

Jelena Žanić Mikuličić  
Tony Pinčetić

## OBAMA'S AND BIDEN'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS THROUGH DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

### *Abstract*

*This paper will compare and discuss linguistic devices used by Barack Obama and Joe Biden in their inaugural speeches using discourse analysis. Barack Obama delivered his first speech on January 21, 2009, and the second on the same day in 2013. Joe Biden held his inaugural speech on January 20, 2021. The speeches were taken from the White House website. The paper highlights the authenticity that politicians Barack Obama and Joe Biden express in their public speeches and the characteristics that can be attributed to their expression. Their speeches rely on literal and figurative meanings. They are their tool to raise awareness, emphasize social, economic, and cultural perspectives, and get closer to the audience and listeners.*

**Keywords:** *political speech, inaugural address, discourse analysis, linguistic devices.*

### **Introduction**

Speech and persuasion stand as paramount tools and techniques within the realm of politics. Through political speech, one expresses an existing idea to the audience. While the inaugural speech represents just one form of political discourse, its significance cannot be overstated. Throughout history, inaugural speeches have remained among the most memorable public addresses, offering insights into the essence of an elected government or individual. They serve as a condensed expression of leaders' messages, wishes, and aspirations to their nations and citizens, encapsulating the policy goals often highlighted during political election campaigns (Fetzer & Weizman, 2006: 147). Policy goals articulated in inaugural speeches may vary between conservative and liberal narratives. The former often accentuates the superiority of enlightenment principles over religious principles, asserting that the country was founded on human values rather than divine intervention (Horváth, 2009: 47).

Language serves as means through which political power becomes more accessible to the public. While language itself may not possess inherent power, certain influential individuals wield it effectively (Wodak & Meyer 2005: 3–10). There is an inherent synergy between language and politics, with language being viewed as an indispensable component of political endeavours. The words of individuals can evoke strong emotions in others, underscoring the potent force within language (Renaldo & Arifin, 2021). Discourse Analysis is one approach used to scrutinize discourse, with scientist van Dijk (2005) emphasizing its focus on the exploitation of power and dominance to shape beliefs and actions in line with the interests of dominant factions. Essentially, political discourse analysis unveils the misuse of political power through language, probing into the discursive conditions and repercussions of social and political inequality resulting from such domination (van Dijk, 2005: 44). Persuasion and manipulation, coupled with legitimacy, are employed when one group or politician seeks to impose their viewpoint and authority over another (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Linguistic devices are another common avenue explored in discourse analysis, with metaphor standing out as a crucial tool. Metaphor possesses a significant psychological impact on the audience, tapping into shared community values to effectively persuade (Charteris-Black, 2004:12). Given that language is integral to organizing, conveying support, and directing political activities, it holds a pivotal role in this realm.

However, at its core, the inaugural speech serves as a victory speech. U.S. presidents from the 1980s to the mid-2000s often prioritized individualism over collectivism, emphasizing the importance of striving for financial independence and providing explicit guidance on fulfilling civic duties rather than dwelling on the consequences of failure to do so (Casey, 2016: 137–140). Inaugural addresses, in particular, wield considerable influence over public opinion, thereby affecting existing power structures (Pramadya & Rahmanhadi, 2021: 85). Furthermore, any speech aimed at persuasion demands meticulous language selection and adaptation to the context. Discursive genres are deeply entrenched in the culture and society in which they emerge, with the groups controlling influential discourse also wielding greater power over the thoughts and actions of others (Fairclough, 1992).

Within the paper, the authors explore how each speech resonates with society, delving into the sociological implications of identified patterns and their associated meanings. Additionally, formal annotations are utilized to highlight themes and connections. The speeches' connotative and denotative meanings are dissected to extract insights into their

messaging regarding the interplay between "economic ideals, consumption, civic responsibility, and patriotism" (Casey, 2016).

### **Aim and methodology**

The aim of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of the speeches delivered by two American politicians, Barack Obama and Joe Biden. Through an examination of persuasive techniques, arguments, and messages employed in their speeches, the aim is to determine which politician's speech is more successful. The inaugural speech marks the first address of a political figure to the highest seat of power, wherein the politician endeavors to effectively convey their political message to a wide audience. This paper seeks to analyze inaugural speeches as vehicles for communicating the American dream, highlighting the significance of linguistic devices in bridging the gap between words and actions.

The methodology employed in this paper draws upon discourse analysis and various linguistic devices of discursive practice, as outlined by Fairclough (1992), van Dijk (2005) and Wang (2010). The comparison, contrast, and interpretation of discourse are rooted in the methods and techniques of speech utilized by politicians, including positive self-promotion, comparisons, metaphors, repeated phrases and words, and tenses. The aim is to systematically examine the often ambiguous connections between discursive practices and texts, alongside broader social and cultural structures and interactions. The speeches and quotes from Barack Obama and Joe Biden were taken from the White House website.

### **Structure of Obama's Inaugural address**

Barack Obama delivered two inaugural speeches following his election as President of the United States for two consecutive terms. Given his extensive time in office and the significant ideals he articulated in his speeches, a range of Obama's political addresses have been subject to analysis (Trần & Phạm, 2022). His first speech took place during his inauguration on January 20, 2009, followed by a second on January 21, 2013. Below is a brief outline of the structure of his second inaugural address:

- 1) Opening greetings to the assembled audience.
- 2) Introduction that sets a celebratory tone by highlighting the paramount importance of the United States' legacy, encompassing the Constitution, history, and the tradition of the American people. This introduction serves to underscore the central theme of community prevalent throughout the rest of the speech. The address recounts the grand narrative of American history, emphasizing the exceptional qualities of the American republic, which has consistently

exercised its authority for just and beneficial purposes. History is portrayed as an enduring source of inspiration and an unyielding repository of timeless American ideals, including freedom, altruism, and sacrifice. It is suggested that American culture has temporarily strayed from these revered values and must strive to return to them (Horváth, 2009: 48).

3) Obama commences three sentences with the same word "together," indicating the tasks that need to be addressed:

"...a great nation must care for the vulnerable and protect its people..."

"...the free market only thrives when there are rules to ensure competition and fair play..."

"...the modern economy requires railroads and highways to speed travel and commerce."

4) Following this, there is a concise overview of democratic politics, accompanied by a call for change. The passage culminates in a renewed appeal for unity, punctuated by the dramatic declaration, "as one nation and one people... "

In this passage, the phrase "the American people can take no more" reflects a reassuring narrative commonly found in political speeches and popular political culture. The United States is depicted as resilient enough to overcome all challenges of the time, being the foremost superpower in the world. Thanks to the "messianic" political choice made by citizens, the state will once again possess the momentum to regain its former strength, symbolized by having the "wind at its back."

This narrative significantly contributes to the ideological construction of myths, which, once widely embraced and integrated into the collective consciousness of citizens, can become a potent tool for manipulating the masses.

5) Obama is trying to portray the significant challenges faced in recent American history as opportunities for hope. This includes alluding to a decade of warfare in the Middle East and the profound economic crisis of 2008, which characterized President Bush Jr.'s tenure. Obama seeks to enlighten his audience about the events surrounding the Iraq War and the prevailing state of the American financial crisis through the utilization of a series of sophisticated rhetorical devices intricately tied to the historical and cultural context in which his speech is delivered (Biria & Mohammadi, 2012: 1298).

6) Furthermore, Obama underscores the peril of neo-feudalism and advocates for the empowerment and expansion of the middle class. He also addresses other contemporary societal needs and emphasizes the importance of citizens' social security. Encouraging citizens to play their part in fostering unity, Obama elucidates that expressing patriotism entails fulfilling one's civic duties and recognizing how the intersections of people, culture, and social institutions affects America (Casey, 2016).

- 7) In addition, he reflects on society's demands regarding climate change and the imperative to develop renewable energy sources. The passage concludes with an ironic mention of God.
- 8) Moreover, Obama discusses matters of war and the defence of the people, asserting that the U.S. stands as the most powerful state in the world.
- 9) Obama employs an almost poetic sequence, commencing with references to the Constitution and freedom.
- 10) He enumerates the remaining tasks necessary to create conditions conducive to realizing the ideals of gender equality, sexual orientation, and immigrant rights. Obama's speaking style is perceived as more inclusive, as he incorporates individuals from diverse racial and national backgrounds and adopts a grassroots perspective (Horváth, 2009). This approach can be justified by emphasizing that the cornerstone of the American republic is its citizens.
- 11) Obama highlights unfulfilled values and proposes aligning actions with the ideals and values outlined by the founders of the United States in the Constitution as prerequisites for achieving the American dream.
- 12) Addressing the citizens, Obama emphasizes his shared identity with them, equating himself with the populace in such a manner that Biria & Mohammadi (2012: 1285) describe him as "a ventriloquist representing the voice that reflects both the members of the group and the members" of society.
- 13) Obama concludes his speech in customary fashion, offering blessings to the state.

### **Structure of Biden's Inaugural address**

Joe Biden delivered his inaugural address on January 20, 2021. Here is a brief outline of the speech.

- 1) Biden begins with an introductory greeting to each officer and all assembled.
- 2) He glorifies Inauguration Day as a day of special significance, declaring it as "America's day" and "democracy's day," characterized by history, hope, renewal, and resolve.
- 3) Biden presents himself as a symbol of the achieved goal - democracy and the realization of the will of the people.
- 4) The subsequent part is somewhat disjointed, as he expresses gratitude, mentions his oath, speaks positively about the country, and acknowledges that there is still much to be done, a sentiment reiterated in the following sentence.
- 5) He repeats several times what he means by the phrase "much to do."
- 6) Biden then delves into more challenging topics, addressing the global pandemic (comparing its consequences to those of the post-war period), unemployment, racial inequality and unrest,

environmental issues, and political extremism (making reference to Trump and the Capitol attack during the recent riots).

7) Biden praises his administration's goals, contrasting them with those of the Trump administration. He emphasizes his goal of national unity, expressing concern about the problems facing the United States and urging his audience to come together and believe in the country's ability to overcome these challenges through collective effort.

8) He draws a parallel to Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation.

9) Biden affirms unity and oneness as essential components of democracy.

10) Finally, Biden lists who the "enemies" of unity are.

11) Biden enumerates what the community "can do," initiating a sentence seven times with the words "We can."

12) When discussing history, Biden depicts a metaphorical struggle in which the country has defended its ideals, affirming the "fight" for unity.

13) He portrays his opponents and their ideas as antagonistic forces.

14) Biden praises the fact that his first elected vice president is a woman, citing it as an example of change and progress.

15) Following a disjointed paragraph, he quotes St. Augustine and outlines the qualities that define an American. He concludes by emphasizing the importance of truth and indirectly contrasting it with the qualities of his predecessor.

16) Biden demonstrates understanding for the worries and fears of his fellow citizens.

17) He prepares the nation for the difficulties and challenges ahead by commencing sentences with "We will" five times.

18) Biden revisits the misfortunes outlined in paragraph six.

19) He opens the paragraph with rhetorical questions and references the hymn.

20) Biden makes promises to the citizens, reiterating the phrase "I will" five times.

21) Lastly, Biden concludes his speech by invoking faith and bestowing a blessing upon the state.

## **Research findings and discussion**

In this section of the paper, authors will describe and analyse the stylistic devices utilized by both Obama and Biden, including metaphors, comparisons, repeated phrases and words, expressions, and the use of tenses in their speeches.

*Metaphor* emerges as the most prevalent stylistic device employed by both Obama and Biden. Obama employs metaphor to depict political action as a journey, while Biden utilizes it to illustrate a creative process.

Obama employs metaphor extensively in his speeches, using it to evoke various historical circumstances and the challenges faced by the nation. For instance, he references the words of the presidential oath spoken during times of prosperity and peace, as well as during periods of adversity, such as financial crises and military conflicts.

"The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace."  
(2009)

"...Yet, every so often, the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms."

"...In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardships..."

He also draws parallels between the ideals of the Constitution's framers and contemporary ideals, while reaffirming America's role as an anchor of strong alliances and its commitment to defending its citizens and interests through military means.

"...we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time." (2013)

"America will remain the anchor of strong alliances..."

Furthermore, Obama invokes the nation's past struggles, including civil war and segregation, to emphasize the importance of upholding values and pursuing happiness. He also employs the metaphor of a journey to highlight the resilience and hard work of the American people, praising their determination and perseverance in the face of challenges (Pilar 2011: 49). He invokes the respect that should be paid to every soldier who has died in the wars, as they are still protecting the freedom of the American people.

"We will defend our people and uphold our values through strength of arms and rule of law."  
(2013)

"...pursuit of happiness..."

"...because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation..."

Overall, Obama's use of metaphor serves to underscore the nation's journey towards prosperity and freedom, while celebrating the resilience and strength of its people.

Like Obama, Biden demonstrates in his speech that metaphor is a potent tool for influencing citizens. His speech relies on both figurative and literal meanings, but the intention behind Biden's use of metaphor differs somewhat from Obama's. While Obama employs metaphor to add solemnity and symbolism to his speech, Biden utilizes metaphor to imbue his message with greater meaning and to emphasize the drama of facts and realities. Through

metaphor, Biden seeks to convey stronger messages and forge deeper connections with his audience.

In a metaphorical manner, Biden references the Covid-19 pandemic, describing it as "a once-in-a-century virus silently stalking the country." He then elaborates on this metaphor, highlighting the urgent issue of pollution and climate change with the phrase:

"A cry for survival comes from the planet itself."

Biden pledges to fulfil his duties conscientiously and draws a historical parallel between the Civil War and the recent riots preceding the inauguration. He underscores the importance of unity and aims to position the USA at the centre of the world's attention with the words:

"the world is watching today."

Additionally, Biden personifies the terms "world" and "soul," adding depth to his metaphorical language. Like Obama, he also addresses foreign policy matters, expressing his commitment to repairing alliances.

"My whole soul is in it."

"Here we stand, in the shadow of a Capitol dome that was completed amid the Civil war when the Union itself hung in the balance..."

"We will repair our alliances..."

Through his adept use of metaphor, Biden enhances the impact of his speech and effectively communicates his vision for the nation's future.

While both, Obama and Biden employ metaphors to convey complex ideas and emotions in their speeches, Obama's metaphors tend to draw on historical and symbolic references to illustrate broader themes, whereas Biden's metaphors are more immediate and targeted at specific contemporary challenges.

Their usage of *comparisons* in the speech is very intriguing. With the following comparison "But the words I spoke today are not so different from the oath that is taken each time soldier signs up for duty or an immigrant realizes her dream" Obama is not glorifying his status as president, but putting himself on a par with a soldier whose aim is to serve and protect the nation. He compares himself to an immigrant who wants to express his gratitude for being part of the new nation. Obama's statement underscores his humility and sense of duty. By likening his inaugural oath to the solemn commitments made by soldiers and immigrants, Obama emphasizes his dedication to the principles and values upon which the nation was founded. This comparison serves to align Obama with the everyday citizens who contribute to



the fabric of American society, highlighting his commitment to serving the nation with integrity and humility.

Biden employs the following comparisons to underscore the resilience and unity of the nation:

"...we come together as one nation..."

"We can see each other not as adversaries but as neighbors..."

"That our America secured liberty at home and stood once again as a beacon to the world..."

Through these comparisons, Biden emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation among Americans. By depicting the nation as united and supportive of one another, he seeks to inspire a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Additionally, Biden highlights the significance of America's role as a symbol of freedom and democracy to the rest of the world, reinforcing the importance of maintaining unity and standing together as a nation.

Obama's comparison draws parallels between his inaugural oath and the commitments made by soldiers and immigrants. On the other hand, Biden's comparisons highlight the strength of national unity and solidarity. He emphasizes the importance of coming together as one nation. While both comparisons emphasize unity and strength, Obama's focuses on humility and duty, while Biden's highlights solidarity and America's role as a beacon of liberty.

Both Obama and Biden utilize *repeated phrases and words* to convey their messages effectively, although they do so in slightly different ways.

Obama's repetitive formulations often express the idea of togetherness and unity. He addresses all citizens of the country with inclusive terms such as "My fellow Americans" and "We," emphasizing collective identity and shared purpose. He frequently repeats nouns and pronouns such as "Nation," "People," and "America," aiming to bridge mutual boundaries within civil society and bring citizens closer together.

Similarly, Biden's repetitive words and messages reinforce the integrity of American identity and emphasize the strength of democracy. He frequently repeats verbs, particularly the phrase "we can," to underscore the nation's collective ability to overcome challenges and achieve progress. Biden also employs paired repetition and multiple repetitions to drive home his points and inspire confidence in the audience. Notably, Biden uses the term "we" inclusively throughout his speech, emphasizing collective action and shared responsibility. While he uses the personal pronoun "I" less frequently, it is strategically employed to convey his optimism and confidence in his ability to lead and effect change.

Overall, both Obama and Biden utilize repeated phrases and words to create coherence and emphasize key themes in their speeches. While their specific linguistic approaches may vary, the overarching goal is to inspire unity, optimism, and confidence among the American people.

Furthermore, their personal *expression* through speech is also interesting. The example from Obama's speech showcases instances where both the form and content deviate from conventional norms, resembling poetic language with its vivid imagery and rhythmic structure. In this passage, Obama eloquently presents himself not just as a leader versed in economics and law, but also as a sensitive individual whose creativity reflects deep human emotions.

"We, the people, declare today  
that the most evident of truths –  
that all of us are created equal –  
is the star that guides us still;  
just as it guided our forebears  
through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall;  
just as it guided all those men and women,  
sung and unsung,  
who left footprints along this great Mall,  
to hear a preacher say  
that we cannot walk alone;  
to hear a King proclaim  
that our individual freedom  
is inextricably bound  
to the freedom of every soul on Earth."

On the other hand, Biden's speech intertwines various discourses and genres, including religious and constitutional themes. He employs a spiritual and religious approach, drawing upon passages from the Bible to construct his vision of the future and present. The distribution of different presuppositions in his speech varied significantly, with themes repeated throughout to underscore the challenges facing the United States' future.

In addition, in our paper, we also focused on the *tenses* they use. In Obama's speech, the present tense dominates, comprising over half of all utterances, with the simple present tense being the most frequently used. For instance:

"We understand that the outdated programs are inadequate..."

This tense choice lends immediacy and relevance to his statements, emphasizing the current state of affairs and the ongoing challenges faced by the nation.

Additionally, the present perfect tense is employed to draw parallels and comparisons, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses as seen in the sentence:

"This generation of Americans has been tested by crises..."

Obama also utilizes the past tense to evoke the ideologies and philosophy of the nation's founders, imbuing his speech with a sense of historical continuity and pathos.

The future tense in the sentence "This is what will give real meaning to our creed..." is used to establish a connection between himself and his audience, emphasizing shared aspirations and goals.

Biden's inaugural address follows a similar pattern in terms of tense usage, with the simple present tense being the most prevalent. This tense choice underscores the fragility of democracy and emphasizes current challenges. For instance:

"Democracy is fragile."

The future tense is utilized to enumerate future challenges and make promises, projecting a sense of optimism and determination, e.g. "We will move forward with speed and urgency."

Unlike Obama's speech, Biden's use of the past tense tends to focus on overcoming difficulties, highlighting the nation's resilience and progress, e.g.

"Here we stand, in the shadow of a Capitol dome that was completed in the middle of the Civil War...."

Moreover, Biden predominantly employs the active tense throughout his speech, enhancing clarity and directness in his communication with the audience.

Overall, both Obama and Biden strategically utilize tense variations to convey their messages effectively and engage their constituents.

## **Conclusion**

Political speeches serve as a crucial tool for politicians to assert their influence and get public attention. However, they also offer listeners an opportunity to discern the underlying motives and intentions behind the rhetoric. Through discourse analysis, a nuanced understanding of the grammatical structures, repetitive phrases, and stylistic nuances employed in speeches can be attained, shedding light on the political intentions of the speakers.

In this paper, a discourse analysis of the inaugural speeches of Barack Obama and Joe Biden revealed distinct rhetorical and linguistic strategies employed by both. Obama emerges as a skilled orator adept at leveraging powerful metaphors, interconnected messages, and poetic

expressions to convey a compelling vision for the nation. His eloquence and charisma position him as a capable and visionary leader worthy of guiding the country.

In contrast, Biden's approach leans towards simplicity, demonstrating the adage that "less is more." Drawing upon his extensive experience, Biden recognizes the need for straightforward messages that offer support and solidarity to the American people, especially during challenging times. His plainspoken language fosters a sense of closeness and relatability with every citizen.

Through the analysis of these speeches, it becomes evident that their rhetorical styles serve as strategic communication tools. Both Obama and Biden present themselves as visionary, determined, and powerful leaders, while also demonstrating respect for their audience. Ultimately, their speeches reflect their individual approaches to leadership and governance, offering insights into their priorities, values, and aspirations for the nation.

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# OBAMINO I BAJDENO INAUGURALNO OBRAĆANJE KROZ ANALIZU DISKURSA

## **Sažetak**

*Koristeći analizu diskursa, u radu se uspoređuju lingvistička sredstva kojima su se Barack Obama i Joe Biden koristili u svojim inauguracijskim govorima. Barack Obama održao je svoj prvi govor 21. siječnja 2009., a drugi na isti dan 2013. Joe Biden održao je inauguracijski govor 20. siječnja 2021. Govori su preuzeti s web stranice Bijele kuće. U radu se ističe autentičnost koju političari Barack Obama i Joe Biden iskazuju u svojim javnim govorima te karakteristike koje se mogu pripisati njihovom izričaju. Njihovi se govori oslanjaju na doslovna i prenesena značenja. To je njihov način podizanja svijesti, naglašavanja društvenih, ekonomskih i kulturnih elemenata te približavanje javnosti.*

**Ključne riječi:** politički govor, inauguracijski govor, analiza diskursa, jezična sredstva