

Understanding King’s Rhetoric: An Analysis of “I Have a Dream”

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ABSTRACT

This article studies various linguistic and paralinguistic strategies in the opening part of Martin Luther King Junior’s famous speech “I Have a Dream.” It explores how King Junior started his speech, prepared the context, and introduced and amplified the central issue. The analysis has been done using Mohan’s (2016) Discourse Dissection Model, inspired by Aristotle’s rhetoric and Austin’s Speech Act Theory. In the opening part, the ad-hoc goals of the orator are to connect with the audience, establish trustworthiness, and introduce and amplify the central issue. This article demonstrates how various rhetorical strategies, such as contrast, repetition, and metaphor, have been used in the first eight sentences. It also makes some meaningful observations on the speech delivery style.

Keywords: *Discourse Dissection Model, Discourse Analysis, Public Speaking, Martin Luther King Junior, I Have a Dream.*

Introduction

The history of struggle against racism and injustice in the world is as old as the colonization of various parts of the world by European powers. Ethnic and racial differences between the European settlers and the natives, in most cases, led to their inharmonious cohabitation. Unequal power relations and an obvious lack of social justice in such societies made the natives uncomfortable. Frequent incidents of oppression of the natives eroded their trust. The typical mentality of the ruling race to look down upon the ruled race was, in some cases, inherited by their progeny, and the differences got perpetuated. The Brotherhood formed upon common religion, and a common book was found to be of little help in harmonizing such multi-ethnic societies. Centuries of democratic liberalization, social reformation, and constitutional proclamations, along with reformatory teaching and preaching from podiums and pulpits, changed society to some extent, but many creases are still to be smoothed out.

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The struggle against racism and injustice in the USA saw many prominent figures, but Dr. Martin Luther King Junior made an outstanding impact due to his august personality and powerful eloquence. Oppressive ideologies are discursively constructed, and so can they be demolished. War, violence, and weapons can perhaps silence the dissenting voices for some time, but the long-term solution to differences and disagreements can be achieved only through discourse and dialogue. King Junior's speech 'I Have a Dream' was one such effort toward establishing social justice and equality in American society.

Public speeches are the sites where ideologies are created, nurtured, and practiced through the persuasive use of language in the most effective way. Adrian Beard (2000) argued that a political speech is not necessarily a success because of its truth value; rather, it may be a matter of presenting valid arguments convincingly (p. 18). The success of a public speech involves the strategic use of various rhetorical devices but also various paralinguistic strategies of delivery.

Political oratory is essentially persuasive in nature. Richard M. Perloff (2003) defines persuasion as "a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviour regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice" (p. 8). Political orators use various rhetorical devices and persuasive strategies to influence the audience's perception, win their support, or motivate them to undertake some action. The opening part of a speech is the most crucial as in this part orators connect with their audience and put the central issue of their speech in the right perspective. It would be interesting to investigate how Martin Luther King Junior used various rhetorical strategies in the opening part of his speech, popularly known as "I Have a Dream." This speech is popular among the students of oratory as a model speech. Its popularity can be understood from the fact that it holds the first rank among the one hundred best speeches of the 20th century listed on the American Rhetoric website. From this speech, students of oratory aspire to learn the techniques of selection of words, ease of expression, the balance of rhythm and impactful delivery. In this sense, this analysis has pedagogical relevance. Since the opening part of the speech could not receive the focus it deserved in most studies, it would be a fruitful endeavor to study this part.

Review of literature

Martin Luther King Junior is a well-researched orator, and a number of articles have been written on his oratory. Durthy A. Washington (1993) studied his "I Have a Dream" in the light

of classical oratory and stylistic features, but due to his ambition of covering the entire speech, his analysis compromised required rigour and depth. Ubong E. Josiah & Gift Oghenerho (2015) studied this speech using the speech act theory. Their analysis focused mainly on identifying the five types of speech acts based on John R. Searle (1975): representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. They did not interpret these speech acts concerning their rhetorical purpose and strategies. Some researchers like Jeanne M. Logsdon & Audrey J. Murrell (2008) tried to interpret King Junior's speech in relation to business management theory. Shaohui Jheng (2014) studied the figures of speech, vocabulary and sentence structure in the speech with little focus on their rhetorical purpose and effects. Therefore, there is still sufficient scope for investigating this speech with a focus on rhetorical strategies.

Alexandra Alvarez Muro (1988) argued that "I Have a Dream" is not a typical political speech but a Baptist sermon, which is typically in the form of a dialogue and formulaic in nature and often uses common knowledge to build an argument. He also feels that reducing a speech to a written text omits many important details and poetic performance. Therefore, an analysis of a speech based on its written text can be problematic. I agree with Muro (1988) and sincerely feel that a speech cannot be properly analyzed on the basis of written text only as paralinguistic factors of delivery of speech, such as pace of delivery, pitch variation, and pause patterns, affect its meaning significantly. Therefore, we require a model that takes care of these factors in the analysis. The discourse dissection model (DDM) proposed by Braj Mohan (2016) takes care of the paralinguistic as well as the linguistic factors of a spoken discourse, hence suitable for this study.

Methodology

For the analysis of this speech, I have used the Discourse Dissection Model (DDM), as I demonstrated in Mohan (2016). This model is based on Aristotle's three means of persuasion and J. L. Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory. DDM is suitable for analyzing spoken discourse as it studies not only linguistic content but also rhetorical and paralinguistic strategies. This model divides a speech into parts and breaks it into minimal utterance units (MUU). A minimal utterance unit is a slight stretch of speech preceded and followed by a discrete pause. Generally, a clause, a sentence, or sometimes a long phrase makes a minimal utterance unit. Each MUU is analyzed in terms of rhetorical strategies and paralinguistic features, such as pitch variation

and pause pattern, to understand how the delivery style complemented the linguistic strategy in achieving the goal of the speech.

The model proposes that each speech has a major intention that is the main goal of the speech. The major intention or goal in deliberative speech can be to persuade, dissuade, prove, falsify, etc. To realize their major goal, the speaker sets various ad-hoc goals (sub-intentions) in various parts of their speeches. Mohan (2016) gave an open-ended list of sub-intentions most common in political oratory. These sub-intentions include connecting with the audience, establishing trustworthiness, introducing, elaborating, amplifying the central issue, appealing to emotions, suggesting action, boosting appeal to action, appealing to logic, and concluding the speech (Mohan, 2016, p. 67-68)

To realize each of the above-mentioned sub-intention, there are some strategies commonly used by successful orators. For instance, to realize the sub-intention of connecting with the audience, orators generally use the strategies like addressing by name and designation, thanking, sharing a goal, and showing association (Mohan, 2016, p. 67-68). Similarly, for amplifying the central issue of a speech, various strategies, such as repeating, contrasting, using amplifying words can be used. In the same way, all other sub-intentions are realized using some rhetorical strategies. Suitable paralinguistic strategies of delivery, such as suitable manipulation of pace, pitch, and pause, complement the rhetorical strategies.

Analysis

Martin Luther King Junior delivered this speech on 28 August 1963 at Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC in front of a large audience, who were agitating for civil rights for non-white Americans (National Archives at New York City). King Junior delivered this speech with the goal of persuading the American public in general and the US Government, in particular, to grant equality and freedom to the black population in the country.

The opening part of the speech has eight sentences. It comprises 166 words spoken in 22 minimal utterance units in 125 seconds. In this part, the speaker connects with the audience, establishes his trustworthiness, and introduces and amplifies the central issue of the speech. This analysis shows how he uses various rhetorical strategies to achieve these goals.

Connecting with the Audience

In the very opening lines of a speech, an orator tries to connect with the audience. For doing so, various strategies such as thanking, addressing by name and designation, sharing a goal and showing association, and use of humour can be used. Oratory in a formal setting generally requires the orator to thank the introducer and the audience. Orators greet their audience and invite their attention by mentioning their names, designations, and group identities. King Junior does not observe these formalities in his speech. He seems to exercise his power and authority as a Baptist minister and champion of the cause of social justice. He connects with the audience on the grounds of shared racial identity and shared cause of struggle against discrimination and injustice. These strategies of sharing goals and showing association help him instantly build trust with his audience and make them receptive to his message. He highlights the importance of the occasion by identifying it as “the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.” Low pitch and slow pace add gravity and seriousness to the speaker’s voice. King’s position and personality and the underlying sentiments of anger and dissatisfaction do not allow him to touch humour.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Aristotle identifies three means of persuasion, namely ethos (trustworthiness), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic). Ethos holds the first place because the audience cannot be persuaded unless they trust the speaker. Orators generally establish their trust by showing association with trustworthy people, citing from trustworthy sources, and mentioning their good actions in the past and good intentions for the future. Some extra-linguistic factors, such as dress and decorum, and paralinguistic factors, such as specific gravity in tone, also help orators establish their reliability.

Dr. Martin Luther King Junior did not seem to invest much effort in establishing his trustworthiness as he was already a very popular figure and commanded much respect among his audience. For this purpose, he only cites President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. By citing trustworthy sources and quoting great persons, orators generally borrow trustworthiness from them and legitimize their point of view. King Junior legitimizes his struggle for justice and equality by mentioning continuous denial of the civil rights promised to the black people in the Emancipation Proclamation. The paralinguistic factors, such as low pitch and slow pace in the opening part of the speech gave his voice required gravity, and he looks cool, composed and reliable.

Introducing the Central Issue

Comprehension precedes persuasion, and for proper comprehension, the central issue of a speech must be presented clearly and in the proper context. King Junior prepares the context by referring to history and giving all the required background information. One hundred years ago, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation promised freedom and equality for the black in the USA but these basic civil rights have been denied. The people of colour had high hopes from the proclamation, but the rights promised there were never granted, therefore, their struggle against discrimination and injustice is legitimate.

From sentence number 2 to 5, the speaker introduces the central issue and amplifies it. Spoken in three minimal utterance units, the second sentence refers to President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in which freedom and equality were promised to the people of colour in the USA. Referring to history is a popular strategy for preparing the background to introduce the central issue. This strategy puts the issue in the right perspective and shows its relevance. The speaker appeals to the authority of Abraham Lincoln and his historic emancipation proclamation to establish the authenticity of his claim and the validity of his demand for freedom. Quoting from authentic texts and appealing to the authority of trustworthy people are considered to be the popular strategies for establishing trustworthiness which Aristotle termed as Ethos. It is also noteworthy that King Junior says, “Five score years ago” (S2), in place of “100 years ago,” to emphasize how long his people have been deprived of their rightful freedom and equality. The second MUU of the second sentence presents Lincoln as the saviour of the people of colour in the USA. Average pitch and sufficiently long pauses lend the required gravity to the speaker.

Amplifying the Central Issue

Rhetoric is not about stating facts but about presenting information effectively and convincingly. Aristotle placed pathos (emotion) before logos (logic). Therefore, oratory requires strategic amplification of the central issues of the speech with the help of various strategies.

King Junior used mainly four strategies for amplifying the central issue of demand for freedom, justice, and equality— repetition, contrast, appeals to emotion, and the strategic use of metaphors.

Repetition, also called anaphora, is a powerful rhetorical device in which specific phrases or clauses are repeated mainly at the beginning of successive sentences. King Junior used this

device masterfully in this famous speech. His anaphoric repletion of “One hundred years later” from S5 to S8 highlights how the aboriginal population of the USA has not been granted their rightful freedom, equality, and justice as promised in the Emancipation Proclamation a century ago. Listing of several injustices one by one, with each repetition, powerfully amplifies the issue. Constantly rising pitch with each repetition adds more force.

The strategy of contrasting is also very powerful as it enhances the intensity of an object due to the contrastive effect of the opposite. King Junior contrasts the deplorable condition of “the Negro” with what was promised in the Emancipation Proclamation. He contrasts their “withering injustice” with “the beacon light of hope” (S3) and their “long night of captivity” with “joyous day break” (S4) that the rulings in Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation promised. They find themselves on a “lonely island of poverty” in the middle of “the vast ocean of prosperity” (S7).

The powerful rhetorical device of metaphor has been skilfully used by King Junior. The word metaphor has etymologically derived from the Latin word *metaphora* or the Greek word *metapherō*, which means ‘to transfer’ or ‘to carry over’. Therefore, metaphor is a rhetorical device through which we carry over meaning from one thing to another thing by way of comparison of similar attributes. According to I. A. Richards (1937), a metaphor has two parts— the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the concept or thing that is required to be explained, and the vehicle is the commonly known thing whose selected characteristics are attributed to the tenor. Lexical necessity and stylistic choice determine the need to use metaphors. Describing the semantic and stylistic value of metaphor, Andrew Ortony (1975) aptly remarks, "Metaphors are necessary as a communicative device because they allow the transfer of coherent chunks of characteristics -- perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential -- from a vehicle which is known to a topic which is less so. In doing so, they circumvent the problem of specifying one by one each of the often unnamable and innumerable characteristics; they avoid discrediting the perceived continuity of experience and are thus closer to experience and, consequently more vivid and memorable.

Metaphors have many layers of meaning, hence, are capable of invoking far deeper responses in the hearers’ minds than general statements can. It is so because metaphors have various semantic associations attached to them based on people’s common understanding and individual experiences. Table 3 shows list of metaphors with their possible semantic associations as used in the first eight sentences of the speech.

Metaphor/ Vehicle	Tenor	Semantic associations
BEACON LIGHT of hope (S3)	Emancipation Proclamation	Rescue, hope, comfort, guidance, destination
joyous DAYBREAK (S4)	Emancipation Proclamation	New hope, end of fears, new opportunities
LONG NIGHT of their captivity (S4)	Racial discrimination	Fears, hopelessness, danger, lack of opportunities,
MANACLES of segregation (S6)	Racial discrimination	Restrictions, lack of freedom, torture, separation, oppression
CHAINS of discrimination. (S6)	Racial discrimination	Barriers, slavery, torture, absence of freedom and rights
LONELY ISLAND of poverty (S7)	The USA for the Black	Separation, lack of opportunities, unknown fears, dangers, thin hope of rescue
VAST OCEAN of material prosperity (S7)	The USA for the white	Limitlessness, plenty, readily available opportunities
the CORNERS of American society	Racial discrimination	Marginalization, discrimination, lack of opportunities
EXILE	Usurpation of rights	Usurpation of rights, pains, and problems, nostalgia, keenness of returning home

The use of emotionally charged words like “still sadly crippled” stirs the audience’s anger. The metaphors like “manacles of segregation”, “chains of discrimination,” and “lonely island of poverty” describe the painful condition of the ‘Negro’ in the USA. While chains and manacles symbolize slavery, the metaphor of “lonely island” has many difficulties and a lack of opportunities associated with it. Black man’s “lonely island of poverty” has been contrasted with the white man’s “vast ocean of material prosperity” to amplify the issue. It is totally unjust that the black people are denied freedom and equality and hence they live a life of poverty in the USA, which is an ocean of prosperity. King Junior uses the strategy of contrast to amplify the central issue. The coloured people are not at the centre of American society but languishing in the corners of American society. They are marginalized and do not get equal opportunities

in their country. He contrasts coloured people's rightful claim of American land with their present condition like that of a person in exile (S8). The metaphor of exile is associated with usurpation and isolation and capable of invoking mutinous and angry responses in the audience. He hints that the coloured population should stand up and claim centrality in American society as the land is their own.

Delivery style

A close analysis of the delivery style yields some interesting observations. The speaker starts his speech with a low pitch and slow pace. The slow pace and low pitch are generally associated with gravity and self-control; therefore, they boost the speaker's reliability. Establishing trustworthiness is desirable in the opening part of the speech. The speaker begins his speech with a rather low pitch of 210 hertz and a significantly long pause of 2.46 seconds. The pattern of moderate pitch and long pause is maintained in the opening five sentences ranging from MUU 1 to MUU13 as the speaker connects with the audience and sets a context. This slow pace of delivery and gravity in pitch facilitates ease of comprehension and gives the audience sufficient time to tune their cognition to the speaker's style. As the speaker feels properly connected with the audience, he slowly increases his pace and raises pitch.

The pitch range, which is around 200 hertz in this part of the speech, is observed above 300 hertz in the following parts. It has been observed that pause length is inversely related to the pace of delivery and pitch range. When the speed becomes faster, and the pitch goes higher in the following parts, pauses become shorter. Very long pauses have been strategically placed to give the audience an opportunity to react. Smart orator carefully observes these reactions and plans their further moves.

Conclusion

The overall impact of a speech is based upon three things-agency, content, and rhetorical strategies that include delivery style. Most rhetoricians generally ignore the first element. There is no doubt that a right combination of content and rhetorical strategy creates impact but one should not forget that this impact draws vigour from the agency of the speaker. Who is the speaker is as important as what is spoken and how it is spoken. Martin Luther King Junior was the most influential leader of the struggle for civil rights in the fifth and sixth decades of the 20th century. His religious piety and vigorous political activism established the powerful identity required for delivering this kind of speech. The opening part of this speech is marked

by historical contextualization, suggestive metaphors, impactful repetition, and gravity in delivery style. This analysis may have some pedagogical relevance for the teachers and students of oratory. On the basis of the analysis, the following observations can be made.

- The speaker’s ad-hoc goals in the opening part of the speech are connecting with the audience, establishing trustworthiness and introducing and amplifying the central issue of the speech.
- The strategies of sharing goal and showing association have been used to connect with the audience. No formal greeting shows that the orator exercised his power and authority and commanded high respect among the audience. Slow pace and low pitch in the beginning helps the speaker connect with the audience and facilitate ease of comprehension.
- The speaker does not seem to invest much effort to establish his trustworthiness, as he commands the audience’s respect. His established position as a Baptist minister and consistent fight for the cause of justice and equality for the Native Americans had already earned him popularity and reliability. Citing the historical Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln and gravity and composure in delivery boosts his image as a reliable person.
- A suitable context is prepared by referring to historical Emancipation Proclamation and contrasting the present condition of his people with what was promised in the Proclamation.
- The speaker highlights the issues of discrimination and injustice in the American society by using the strategies of appeal to emotion and amplification. Emotionally charged words, emotive metaphors, contrast and repetition have been used for the purpose. Rhetorical use of metaphors is remarkable in this speech. Metaphors with their multiple layers of meaning can communicate far deeper meanings that are otherwise incommunicable.

Appendix

NO	MUU	Minimal Utterance Unit	Pitch (Hz)	Length (Sec)	Pause (Sec.)	Intention	Strategies
S1	1	I am happy to join with you today	210	3.00	1.89	Connecting	Sharing goal
	2	in what will go down in history	230	3.40	1.78		

	3	as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.	224	5.32	9.11		Showing association
S2	4	Five score years ago	220	2.82	2.46	Establishing trustworthiness	Appealing to authority
	5	a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today,	222	4.73	1.63	Introducing the issue	Referring to history
	6	signed the Emancipation Proclamation.	223	3.21	2.34		
S3	7	This momentous decree came	228	2.30	1.47	Amplifying the issue	Contrasting Using emotive metaphors
	8	as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves	217	4.26	1.43	Appeal to emotion	
	9	who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.	218	4.21	2.02		
S4	10	It came as a joyous daybreak	214	2.30	2.02	Amplifying the issue	

	11	to end the long night of their captivity.	232	3.57	2.31		Contrasting Using Metaphor
S5	12	But one hundred years later,	221	2.48	2.32	Amplifying the issue	Contrasting
		the Negro still is not free.	220	3.97	1.83		
S6	13	One hundred years later,	226	1.47	2.09	Amplifying the issue Appeal to emotion	Repetition, Emotionally charged words, metaphors
	14	the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation	240	6.35	1.09		
	15	and the chains of discrimination.	252	2.35	.54		
S7	16	One hundred years later	231	1.46	1.75	Amplifying the issue Appeal to emotion	Repetition, Contrasting, Metaphor,
	17	the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty	234	3.31	1.47		
	18	in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.	239	4.14	.40		
S8	19	One hundred years later	258	1.42	4.83	Amplifying the issue	Repetition, Contrasting Metaphor
	20	the Negro is still languishing in the	235	5.20	1.40		

		corners of American society				Appeal to emotion	
	21	and finds himself in exile in his own land.	228	3.29	1.43		

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