discourse of Biden's presidential inaugural address by applying this method, it can be found that by adopting the fantasy-theme rhetorical strategy, Biden has achieved the same rhetorical vision with the American people, which is likely to win wide recognition and support from the public, thus achieving the rhetorical purpose of persuasion and the rhetorical function of influencing the public's thinking and behavior.

Acknowledgments

Project funding:

(1) 2019 Ministry of Education Industry-University-and-Research Collaborative Education Project "Professional Construction and Exploration of Multidisciplinary Integration of Industry and Education under the Background of New Engineering" (Project No.: 201802350002);

(2) 2019 Guangdong Provincial Higher Education Teaching Reform Project "Research on Panoramic Multidisciplinary and Cross-domain Talent Cultivation Model Based on the Concept of New Engineering";

(3) 2020 Guangdong Provincial Higher Education Teaching Reform Project "Eplicative Study on the Impact of the Problem-based Goal-oriented Teaching Mode Based on Mobile Platforms on ESP classroom anxiety ";

(4) 2020 Guangdong University of Technology Education Teaching Reform Project "Eplicative Study on the Impact of the Problem-based Goal-oriented Teaching Mode Based on Mobile Platforms on ESP Classroom Anxiety " (Project No.: JY202014).

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