

# A Brief Analysis on Iconicity in Kennedy's Inaugural Address

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at studying and analyzing the iconicity in Kennedy's inaugural address in terms of proximity iconicity, quantitative iconicity and sequential iconicity. The results indicate that political speech is based on the content; appropriate use of iconicity can better enhance the performance of speech and credibility. In addition, it also can help us understand and appreciate the speech better.*

**Keywords:** *iconicity, Kennedy's inaugural address, political speech*

## 1. Introduction

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the rising of cognitive linguistics, linguists paid much more attention to the motivation, demonstrability and no arbitrariness between the signifier and signified. Among them are some representatives, such as Peirce, J. Haiman, D. I.Slobin abroad and Xu Guozhang, Shen Jiaxuan and Wang Yin at home.

C. S. Peirce, the founder of Semiotics, first puts forward the concept of iconicity. Just as Peirce (1960) refers that all modes of thinking depend on the use of signs.

Hu Zhuanglin (2010) holds that signs can be classified as icon (iconic sign), index (indexical sign), and symbol (symbolic sign). The iconic sign is totally based on its similarity to nature.

Relatively speaking, Haiman's study in iconicity is the most systematic and comprehensive one. According to Haiman (1983), iconicity can be divided into isomorphism and motivation. Besides, he further divides the latter one into three main sorts: proximity iconicity, quantitative iconicity, sequential iconicity.

It is well known that the 35<sup>th</sup> U.S. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's inaugural address and Delano Franklin Roosevelt's inaugural address are the most impressive ones in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Kennedy's inaugural address, a total of 1355 words, become incentive words and a model for civic duty. About three-quarters of Americans approved of him after his address. Why it has such a persuasive power? This paper will explain it from the perspective of iconicity.

## 2. What's Iconicity?

Haiman (1983) refers that essentially iconicity refers to the conceived similarity between the linguistic form and conceptual structure. Hou Guojin (2009) indicates that "'Iconicity' can be interpreted in a narrow sense, which refers to a certain similarity between form and meaning."

Just as Shen Jiaxuan (1993) points out that iconicity is the idea that a formal property in a sign corresponds through similarity to a property of its referent. Besides, Zhao Yanfang (2001) puts it that iconicity in recognition refers the relation between language and thought. That is, the structure of language reflects the structure of experience directly.

Generally speaking, iconicity puts emphasis on the demonstration and motivation of language. So we can summarize as language is not only based on but also reflects human's perceptual experience, cognitive style and conceptual structure.

## 3. Iconicity Analysis in Kennedy's Inaugural Address

In addition to his superior political talent, President John F. Kennedy's speech is also eloquent and

outstanding in U.S. history. His speaking skills played vividly and incisively in his inaugural address in 1961, which showed him up completely. Therefore, the speech has been considered the classic work, in which some of the classic words are often quoted by the descendants.

Iconicity appears in all kinds of discourse frequently, which can present good effect. Now we're going to analyze Kennedy's address in terms of proximity iconicity, quantitative iconicity and sequential iconicity.

### ***3.1 Proximity iconicity in Kennedy's Inaugural Address***

Haiman (1983) suggests that the distance between the expressions corresponds to the distance between the concepts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discuss the iconicity from the perspective of metaphor. They suggest that the relation between words reflects mutual relationship between the concepts. That is to say, the closer the concept and the cognition are, the closer the components of the language are.

In political speech, in order to emphasize the significance of the speech and impress the audience, the speaker always intends to arrange the distance of the words. Here we will analyze the proximity iconicity in Kennedy's Inaugural Address as follows:

#### ***3.1.1 The use of verb modifier: not***

According to Hou Guojin(2009), elements which have a close relationship must be placed closer together in the sentence than elements that don't seem close. Considering the following examples in Kennedy's Inaugural Address: "...ask not what ... ask not what ....".

In general, we often use the sentence structure like "do not ask what..." But in Kennedy's speech, he intends to put "not" before "what" (of course maybe he takes symmetry into consideration). In this case, "not" and ask are closely related with each other, which help him express his idea that it is explicit that what should ask and what should not ask. Therefore, he inspires the American people and the people of the world to do what they should do better. Therefore, the place of 'not' can reflect the proximity iconicity.

#### ***3.1.2 The use of noun modifier***

##### ***3.1.2.1 The order of adjectives before noun***

In English, the distance of modifier corresponds to the distance of concept. The farther the modifiers are from the noun, the farther distance of the concept is. It is a basic rule that the closer to nature, the closer the adjective is to the noun. For example, the adjectives representing sources and materials are more likely to be nature than those representing size and shape, so the latter ones are farther than the former ones.

For example: "both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom." In this sentence, the most essential nature of the atom is fatal, so the word deadly is the closest one to the word atom. So the order of adjective also reflects people's recognition and concept, which also reflects the proximity iconicity.

##### ***3.1.2.2 The (non-) restrictive attributive clause***

Similarly, in English, restrictive clause is close to the noun, so they cannot be separated by a comma. The two concepts it represents are viewed as a whole part in reality. On the contrary, non-restrictive clause can be separated by a comma with the head noun. They are not influenced in concept with each other and not considered as a whole part. For example: "...to those nations who would ..." and "...but a new world of law, where the strong ... and the weak...".

From the first sentence, we know that the nations are not all the nations, but are restricted to those that would make themselves our adversary. In the second sentence, a new word of law is not restricted, so it has little to do with the latter sentence. So the distance of the words can reflect the distance of the ideas and recognition, which shows the proximity iconicity.

#### ***3.1.3 The use of indirect language and euphemism***

Traditionally, the indirect speech act refers to the illocutionary speech acts in speech act theory. Indirect speech is often linked with manners or politeness. A general rule in pragmatics is that courtesy reflects the distance. The more polite one is, the more information he wants to show, the longer the sentence will be. For example: "...To those old allies whose ...", "...To our sister republics south of

our border ...”, "... to those nations who would make themselves our adversary...dark powers of destruction unleashed by science...”,

From what Kennedy says, we can find many indirect language. By analyzing carefully, we can know that “those old allies” refer to European allies; “our sister republics south of our border” refer to the countries in South America; “those who make themselves our adversary” refers to their opponent in Cold War; and “dark powers of destruction unleashed by science” refer to nuclear weapons. All of these euphemisms are closely related to the background at that time. It is the Cold War when Kennedy takes office. Under such circumstance, it is wise and necessary for him to avoid direct call in public statement.

These euphemisms are so longer that it takes some time for people to recognize and understand the real meaning. Therefore, the distance among words corresponds to the distance of recognition and politeness, which conforms to the proximity iconicity.

### 3.1.4 First-person narrative point of view

Narrative point of view is essentially to a speaker, which refers to his observation angle. It is vital for a speaker to adopt a right narrative point of view. For example: “Fellow citizens, we observe today ... And we dare not forget today that we are the ...”.

In Kennedy’s address, he adopts first-person narrative point of view and uses “we/ us “all the time, which not only can attract audience, but also can shorten the distance with his people and enhance their relationship. As a president, unprecedented, Kennedy stands with ordinary people together, which can arouse his people’s value and emotion at the bottom of heart. Thus, people don’t feel a president who is talking to them; instead, they find they are good friends. Of course, it can help him be approved by his people. So the narrative point of view can reflect proximity iconicity.

## 3.2 Quantitative iconicity in Kennedy’s Inaugural Address

Wang Yin (2001) points out that quantitative iconicity refers to the congruent relationship between the number of linguistic signs and the number and complexity of the concept. Just as Hou Guojin (2009) puts it that it is a relationship between the length of linguistic expression and the complexity of cognitive model. According to the principle, the larger a form is, the more content is conveyed. Hiraga (1994) holds that quantity iconicity specifies the correlation between the quantity of form and the quantity of meaning.

There are only 1355 words in Kennedy’s inaugural address, which contains plenty of sentence patterns, such as simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and the combinations of long sentences and short sentences. When he wants to show his resolution, he always inclines to use more complex sentences in structure and in semantics.

### 3.2.1 The effective use of long sentence

As we know, quantitative iconicity can be defined as that the number of words is proportional to the amount and complexity of ideas. More words can show more complex concept and ideas, which needs people spend more time and energy on dealing with the information.

Xie Ping (2009) summarizes that there are only 51 sentences in Kennedy’s inaugural address, specifically as following:

Table 1

The length of the sentence	The quantity of sentences	percentage
Less than 10 words	6	11.8%
10—19 words	14	27.5%
20—29 words	16	31.4%
30—39 words	5	9.8%
More than 40 words	10	19.6%

In the terms of the length of the sentences, long sentences are more than short sentences. The average sentence length is about 28 words and the longest one is 80 words. According to the quantitative iconicity, if the long complex sentence contains more words, then the information and ideas it conveys will be more, such as: “Let the word go forth...to friend and foe... that the torch ...—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by ...,proud of ...—and unwilling to ...,and to

which ...”

This is a long sentence containing 80 words. It appropriately expresses his resolution that they must defend their freedom and human right, which also reflects the quantitative iconicity.

According to Xie Ping (2009), the types of sentences are as follows:

Table 2

Types of sentences	The quantity of sentences	percentage
Simple sentences	16	31.4%
Compound sentences	4	7.8%
Subordinative compound sentences	31	60.8%
Declarative sentences	35	68.6%
Imperative sentences	14	27.5%

Now, we can easily see that the main sentence patterns are subordinative compound, which contains more information than simple or compound sentences. From this angle, it can reflect the quantitative iconicity.

### 3.2.2 The use of figure of speech

Kennedy uses a plenty of figures of speech and leaves a profound impression to audience in his speech. Specifically, quantitative iconicity reflects in the rhetorics are mainly in parallelism and repetition.

#### 3.2.2.1 The use of parallelism

Generally speaking, the paralleled sentences have enough words, which accords with quantitative iconicity. Parallelism is one of the most commonly used rhetorical in English, which can show definite and profound meanings and serious tone. Besides, it can enhance emphasis effectively and express strong feelings. In the meantime, it will make the language more vivid and then accepted by the audience easily. For instance: “To those old allies whose...”, “To those new States whom...”, “To those peoples...”, “To our sister republics...”, “To that world...”, “Finally, to those nations who...”

In order to accurately express his promise to protect freedom of different kinds of audience, Kennedy originally adopts six parallels to converge the six paragraphs. Thus, it not only shows his clearly different division and requirements to different groups, but also indicates careful thought of the speaker. As a matter of fact, parallels can be found everywhere in Kenney’s inaugural address, which can not only show his purpose and goal comprehensively and profoundly, but also have a lively rhythm. What’s more, the parallelisms can reflect the quantitative iconicity.

#### 3.2.2.2 The use of repetition

Another figure of speech reflecting quantitative iconicity is repetition, which is also an important rhetorical device. It means use the same word, phrase, and sentence to express the same idea repeatedly. Thus, it can emphasize his viewpoints, clarify profound principle and express a strong feeling. In Kenney’s speech, he always uses key words and key phrases repeatedly. Considering this sentence: “To our sister ... to convert our good words into good deeds...”

Kennedy expresses his strong emotion to emphasize his claim and commitment to the world by using some words repeatedly, such as: good and free, which is a good help for his success and also can reflect the quantitative iconicity.

### 3.2.3 Avoiding using of contractions

There is no doubt that a successful speaker should avoid using of contractions or abbreviations. This also reflects the quantitative iconicity. If using the phrases can express the same meaning of the verbs or adverbs, it is better adopting phrases. In this case, it can play a significant role in the speech and show some additional meanings. In Kennedy’s speech, these non-contractions help him strengthen his views without exception, such as: “So let us begin anew... But let us never fear to negotiate.”

Kennedy doesn’t use the contraction “let’s”, instead, he uses non-contraction form “let us”. The first impression to the audience is the president is the one who is always with them side by side as a member. Thus, it’s easier for him to win audience’s support. So avoiding using of contractions can also reflects the quantitative iconicity.

### **3.3 Sequential iconicity in Kennedy's Inaugural Address**

Givon (1994) refers that sequential iconicity, like sequential order principle, has two sub-principles: (a) semantic principle of linear order, that is, the order of the discourse described corresponds the order of the events occurred. (b) Pragmatic principle of linear order, that is, the information that is more important, more urgent, not available to get or difficult to predict should appear first in linear order.

Hou Guojin (2009) refers the sequential iconicity as the sequence of the sentence complies with the natural order of events. That's to say, the sequence of the syntactic constituents reflects the actual state or order of events. "I came, I saw, I conquered." is a case in point. (Said by Caesar) It is so important in iconicity to describe according to the events occurred. Let discuss in the sequential iconicity in Kennedy's address.

#### **3.3.1 Way of thinking and perception**

Kennedy follows principle of sequential iconicity: "from shallower to deeper, from smaller to bigger, from lighter to heavier, from less to more, from lower to higher". Therefore, it plays a great role in strengthening meaning. For example: "... will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet...".

In this sentence, Kennedy calls on people to help the poor to achieve poverty eradication and global peace and to be well-prepared for a long-term struggle to achieve the goal. This series of time order (100 days, 1000 days, life of this administration, lifetime of this planet) are in accordance with the westerns' cognition laws. What's more, it reflects the principle of iconicity, especially sequential iconicity.

#### **3.3.2 Time sequence**

It is know that both the natural phenomena and human activity have time sequence. The sequence of human's experience and perception reflects in the order of the language described. That is, the relative order of the two words or two sentences depends on the time sequence of the conceptions represented. Take this sentence in Kennedy's inaugural address as an example: "... born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage"

In this sentence, when describing the new Americans, Kennedy uses three verbs: "born, tempered, disciplined". He plainly expresses Americans' development process: a generation from birth, through baptism of the World War Two, to the harsh and hard peace. Therefore, it is obvious that the time order can reflect the sequential iconicity.

## **4. Conclusion**

It is for communicative purpose that a certain linguistic form is chosen by a speaker, based on his conceptualization of the world. The iconicity principle can, in fact, subsume all the senses. Politicians rely heavily on the language to persuade people to accept his political views and reform measures. The speech they prepared should be well enough that it can elicit audience's same feelings and reaction in emotion and value.

From the perspective of iconicity, Kennedy adopts the principle of proximity iconicity, quantitative iconicity, sequential iconicity, which help him achieve his goal of persuading and encouraging people effectively. Therefore, iconicity plays a great role in the speech: on the one hand, it can enhance the artistic effects of the speech; on the other hand, it helps the audience and readers enjoy and appreciate the speech at a higher level.

All in all, this paper aims at analyzing iconicity in Kennedy's inaugural address on the basis of introducing the principle of iconicity. Obviously, the results show that appropriate use of iconicity can better enhance the performance of speech power. In addition, it also can help us understand and appreciate the speech better.

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