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# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Lexical Selection in Obama's Speech on Gun Violence Reduction

Wafaa M. Ali

Department of English Language, College of Arts, University of Mosul, Nineveh, Iraq.

## Abstract:

Language has a very effective role in the life of the politician as he or she uses it to achieve his or her aims and to convey his or her ideas. This study tries to show particular discursive strategies specially focusing on lexical selection strategies that are followed by Barak Obama in his speech on 16th January, 2013 that can help to draw out his ideology and power. The study follows a critical discourse analysis approach presented by van Dijk (1997) in a way of explicating its validity to explore Obama's ideology and power and trying to present a method for better understanding of political discourse. The study mainly hypothesizes that lexical richness and vocabulary diversity must illuminate hidden ideology and any lexical selection can not be random. The study concludes that Obama's language, particularly lexical selection, is in service of his political interest, social stance and power. It also concludes that Van Dijk's macrostructural analysis is very helpful in studying organized political ideology.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Gun Violence Reduction, Obama's Speech, Language, Political Discourse.

## 1. Introduction:

Language plays a very effective role in the life of politicians. Every political action is usually played by language (Horvath, 2009: 45). Politicians use language very skillfully when they want to their listeners. They want their listeners to respect them and accept their authority; so, you can find them using forms of speech which are very impressive and meaningful for the public (Wodak, 1989: 143).

Van Dijk (1997: 23) asserts that political discourse analysis

studies text and talk which have "a direct functional role as a form of political action in the political process". Political action may include governing, ruling, legislating, protesting, dissenting, or voting and is usually performed by political actors such as presidents and prime ministers and other members of government, parliament or political parties (ibid: 12 - 14). Indeed, van Dijk (ibid: 18) further claims that most political actions specially those of passing laws, decision making (which we are trying to investigate in our paper) are largely discursive.

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: 17) make a similar, somewhat stronger claim. For them political discourse analysis should be critical focusing on the reproduction of political power through political discourse. They add that politics is oriented towards decision-making that can ground action.

## 1.1 Major Characteristics of Political Discourse

Throughout the literature that have been reviewed, the following points have been pointed out:

### a. Persuasion and Manipulation:

Language can be manipulated by political actors to produce specific effects (Wilson, 2001 cited in Collet and Najem, 2005: 2). It is also very important in persuasion, domination, and control. Politicians try to convince the public by their speeches or through interviews where they use dramatic overtone and sometimes unrealistic promises through the language forms to influence the public (Matic, 2012: 55). It is, therefore, the principal role of political discourse analysis to identify the many ways in which language can be used or manipulated (Wilson, 2001 cited in Collet and Najem, 2005: 2).

### b. Power and Ideology:

Power affects and is affected by discourse (Shayegh and Nabifar, 2012: 3481). Politicians and political groups need their own language to define their power and to signal their ideology through certain slogans and stereotypes (Wodak, 1989: 137). Critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA), as Fairclough (1992, 135) puts it, studies how the discursive practices arise and how ideology is shaped by power and struggle for power. Van Dijk (1997: 11) presents a harder edge saying that CDA is political in its orientation since it focuses on those who abuse power to establish or legitimate their own power.

### c. Decision Making and Problem Solution:

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, 22 – 26) point out that politics is oriented towards decision making. That is why political discourse is, in their view, inherently deliberative. The process of arriving at a decision involves minimal weighing of options and it is deliberative and

argumentative in nature. Blackledge (2005, 94) adds that the problem solution structure is a feature of different political discourses. He argues that in setting out the problem to be solved (for example: 'what were the causes of violence in streets of English towns?'), it is assumed that a solution will be forthcoming. Although there may be ambiguity about the initial question and a solution proposed, the problem-solution structure characterizes political discourse (ibid).

### d. Personality Defining:

Politicians' bad reputation concerning their political conduct is to a large extent due to the way they use language. To believe in a person or to call him/her trustworthy means believing what he/she says (Holly, 1989: 115). The linguistic behaviour of politicians define their personality traits which are very important in their elections (Moosmüller, 1989: 166). Introductions such as " Ladies and gentlemen! First, I would like to thank Mr. X ....." have the function of raising the value of one's own statement and making effort to sound close and friendly (ibid).

### e. Lexicon and Catchy Words:

Politicians may deliberately use catchphrases to influence the emotional level of their hearers (Wodak, 1989: 144). According to Matic (2012, 55), political speech is a genre of political discourse and part of public discourse. Politicians use carefully-crafted formal lexis prepared by professional speech writers that even needs no improvisation on the part of the speaker. Wodak (1989, 144) believes that politicians are inclined to use abstract, undefined or very vague forms to cover unpleasant facts, to cover their own ignorance and to deny any statement afterwards. On the contrary, Collet and Najem (2005: 4) believe that politicians' word choices are overt, rarely

unnoticed and deliberate. They are used to influence the public opinion.

f. Argumentation:

Blacledge (2005: 94) presents argumentations as a point which he considers a typical characteristic of political discourse analysis. Politicians often anticipate and counter possible opposition arguments. They are dialogic; they start to undermine any possible opposition before it occurs to block views alternative to the argument being proposed (see Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 23 for a similar view).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Data

The selected data is a speech delivered by President Barak Obama on 16th January, 2013. The speech was delivered on the occasion of signing 23 executive actions to reduce gun violence. This speech has received a lot of support by his Democrat campaign and a lot of opposition and criticism by the Republicans and a considerable number of people.

The speech is about 2646 words. For the purpose of analysis numbers to pages and paragraphs are given to simplify the selection and discussion of samples. What is worth mentioning here is that the full text has been studied and the selected samples of the analysis are representatives of the full text.

### 2.2 Aims of the Study

The study aims at:

1. Examining the discursive strategies of Obama's speech to be able to draw out his ideology and power.
2. Comparing the global-structural meaning with the local meaning, specially presenting a qualitative supported by a quantitative lexical analysis.
3. Supporting the analysis by a textual outlook at the text selected for analysis and syntactic justification for

the selection of certain pronouns.

### 2.3 The Problem

Throughout the literature that have been surveyed on political discourse analysis a discursive study that deals with a lexically detailed analysis that reveals accurately the speaker's real intention has not been found.

### 2.4 The Hypotheses

1. The text will be illuminating the lexical richness, and the vocabulary diversity will illuminate the ideological implications in Obama's speech.
2. Van Dijk's model of (1997) is very comprehensive in identifying the major discursive strategies and in explaining the content and what is beyond the linguistic realizations.
3. Obama's lexical selection is deliberate and in service of his own political and social interests and tries to promote his power.

## 3. Model Description and Analysis

In (1980), van Dijk worked on a discourse structural model called "Macrostructures" which he developed during the 1990s to be integrated in CDA. The model is simply built on three elements. They are as follows:

### 3.1 Macrostructures

Macrostructure focuses on the "global meaning" which in turn focuses or emphasizes the meaning of discourse theme or topic. The meaning of discourse is not limited to the meaning of its words and sentences. Accordingly, discourse will have topics that represent the gist or the most important information of a discourse which tells us what a discourse is about (van Dijk, 1980: 9). Political attitudes and opinions, gaining support, manipulating the public, manufacturing political consent, or legitimating political power, are all emphasized or de-emphasized by the selection of topics just like lexical selection (van Dijk, 1997: 25).

Political discourse exhibits preferred topics of politicians, and

since it is reflexive, politicians would praise themselves directly or indirectly through and speak about opponents, previous presidents, governments or parliaments (ibid). This typically appeared in Obama's speech:

- Obama's global topic was about social security, an issue which is not directly political, but rather related to the legal, educational, social system of schooling, yet it reflects the campaign's policy and actions in decision making. Thus, it is reflexive.
- Reference was made to topical institutions and organizations (elite organizations and actors, unions, professional organizations and their leaders):  
Page 2, parag. 3: mental health professionals,  
public health community  
parag. 5: Centers for Disease Control  
Congress  
parag. 8: National Rifle Association members  
Page 3, parag. 1: high-capacity magazines  
parag. 4: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.
- Topical participants also appeared. They are those who are able to contribute to the political process, viz. elite groups on the one hand and the public (citizens, people, etc.) on the other hand.  
Page 1, parag. 2: Joe Biden  
parag. 3: families of those gorgeous children and their teachers and guardians.  
kids (Grant, Julia, Hinna, Teja)  
Page 3, parag. 3: Ronald Regan (with positive reference).  
parag. 4: Tod Jones  
Page 4, parag. 5: Americans  
6: students
- Topics are mostly future-oriented. They are related to what Obama thinks he should do or will do or decide. Quite typical of much political discourse is the fact that reference to the present tends to be negative (the big deal here is shooting and killing among school kids), and reference to the future is mostly positive while reference to the past stays ambiguous, i.e. Obama did not propose any practical solutions to the

problem suggested by previous governments except to Ronald Regan.

- One should expect Obama to topicalize what is now the case and what should be done about it in future through modality choices or through speech acts (promises, threats, recommendations) and all have persuasive functions:  
Page 1, parag. 8: We should be thinking about our responsibility....  
Parag. 8: ...voices should compel us to change.  
Page 2, parag. 1: We can't put this off any longer  
parag. 2: that will prevent every tragedy  
parag. 3: I'm going to do my part.  
I will sit at the desk and I will sign....  
Parag 4: We will help schools  
Page 4, parag. 4: We should get together on people who buy guns.....  
His usage of modality and speech acts indicates his exercising of his authority and his evaluation of the current circumstance and both of course have pervasive functions (see Shayegh and Nabifar, 2012 for similar discussion).
- Topics might appear as evaluations. "We" are good vs. "They" are bad. We are democratic, they are not. We decide better than they do. Obama passed positive evaluations in his speech in representing his campaign while he passed negative evaluations to his opponents or enemies (Republic members of Congress, gun lobby) because he expected rejection. Our macrostructure analysis has revealed that all the topics occur along the line of positive self-presentation / negative other-presentation.
- The sub-topics that he raised were supportive of his main global topic or global macrostructure. This will be made clearer in the subsequent sections of analysis.

### 3.2 Superstructure (Textual Schema Analysis)

Superstructure is the overall schema of discourse. It explains how parts of the text, i.e. topics or macrostructures are arranged and organized by a conventional schemata

(superstructure) into the whole discourse. For example, we all know that in narrative discourse we have a superstructure textual schema of

beginning ➔ rising events ➔ climax ➔ conclusion.

Van Dijk (1980: 107) argues that superstructures are not directly controlled by ideology. Yet, throughout the research it has been observed that political speech can be pre-organized to serve a certain agenda. Schematic structure makes the global meaning (van Dijk, 1997: 29). Politicians can add significant details to get extra emphasis by putting them in prominent (first, important) schematic categories, or delete information to conceal an issue or at least downgrade it by putting it in a less prominent textual category (ibid).

Textual analysis is relevant in political discourse to explore strategies of argumentation as well as conclusions specially in attacking others. This also has a persuasive function. Van Dijk argues that even openings and closings have their own canonical functions (ibid).

In Obama's speech we could find the following schemata:



In the first part or page, Obama opens his speech by thanking the audience and Joe Biden for raising this issue. He welcomes the families of the victims giving details and showing responsibility which will in turn give importance to his subject.

In the second part (which is on page 2), Obama acknowledges the crisis and tries to give solutions. He shows statistics of killing events, presents his proposal with no details but promises concealing responsibility for what is happening, for example signing a directive concerning mental health professionals, strengthening a background check system, or directing the Center for Disease Control to fund their researches from Congress.

The third part of his speech which covers page 2, parag. (5) up to page 4, parag. (5) is dedicated to demanding help and

consensus so you can find Obama addressing his opponents and the American people:

Congress must act soon (page 2, parag. 6)

Congress must require a universal background check (page 2, parag. 7)

Congress should ban military-style assault weapons (page 3, parag. 1)

All Americans should help us (page 4, parag. 2)

Our action should be congressional (page 4, parag. 3)

In the last part, he goes back to praising America, families, and kids and closes his speech again by thanking them all. This makes the whole text well-organized, logical and coherent so that it can be very persuasive to the audience.

### 3.3 Microstructures (Local Semantics)

It refers to the local meaning of discourse by observing the semantic (lexicon), syntactic, and rhetorical aspects (van Dijk, 1980: 29) and how these aspects are used to influence the audience, to create support, to legitimize an action and to persuade the audience. Special emphasis will be laid on lexical analysis in this study as the other aspects are of lesser importance to the aim of this research.

Obama's political view, which he wants to convince the others of, is that he sees the high proportion of crimes in schools as being caused mainly by the failure of the Congress, the Second Amendment, the gun lobby and rich people and not by bad conditions, unemployment, unfixed mental health system or unprosecuted violent criminals. Now this message will be explained in terms of the ideological square of viewing positivity assigned to Obama and his campaign and negativity assigned to opponents in the Congress, criminals, and gun dealers. Thus, the deeds and promises of Obama and his group received much detailed explanation hiding any illogical, careless or irresponsible deeds. On the other side, the bad deeds of political outgroups or outgroup members are generalized, backed by specifications (detailed) and examples

(stories told by Obama on page 4).

### 3.3.1 Lexicon

Lexical selection in Obama's speech is shown in Table (1) below:

Table (1): Positive / Negative Lexis

Positive Expressions			Negative Expressions		
Page No.	Parag No.	Expression	Page No.	Parag No.	Expression
1	2	Reducing gun violence	2	2	Violently, violent
1	2	Protecting our children	2	2	There is no law or set of laws
1	3	Do everything we can			
1	8	Our responsibility to care	2	2	Senseless act of violence
1	9	Some concrete steps	2	2	No piece of legislation
1	9	Prevent, reduce	2	2	Will prevent every tragedy
1	8	Change	2	2	Act of evil
2	2	We've got an obligation to try	2	4	criminals
			2	4	Mental illness
2	4	Strengthening	2	7	Wrong people
2	4	Develop emergence preparedness	2	5	Those who oppose
3	3	Agree with us	2	5	Epidemic

		on this			violence
3	6	Let me be ... clearer	2	5	Ignorance
3	6	I respect our strong tradition	2	7	That is not smart
3	10	We must do something	3	1	Military style assault weapon
4	1	I'll put everything I've got into this	3	1	High-capacity magazine
			3	1	Pomp out...bullets
4	1	Examine ourselves	3	1	Much damage
4	1	Our hearts	3	1	Maximum damage
4	5	The land of free	3	7	Irresponsible
4	5	We are endowed by our Creator	3	7	Law-breaking
			3	9	Pundits, special interest lobbyists
4	5	We don't live in isolation	3	9	Tyrannical
			3	9	They want to give up fears
			3	9	Revenue for themselves
			3	9	Behind the scene
			3	9	To block any common-sense reform

			3	4	Gun lobby that funds their campaigns
			3	6	That right was denied in Wisconsin

Obama is using the language lexicon to promote his own social and political interests and hence he is promoting his own personal interests. This is illustrated clearly in the vocabulary he utilizes. We totally agree with Wang (2010: 261) in his view of Obama's use of more simple words and short sentences instead of difficult words. His language is very easy and colloquial. This, of course, has an effect of shortening the distance between him and his audience.

Obama used words with positive connotation to describe his own sense of the problem and of course to describe the programme of his political party. This is clear in the words (reduce, protect, do, help, prevent, try, strengthening, develop, change, clean). Besides, Obama's use of positive adjectives (gorgeous, pretty, smart, caring, joyful) to describe the kids he invited to the White House and his reference to fellow American citizens (As Americans, we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights). Obama's words were more or less emotive, informal and intimate indicating that he wants to touch people's hearts and to achieve a high degree of solidarity, which explains why he received a lot of criticism later on.

In our lexical analysis we also noticed that Obama tried hard to draw a brighter future in front of his audience. He explained the plans he intended to achieve if the Congress let his "Executive Actions" pass. He used many words indicating future plans the most famous of which are future modals (will prevent, I will sit and sign, we will help, we will make easier, we will make sure, I will direct, I will be nominating, we will ....change). This also explains the appearance of his electoral motto "Change" twice in the text because we all know that he promised the American people to bring changes. This can be considered a positive aspect that can be added to his personality defining factors i.e. to present himself the best person to rule America.

The other positive factor which we detected in our lexical analysis is his religious sense. On page 4 (paragraphs 5 and 6) we can find some specific items related to his religious belief. The man believes in God and he respects other people's right of worshipping. He admitted the Sikhs' denied right of worshipping in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. He tries to show himself as a man of tolerance and liberty as well to stay close to people because he is talking about things that most people accept and respect (see Wang, 2010: 260 for a similar view).

On the other hand, negativity is also achieved by lexicalization. Negativity in Obama's speech is assigned to three groups: criminals, gun dealers, and his opponents. We can find several noun phrases with which the speaker tries to refer to the doer of the action (e.g. criminals, mental illness, bad people) or the action itself (e.g. senseless act of evil, epidemic violence). Obama presents himself as the man who would bring justice to his nation through giving a negative image about past legislations (no piece of legislation) and of the gun lobby or gun dealers (pundits, special interest lobbyists, gun lobby). A negative image is also given about their actions and expected reactions (they want to give up fears, they'll do anything to block any common-sense reform). These terms may connote that those people are putting pressure on some members of the government to achieve their aims, if not in the present time, then in the future. Thus, Obama is actually presenting himself as a man of insight.

Obama presupposes rejection from the other campaign and some members of the Congress, yet he never names any of them; instead, he says (This will be difficult, there will be ..... politicians). He addresses them indirectly for the sake of legitimizing his own policy. Later on, he accuses them directly (gun lobby that funds their campaigns). Through using the word "funds" he points out the difference between him and his opponents, condemning their strategy, and revealing their bad intentions. He tries to persuade his audience of his opponents' incapability of undertaking the responsibility and to feel the crisis by presenting them as selfish irresponsible people.

Once again, Obama praises himself indirectly by negatively imaging the others. He presents himself as the only fighter for minority and poor people's rights through condemning the

past administration's policies (right was denied the Sikh in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, the right to assemble peaceably .... was denied shoppers in Clackamas, Oregon). He tries to persuade his audience that he will take good care of them because neither previous administrations nor the opponent campaign managed the crisis or brought any good.

### 3.3.2 Syntactic Remarks

In this section, we will basically embark on the use of "pronouns" which have been carefully manipulated in Obama's speech. Basically, they illuminated the polarization of "Us", "Them" and how "I", "We" and "They" are overloaded with different connotations among which are:

- "We" is used to promote solidarity and intimacy and it shortens the distance between the speaker and the hearer so that the speaker would give a strong impression of being an in-group member.
- "We" could be used to refer to the speaker himself, his team, or the whole nation and this will in turn describe Obama's position towards the case and towards his audience.

This could best be described in terms of frequency of usage as shown in Table (2) below:

Table (2): Pronouns Frequency

	Subject		Object		Possessive	
	Pronoun	Frequency	Pronoun	Frequency	Pronoun	Frequency
1st person	I	29	Me	-	My	-
	We	32	Us	6	Our	11
2nd person	You	5	You	-	Your	1
3rd person	He	-	Him	-	His	-
	She	4	Her	-	Her	1
	It	5	It	-	Their	3

	They	14	Them	6		
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Obviously, "I", "We" and "They" have scored high frequencies in the text. "We" which has scored the highest frequency has been used in different contexts to give the following meanings:

- "We" in the west ➡ but we've also long recognized (e.g. parag. 5, page 4)
- "We" the people ➡ we've suffered so much pain (page 4, parag. 2)
- "We" the American citizens ➡ We are endowed by our Creator (page 4, parag. 5)
- "We" the Democrats ➡ .... we can take right now (page 1, parag. 9)
- "We" in the government ➡ We cannot put off this any longer (page2, parag. 1)
- "We" the president ➡ we've heard from so many (page 1, parag. 3).

### 3.3.3 Lexical Repetition

A very important strategy that can be used to draw attention to preferred meanings to achieve persuasion. Let us examine the following:

- But we've also recognized as our Founders recognized, that with rights comes responsibility (page 4, parag. 5)
- Let's do the right thing . Let's do the right thing (page 5, parag. 2)
- The gunman in Aurora to 70 people ...70 people (page 3, parag. 2).

## 4. Conclusions

The paper has examined how lexical selection is of much importance in explicating the ideology of political texts. It has analyzed Obama's speech as a sample using van Dijk's (1997) model to reveal the discursive and lexical strategies implemented by the speaker to persuade his audience. The study has come up with the following conclusions:

- Obama's language is very simple and colloquial. He uses short and direct sentences that are full of emotive expressions to address his audience trying to persuade the audience with his views.
- The results of applying van Dijk's model have shown that Obama's speech is basically organized to achieve persuasion.
- The results have also shown that Obama's choice of lexicon is mainly maintaining coherence and is all in service of his ideological views and power.
- Obama's lexical selection promotes the polarization ideology, i.e. emphasizing positive information about him and his campaign and, on the other hand, emphasizing negative information about the others who are his opponents of course. This is totally obvious in our analysis of pronouns as well.

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