

FEMINIST RHETORIC IN BARACK OBAMA AND HILLARY CLINTON'S DISCOURSE

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Abstract: November 8, 2016, marked the beginning of a new era in the American political setting. The Obama era was known as a period of great opening, minority-friendly approach and liberal vision. Of the two candidates that were running for office in 2016, Hillary Clinton seemed to have the most similar approach to the now former president of the USA, Barack Obama; Clinton was framed as the *de facto* carrier and enforcer of Obama's legacy. Feminist approaches are not gender-determined; Obama himself has made a mark as a feminist leader. Clinton ran for the highest office as a pioneer of women's representation in politics. The aim of this paper is to discover the similarities between Obama's discursive style and Hillary's approach. Through critical discourse analysis, we launch this research in order to emphasize gender negotiations, in terms of both content and style.

Keywords: Feminism, discourse, communication style, gender, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton.

1. Introduction

The 2016 U.S. presidential elections marked a historical breakthrough in terms of competitors; for the first time in American history, a female candidate secured a major party's endorsement for running as President of the United States of America. When faced with the choice of breaking the ultimate glass ceiling by electing Hillary Clinton, however, they did not galvanize for the first viable woman candidate as enthusiastically as they had done for Barack Obama. Sheeler and Anderson (2013) invoked an American cultural reality vastly ignored in explaining why women have not cracked the presidential glass ceiling in the United States: "*Americans have always preferred potential female presidential candidates to actual ones*" (2), which suggests that constituents are more likely to embrace the idea of women in political leadership roles when they are not actually running for office.

Throughout her political journey, from her college activism that gave her the trailblazing opportunity to be the first student to deliver the commencement address at Wellesley (Denmark *et al.* 2016, 44) and up to launching a presidential bid, Hillary gathered a remarkable series of *firsts*, yet failed to secure the votes of American women. "*To win as a woman, you need more than half of the female vote. You need all of it*" (Cooper 2017, 256). Being into the political spotlight has earned Clinton various colors of feminist labels: from radical feminist, or militant feminist, like Republicans portrayed her during her First Lady tenure (Jamieson 1995, 41), to an "*unapologetic liberal*" (Lim 2009). Overall, she disrupted the gender order in the American political setting, aiming toward increasingly more ambitious political seats: "*as a woman succeeding on men's terms in society, adopting male-coded behaviors, and bringing women's needs to the agenda of the patriarchal public sphere as it is, Hillary [...] fits into the paradigm of liberal feminism*" (Denmark *et al.* 2016, 48).

However, feminism has not only been associated to women in the political realm. Barack Obama is a self-declared feminist¹, and his presidential rhetoric has tackled human rights, welfare, intersectionality, and women's rights, topics promoted under the umbrella of feminism. While Hillary Rodham Clinton was carrying out her tenure as Secretary of State, she authored the "Hillary Doctrine," a feminist approach of foreign policy, based on the idea that "*countries that support women's rights tend to be more stable, secure, and prosperous*" (Saiya et al. 2017, 422), yet she differentiated herself from President Obama by taking a firmer stand on foreign policy. "*On matters of foreign policy, where she is staking out a more aggressive stance on the use of American power as a way to address problems*" (Streich and Kuhlmann 2016, 24), Clinton took a more masculine approach than Obama. As a presidential candidate, however, Clinton "*was projecting herself as the candidate of continuity, maintaining the legacy of the first Black President and leading to interesting dynamics on the domestic and foreign policy front*" (Sharma 2016, xv).

2. Discourse, gender, and feminism

Hermeneutics represents an important research technique. As discourses are aimed to create and recreate the social and political context, it is highly important to be able to determine their meaning. Discourses are part of the universal language that marked the history. They have been analyzed, copied, and transformed in order to respond to the people's needs. A discourse is a mark of not only the ideas that that a political actor has, but a mark of his or hers type of public. Political speeches are directed towards a certain electorate in order to transform their way of thinking.

In the communication area, a discourse is considered to be a communicational tool. In philosophy, the discourse is seen as a universe of meanings. "*A discourse integrates a whole range of meanings that are to be found in linguistics, sociology, philosophy and so on*" (Horvath 2009). On the other hand, the discourse represents "*an analysis of the language seen as a system, as a form of interaction, as the social and cultural processes of the language, as the analysis of its social effects*" (Garrity 2010, 194). Moreover, the discourse "*shapes a social view on reality, agenda-setting and the spiral of silence representing some of the theories that reveal the force of a discourse that is meant to create or to destroy the reality, using pseudo-events*" (Barbaros 2014, 104). It is easy to observe the effects of a discourse, as a social instrument. Discourse is also considered to be a persuading instrument and it can create an advantage against the contra candidate. "*A discourse can influence the audience through its logical order, through the fundamentals that generate the discourse*" (Sălăvăștru 2009, 15).

The political speeches represent a special category in the aria of hermeneutics, as they stand as a symbol of power and its manifestation. They integrate a whole spectrum that includes rhetoric, myths, persuasion. There is no question why this instrument of communication became so popular and there are so many researchers that show a special interest on this area. The political speech comes as a justification for the electorate, o political dispute carried with fellow politicians, a well-grounded answer to an interpellation and a negotiation with social partners (Sălăvăștru 2009, 17). The same author agrees that the political discourse is the most profitable

legitimization in front of the electorate, being even more effective than mathematics of the options.

Feminist rhetoric is not gender-determined, in that men can also circulate messages of feminist nature; at times, they can do so more credibly and efficiently than their female counterparts. Although initiated by women, for women, and overwhelmingly comprised by women, the feminist movement has also encompassed, throughout its development, male advocates. Even though pieces of the feminist puzzle can be traced back to sometime before the first wave took shape, feminist rhetoric debuted with pleas in favor women's enfranchisement; once the battle for suffrage was quasi-conquered, rhetoric went on by approaching women's liberation, their access to economic and educational opportunities. Second-wave feminism, thus, represented a negotiation for women's transgression from the private sphere to the public arena, a fight that has yet to be concluded. Negotiations for gender equity are ongoing, and women's participation in politics is one of the meta-interests of the feminist movement, which claims that "*feminism is the radical notion that women are people*"ⁱⁱ (Sheeler and Anderson 2013, 179).

According to Christie (2015), role-based discourses

"promote policies located within a gender agenda, and by the displacement of ethically complex themes, such as sexual and reproductive rights. [...] Strategically, a moderate equality program that does not agitate the status quo is more likely to gain broad political consensus. Conversely, a feminist agenda, even the mere use of the feminist label, consciously utilizes rights-based discourse frames" (149).

Hence, feminist discourse negotiates gendered identities, advancing an ideology of equality, yet the mere use of the feminist label might hinder the efficiency of a rights-focused message, as it challenges the current state of affairs within a society. Mayhead and Marshall (2005) postulate the emergence of an in-between space in political discursive practice, "*where it is not only appropriate to discuss topics that once were considered masculine or feminine only, it is imperative to do so*" (15). Advocates of difference feminism postulate that "*women position themselves as a collective group through discourse codes that correspond to a maternal biological condition: social inclusion and social responsibility, or caring for those who cannot take care of themselves*" (Christie 2015, 166). Jamieson draws on conventional wisdom and finds that *women who display and pursue their political ambitions pose, indeed, more credibility than their male counterparts on policy issues that "tie intuitively to a maternal role"* (1995, 97).

3. Method

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the discursive patterns of the former US president Barack Obama and the democratic candidate for last year's election, Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton was considered to be the carrier of the *obamite* legacy. She and Obama are considered to have similar views on ideology-oriented policies.

Using the critical discourse analysis paradigm, we aim to emphasize the gender-oriented approaches of both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. The two discourses analyzed were delivered in key moments of their political carrier. In order to emphasize Obama's views we will take into consideration aspects that he presented in his last "State of the Union" speech ("President Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address,"

2016, January 12), in 2016. Hillary Clinton's acceptance speech ("Full text: Hillary Clinton's DNC Speech," 2016, July 28), delivered on the Democratic National Convention, will be compared to Obama's, in order to draw some conclusions regarding our main hypothesis.

In order to undertake this analysis we will use as a research method the document analysis, more specifically the critical discourse analysis. The critical discourse analysis represents a "*multidisciplinary, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture*" (van Dijk 1993, 253). This instrument allows us to analyze a speech from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. We take into consideration aspects that concern the ideological part of the discourse, the main themes that are presented, the aspects of a liberal discourse, the most frequently used words and connotations. This instrument allows us to analyze a speech from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The social context that creates the need for a discourse is very important, as well as the effects it produces. In order to have a more accurate analysis, we will use Textalyserⁱⁱⁱ software, which gives us a more accurate vision on the quantitative part of our analysis.

To assess the extent to which Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton negotiate their gender within their rhetorical performance, we use the framework of gendered styles employed by Bystrom *et al.* (2004). The authors ground their research on Campbell's model of feminine style and a masculine style drawn from previous research. Thus, the feminine discursive style is designed to be: (1) more personal in tone; (2) capitalizing on personal experience, anecdotes, and examples, (3) structured inductively, (4) inviting audience engagement and participation, (5) addressing the audience as peers, thus creating rapport, and (6) identifying with the audience's experience. Conversely, the masculine discursive style comprises (1) deductive logic and line of reasoning, in which the speaker drops conclusions before actually providing examples, (2) affirmation of the speaker's expertise, (3) use of expert authority, and (4) impersonal or incomplete experiences – not drawn from their own experience or relatable to the audience (12-13, *passim*). In addition, we aim to identify metaphors that are conventionally deemed as masculine (sports and war metaphors) – so linked to the male competitive trait, and those perceived as feminine (care and affection) – exhibiting women's intrinsic ethics of care and nurturance (Sheeler and Anderson 2013, 131).

4. Findings

4.1. Barack Obama's feminist rhetoric and gendered style

State of the Union speeches represent a tradition in the USA. They are aimed to present a sum up of the main events that happened during the year and their influence on the American society. Their importance is mentioned in the Constitution of the United States: "The President "*shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient*" (State of the Union Address 2017). It started from a general speech regarding the state budget and evolved to much more complex issues. Over time, it became necessary for presidents to engage in a more sophisticated informational process (*ibid*).

The 2016 speech marks the end of an era in America. The first Afro-American president, Barack Obama, is known for managing to create a discursive rhetoric along the years, as well as a formal discursive style, a relaxed one, but mostly a different politics in comparison to the former president Bush. Obama identifies himself as being one of the people and a symbol of the fight for democracy, as well as a good diplomat.

The 2016 discourse represents the last official discourse of the president Barack Obama in front the USA Congress. The double quality of the discourse marks the final of the two mandates of Barack Obama. Moreover, it comes as a final goodbye to all his co-workers. The now-common beginning of the *obamite* discourse, the president starts by addressing the public: "*my fellow Americans.*" This classical addressing formula represents sums up his liberal orientation, as he proclaims everyone to being equal. He also states the importance of the moment: "[...] *for this final one, I'm going to try to make it a little shorter.*"

From the very beginning, he announces the main themes of the speech: the economy along with the connected subject – the tax system, increasing minimum wage – reforming justice, helping drug addicts, the medical and educational system, encouraging science, immigration policies, gun control, and paid leave. Most of these themes are to be found in the social aspects of live, being more related to women's issues. Therefore, Obama is considered to be a feminist, as his rhetoric revolves around many soft subjects.

The motivational character of the discourse aims to emphasize the active spirit and the idea of hope and social activism. There is a strong emphasize on social aspects of life. For Obama, equality means providing free college for students, developing programs for children, giving access to technology to pupils and so on: "*we have to make college affordable for every American.*" Another important theme of this speech is the medical system. Ideologically, this theme presents Obama's socialist political views. According to the president, there is a strong need for the lower classes to benefit from a differential tax system and a more affordable health care program.

American liberalism is defined by competition. This theme is to be found in the great majority of the *obamite* discourses. He manages to turn this theme into a softer one as he associates it with progress and development. "*Sixty years ago, when the Russians beat us into space, we didn't deny Sputnik was up there. [...] We built a space program almost overnight. And 12 years later, we were walking on the moon.*" Moreover, he presents a list of the most important American scientists, both men and women, praising their hard work. Not only that he promotes a liberal vision, but moreover, he presents a feminine one. Gender equality is a very popular theme in Obama's discourses.

Obama promotes a common spirit, putting a great accent on a collective society. According to Hofstede *et al.*, working together for an objective, emphasizes a collectivist vision on work and organization (1990, 3). According to the same study, this vision emphasizes a feminine view on the organization. Work-related, Obama seems to fit in just well into Hofstede's cultural dimension model. "*That's how we stopped the spread of Ebola in West Africa. Our military, our doctors, our development workers -- they were heroic. [...] Hundreds of thousands, maybe a couple million lives were saved.*"

Ideologically speaking, Obama engages in conservative issues that put a great accent on families and family businesses: *"I believe that in this new economy, workers and start-ups and small businesses need more of a voice, not less."* He takes into consideration women-related issues not only as a discursive theme, but also as a call for action. Talking about inequality, he affirms himself as a promoter of diversity, accepting all human beings as being unique as a defining characteristic: *"Voices that help us see ourselves not, first and foremost, as black or white, or Asian or Latino, not as gay or straight, immigrant or native born, not as Democrat or Republican, but as Americans first, bound by a common creed. Voices Dr. King believed would have the final word -- voices of unarmed truth and unconditional love."* Obama proves to be a true human rights activist, throughout his speeches. He truly believes in people's power and the power for people. All of the themes that we presented in this analysis put a great accent on soft issues, even though the discourse represents a sum of soft and hard issues. Being aware of the human condition marks a more humble and compassionate side of the president.

His speeches are filled with personal anecdotes or examples of the people he met:

"I see it in the worker on the assembly line who clocked extra shifts to keep his company open, and the boss who pays him higher wages instead of laying him off. I see it in the Dreamer who stays up late to finish her science project, and the teacher who comes in early because he knows she might someday cure a disease. [...] The protester determined to prove that justice matters -- and the young cop walking the beat, treating everybody with respect, doing the brave, quiet work of keeping us safe."

This also represents a mark of the feminine discursive style. The religious aspects of the discourse complete his feminine orientation. It is represented not only by the common addressing *"God bless you. God bless the United States of America"*, but by biblical reference to acceptance and loving the other. On a linguistic level, the possessive adjective *"ours"* seems to have 98 occurrences and a frequency of 2.8%. The most frequent words are *you, America, people, world, to work, now*; these suggest a strong social engagement and a protective spirit. Throughout the speech, Obama uses a professorial tone, the words of a wise man that has a guidance position. To support his active spirit, he uses action verbs. He comes across as a clean man, as he presents both positive and negative sides of the society, transforming him in an honest man.

4.2. Hillary Clinton's feminist rhetoric and gendered style

According to Trent *et al.* (2016), acceptance addresses serve the purpose of a public assumption of the party's nomination, are meant to energize the audience, unify the party, and *"serve as a strong persuasive message"* (171). The nominee uses this communication setting to express her or his vision of the direction the country should take, should they attain office, and feature a series of traits; they are *"simplified partisan statements, [in which the candidate expresses] laments about the present and celebrations about the future, stress on the crucial nature of this election, calls for unity, use of biography, [and] use of biography to go negative"* (173).

Hillary Rodham Clinton's acceptance speech, delivered at the Democratic National Convention, on July 28th in Philadelphia, has been a long-awaited moment

in her political career, and in the American history of women's empowerment. Following the 18 million cracks in the highest glass ceiling marked in 2008^{iv}, Clinton launched a second presidential bid, in order to attain the highest office in the United States. Although she was not the first woman to run for President – Victoria Woodhull pioneered women's presidential bids in 1872, followed by Margaret Chase Smith, Shirley Chisholm, Patricia Schroeder, or Carol Moseley Braun –, Clinton's trailblazing merit comes from being the first woman to secure the endorsement of a major American party.

Clinton begins by engaging in a series of metaphors of affection, invoking family and friendship as prominent pillars in her road to winning the nomination. She presents Barack Obama as the *"man of Hope,"* and praises his leadership: *"American is stronger because of President Obama's leadership, and I'm better because of his friendship."* In an attempt to win over her Democratic opponent's electorate, *"particularly the young people who threw their hearts and souls into our primary,"* she thanks Bernie Sanders, and invites him to lead together. Hillary's speech capitalizes on the feminine strategy of storytelling, by drawing on personal experience, on stories that came to her attention on the campaign trail, a strategy in which she had engaged since she held the role of First Lady of Arkansas: the *listening tour* (Lim 2009; Scranton 2015). She organizes her arguments inductively, also a feminine stylistic choice; Clinton capitalizes on the historical importance of the DNC location, as venue of her nomination, to stress the historical importance of the election. Through storytelling, she invokes the founding myth of the United States, through a metaphor of affection, drawing on motherhood: *"the birthplace of our nation."*

Throughout her speech, Rodham Clinton interweaves arguments against her opponent, Donald Trump, based on his divisive rhetoric and lack of political credentials, opting for a masculine rhetorical style. To this end, she uses metaphors of war and sports, speaking in terms of *fear, fight, threats, challenges,* and *power,* and invokes expert authority, by quoting president Roosevelt: *"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,"* still in reference to her opponent. She marks a feminist feature by standing up to her opponent for his demeaning attitudes towards women, minorities, and people with disabilities.

Going on, nominee Clinton makes promises of tackling issues identified within the American society, and invites the audience to engage in her master plan, by repeatedly using *we.* The invitation for collective effort is followed by a section of *I's,* where she presents her credentials for the highest office. Building on metaphors of affection underlying the family theme, Clinton invites for unity, lists her political achievements that qualify her and legitimize her presidential bid, and confesses that *"the truth is, through all these years of public service, the 'service' part has always come easier to me than the 'public' part."* She then addresses the audience as peers, giving them a sense of her upbringing, through a series of stories drawn from her family history. The storytelling strategy is further engaged by listing stories of individuals from the campaign trail, stressing on work needed on soft policy issues such as education, health, and vulnerable groups. However, in the fabric of the acceptance speech, Clinton weaves threads of hard policy issues as well, such as the economy, the military, gun control, jobs, foreign affairs, and climate change, offering solutions for issues facing contemporary America.

The feminist layers of Hillary Clinton's speech are enhanced by her use of the pioneer frame to present her achievement and its symbolism, *"a milestone in our*

nation's march toward a more perfect union," and midway through her speech, she launches the mantra of her campaign: *"when there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit."* Feminism also transpires from her invitation to the audience to join her in addressing health care, equal pay, national security – through smart power –, veterans and children's cause: *"we will defend all our rights – civil rights, human rights and voting rights... women's rights and workers' rights... LGBT rights and the rights of people with disabilities"*. Moreover, feminist features stem from empowering stories laid out throughout her speech, and the most empowering is perhaps the personal anecdote of her strong mother, who *"never let me back down from any challenge. When I tried to hide from a neighborhood bully, she literally blocked the door. 'Go back out there,' she said. And she was right. You have to stand up to bullies."*

Hillary's speech exhibits a cyclical structure, as she addresses the founding myth towards the end, to once again stress the importance of the Americans' choice in the 2016 presidential elections: *"They [the Founding Fathers] were drawn together by love of country, and the selfless passion to build something better for all who follow. [...] Yes, America's destiny is ours to choose. [...] When we do [build a better tomorrow], America will be greater than ever."* Just like her predecessor, she ends by thanking the public, on a religious note: *"may God bless the United States of America!"*

5. Conclusions

Overall, Obama engages in a well-developed strategy that is meant to present a realistic view on the problems he put on the table. The analysis revealed a very compassionate person, who is able to see the true face of the society and it is eager to fight along with the people to make it a better place. By taking all these things into account and by analyzing the themes of the speech, we can conclude that Obama has strong feminist views. These views are accentuated by his compassionate spirit, more than the themes he approaches.

Similarly, Hillary Clinton pledges to continue the work started by her predecessor, who had entrusted her the toughest policy portfolio, that of Secretary of State. Throughout her acceptance speech, Hillary tackles both soft and hard policy issues, employing both feminine and masculine discursive styles, reaching an in-between rhetorical ground. Feminism transpires throughout the discourse, by tackling issues of equality and rights, stressing on her political credentials within the pioneer rhetorical frame, and invoking empowering examples of women.

Focusing on Obama's legacy, Clinton illustrated the greatness of America, and the need to follow the already established policy lines in order to better serve the American people. Although the election results hinder any potential assessment of keeping these promises, both politicians, remarkable personalities of contemporary politics, have furthered a perspective of the United States focused on human welfare and exceptionalism, *"a society in which a person's talent and hard work, not structures beyond their control, can determine their fate"* (Streich and Kuhlmann 2016, 22).

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ⁱ In August 2016, President Barack Obama was featured in the *Glamour* magazine, with a piece called "This is what a feminist looks like."

ⁱⁱ Quote whose authorship is traditionally attributed to Kramarae and Treichler, according to Sheeler and Anderson (2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ The software can be found at <http://textalyser.net/index.php?lang=en#analysis>

^{iv} Reference to Hillary Clinton's 2008 concession speech, when she invoked the 18 million votes obtained in the primaries. Clinton was the first woman to run in all the American states during primaries.