

THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGES IN THE INAUGURAL SPEECH OF BARACK OBAMA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the figurative language used in Barack Obama's second inaugural address, focusing on its types, semantic meanings, and pragmatic functions. Taking a qualitative descriptive approach, the research uses Perrine's classification of figurative language, alongside semantic theory and pragmatic theory as analytical frameworks. Data were taken from the official transcript and video recording of the speech and analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's content analysis model. The results revealed 32 figurative expressions, consisting of 13 metaphors, 6 personifications, 6 hyperboles, 5 synecdoches, and 2 symbols. Semantically, these expressions extend literal meanings into richer, more symbolic ones that emphasize themes of equality, unity, and progress. Pragmatically, they inspire, persuade, and unify the audience by presenting complex issues in a clear and emotionally engaging manner. However, as the study is limited to a single speech, the findings cannot fully represent figurative language in political discourse as a whole. Nevertheless, the study shows that figurative language was central to Obama's rhetorical strategy, functioning not only as a stylistic device but also as a persuasive tool that reinforced shared values and legitimized leadership.

Keywords: *figurative language, inaugural speech, Barack Obama*

A. Introduction

Language is more than a neutral medium of communication; it is a force that constructs meaning, identity, and power. Scholars argue that words do not merely transfer information but also shape ideologies and worldviews (Fairclough, 2001; Chilton, 2004). Through language, political leaders can inspire hope, strengthen unity, and influence decision-making (Charteris-Black, 2005). In political settings, every phrase and image is deliberately chosen to evoke both rational and emotional responses, showing that discourse itself is a strategic act (Simpson, 2004; Verdonk, 2002). Figurative language is especially important because it allows abstract concepts to be expressed vividly and persuasively. Leech and Short (2007) emphasize that figures of speech enrich stylistic meaning, while Pavlíková (2018) highlights their centrality in shaping political argumentation. Similarly, Nuriadi (2016) stresses that figures of speech act as cultural and ideological symbols, embedding

language with values that resonate with audiences.

Among political speeches, inaugural addresses stand out because they are not ordinary policy outlines but symbolic moments marking the transition of leadership. They are occasions where leaders are expected to reassure citizens, inspire collective confidence, and articulate a unifying vision for the future (Farnsworth, 2013; Kendall, 2013). Barack Obama's second inaugural address in 2013 demonstrates how figurative language can transform a speech into a rhetorical landmark. Commentators described it as eloquent and uplifting, with a strong emphasis on justice, equality, and shared responsibility (McKinney, 2013; Anggreni et al., 2022). By using metaphors such as a *never-ending journey* to describe democracy and symbols such as *the star that guides us* to embody equality, Obama reframed complex issues in ways that were both intellectually accessible and emotionally resonant (Risdianto, 2016; Oppusunggu et al., 2023).

Despite the significance of Obama's rhetoric, earlier research has often addressed it only partially. Risdianto (2016) examined metaphors in Obama's first inaugural address but overlooked other forms of figurative language. Oktarini (2019) identified rhetorical strategies across both inaugural speeches but did not analyze their semantic and pragmatic implications. Martika et al. (2022) explored ideology through Critical Discourse Analysis but paid little attention to how figurative expressions construct meaning. Other studies on political discourse (Nurdiana, 2019; Khater et al., 2024) focus on pragmatic or ideological aspects, while works like Kuswanto and Mustofa (2022) analyze semantic shifts in campaign speeches without integrating stylistic and pragmatic dimensions. These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive approach that combines stylistics, semantics, and pragmatics to reveal how figurative language simultaneously expands meaning and drives persuasion.

This research addresses that gap by analyzing the figurative

language in Obama's 2013 inaugural address. Using Perrine's (1992) classification of figures of speech, the study identifies the range of figurative expressions employed in the speech. Semantic theory (Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 2016; Kroeger, 2023) is then used to explain how literal meanings extend into symbolic interpretations, while pragmatic theory (Yule, 1996; Levinson, 1983; Wilson & Sperber, 2004) is applied to show how figurative expressions function in context to persuade, inspire, and unify. By combining these frameworks, this study moves beyond simple categorization to a deeper understanding of how figurative language operates as a rhetorical and communicative strategy.

The importance of this research lies in both its academic and practical contributions. Academically, it enriches the study of political discourse by showing how stylistics, semantics, and pragmatics can be integrated in analyzing figurative language. This combined approach demonstrates that figurative language is not only an ornament of style but also a

central component of persuasive communication (Verdonk, 2002; Simpson, 2004). Practically, the study contributes to public literacy by helping readers recognize how political leaders use language to shape thought and emotion. It also provides valuable material for educators in teaching stylistics and discourse analysis, offering authentic examples of how language functions in real-world contexts (Oviogun & Veerdee, 2020; Yulianda & Sunra, 2022; Sandy et al., 2021).

B. Research Methods

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive design with a focus on stylistic analysis. A qualitative approach is considered suitable because the aim is not to measure linguistic phenomena statistically, but to explore their meanings and functions in depth. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that qualitative research allows for interpretation of words and texts in their natural contexts, which in this case is a political speech addressed to both a national and international audience. In line with this, Moleong (2017) emphasizes that qualitative

research seeks to understand phenomena holistically and contextually, making it particularly relevant when analyzing language in real communication. Such an approach is widely used in language and discourse studies where the richness of meaning is more important than numerical generalization (Fairclough, 2001; Charteris-Black, 2005).

The data for this study come from Barack Obama's second inaugural address delivered on January 21, 2013. To ensure accuracy and reliability, two sources were used: the official transcript of the speech from the White House archives and the official video recording available through the White House's verified channel. The transcript provides the precise wording of the speech, while the video allows observation of intonation, stress, and pauses, which are important for understanding pragmatic meaning (Yule, 1996; Levinson, 1983). This dual-source method strengthens the validity of the data, as both text and performance are essential elements in rhetorical analysis (Simpson, 2004; Verdonk, 2002).

The process of data collection followed several stages. First, both the transcript and video were reviewed carefully to identify expressions that deviate from literal meaning. Figurative language was then classified according to Perrine's (1992) twelve categories, which include metaphor, simile, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, allegory, paradox, hyperbole, understatement, apostrophe, and irony. Each figurative expression was recorded in a data sheet, noting its textual form, type, and location within the speech. This systematic step ensured that the analysis was comprehensive and transparent (Anggreni et al., 2022).

For data analysis, this study employed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the condensation stage, figurative expressions were selected and grouped according to their categories. In the display stage, they were arranged in tables showing their semantic meaning and pragmatic function. Finally, in the conclusion

stage, the researcher interpreted how the figurative expressions as a whole contributed to the rhetorical effectiveness of Obama's address. This model has been widely applied in linguistic and discourse studies because of its systematic and iterative process (Ketaren et al., 2021; Kuswanto & Mustofa, 2022).

By combining stylistic, semantic, and pragmatic frameworks, this methodological design ensured a holistic analysis. Stylistics provided the descriptive account of language use, semantics explained the expansion of literal to symbolic meanings, and pragmatics clarified the speaker's intention in context. This triangulation of perspectives has been emphasized in previous studies as essential for understanding how figurative language operates in political and cultural texts (Nuriadi, 2016; Pavlíková, 2018; Sandy et al., 2021).

C. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of Barack Obama's second inaugural address revealed 32 figurative expressions, consisting of 13 metaphors, 6 personifications, 5

synecdoches, 2 symbols, and 6 hyperboles. The distribution is shown below.

Table 1. Types of Figurative Language in the Inaugural Speech of Barack Obama

No	Types of Figurative Language	Number of Occurrences
1	Metaphor	13
2	Personification	6
3	Synecdoche	5
4	Symbol	2
5	Hyperbole	6
Total		32

The discussion below explains each type with examples, drawing on Perrine's (1992) classification, Lyons' (1995) semantics, and Yule's (1996) pragmatics.

Metaphor

Metaphor was the most frequent device with 13 instances. Expressions such as a never-ending journey and the anchor of strong alliances show how Obama uses comparisons to transform abstract ideas into tangible images. Semantically, journey literally denotes travel but here represents democratic progress (Lyons, 1995). Pragmatically, it motivates citizens to see equality as an unfinished collective task (Yule, 1996). The metaphor of America as an anchor similarly extends the meaning of

stability to international relations, reassuring listeners of U.S. reliability. This dominance of metaphor confirms Perrine's (1992) view that metaphor deepens meaning by transferring qualities across domains.

Personification

Obama often attributes human qualities to abstract concepts. For example, history tells us and the flag that fills our hearts with pride personify history and the national flag. Semantically, neither history nor a flag can literally act, but their meanings are extended to suggest agency (Lyons, 1995). Pragmatically, this rhetorical move transforms static symbols into active moral guides, making national values feel alive and urgent (Yule, 1996). By animating these abstractions, Obama fosters an emotional bond between the audience and the ideals they represent.

Synecdoche

Several expressions rely on synecdoche, where a part stands for the whole. Examples include all men to mean humanity and arms to mean the entire military force. Semantically, these words are limited in scope, but Obama extends them to encompass

broader categories (Lyons, 1995). Pragmatically, such synecdoches simplify broad social or political issues into more relatable terms (Yule, 1996). For instance, referring to wives, mothers, and daughters highlights women's roles in family life to argue for gender equality, making the issue personally relevant for listeners.

Symbol

Symbols appear less frequently but carry strong cultural resonance. The phrase life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness symbolizes America's founding ideals, while the star that guides us symbolizes equality. Semantically, these terms retain their literal meaning but also represent deeper national values (Lyons, 1995). Pragmatically, Obama invokes them to connect contemporary struggles with historical principles, reinforcing legitimacy and continuity (Yule, 1996). These symbols remind the audience that present responsibilities are extensions of the nation's original promises.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is used to inspire emotion through exaggeration. Statements such as America's

possibilities are limitless and our soldiers are unmatched in skill and courage go beyond literal truth. Semantically, limitless or unmatched are exaggerations (Lyons, 1995). Pragmatically, they heighten optimism, pride, and unity (Yule, 1996). By overstating national potential and military strength, Obama strengthens collective confidence and frames challenges as surmountable.

E. Conclusion

The analysis shows that Barack Obama's second inaugural address relies heavily on figurative language to strengthen its message. From the 32 expressions identified; 13 metaphors, 6 personifications, 5 synecdoches, 2 symbols, and 6 hyperboles. Metaphor appeared most often, shaping abstract political ideas into concrete and relatable images. In terms of meaning, the expressions expand literal sense into richer symbolic layers (Lyons, 1995), while in terms of use, they work to inspire, persuade, and bring people together (Yule, 1996). This supports Perrine's (1992) view that figurative language adds depth and resonance, making Obama's speech more than a

set of political statements, but a call to unity grounded in shared values.

Looking ahead, studies on other political speeches could reveal whether similar patterns occur across different leaders or contexts. It would also be valuable to connect this kind of analysis with rhetorical or discourse studies to see how figurative language interacts with ideology and persuasion on a broader scale. For educators, speeches like this can serve as practical teaching material in stylistics or semantics classes, helping students see how language functions in real-world communication.

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