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A Study of Tropes and Figures in Mandela's speech at Harvard University

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Abstract

This paper studies Nelson Mandela's speech at Harvard University with a view to investigating tropes and figures of speech. Figures of speech are one of the prominent stylistic devices that make a speech more effective. In the analysis, it was found that Nelson Mandela used many figures of speech but metaphor, hyperbole and litotes, alliteration and assonance, and homoeoteleuton are most common and skillfully used. Mandela used these tropes and figure with a view to stirring the audience's certain emotions, breaking monotony, and mitigating and intensifying certain issues.

Keywords: Tropes and figures of speech, stylistic devices, public speech, Nelson Mandela

Introduction

Public speaking is a very complex process that requires competency of language and knowledge of many domains like social psychology, pragmatics, etc. But the skill of language use is in the first place. A skilled user of language can become a skilled orator for he/she knows how to modify the language to achieve his/her goals. Public speakers are seen using various strategies for the sake of persuasion, motivation, entertainment, etc. The use of figures of speech is one of the dominant strategies to achieve certain goals and arouse various emotions and effects. These linguistic features of the language are studied through stylistics.

Stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics that studies the style of a text in terms of choice and arrangement of linguistic features in a sentence. Norgaard, Montoro & Busse (2010) define stylistics as "the study of the ways in which meaning is created through language in literature as well as in other types of text" (Norgaard, Montoro & Busse 2010:1). Stating the goal of stylistic analysis, Wales (2011) says that stylistic studies aim at examining how a text

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works, by explaining formal features of the text and their functional importance in the interpretation of the text (Wales 2011:400). Crystal (2008) defines stylistics as "a branch of linguistics which studies the features of SITUATIONALLY distinctive uses (VARIETIES) of language, and tries to establish principles capable of accounting for the particular choices made by the individual and social groups in their use of language" (Crystal 2008:460). Verdonk (2002) defines stylistics as the study of the style of language, wherein style is "distinctive linguistics expression" (Verdonk 2002:3). Thus it can be concluded that stylistics studies a text in terms of choice of linguistic features, register, syntactic structure, rhythm, schematics structure, etc. and a stylistician investigates text to know how it works and how is meaning deducted from the words on the page.

According to Simpson (2004), stylistics studies language on seven levels, namely phonological level, graphological level, morphological level, syntactic or grammatical level, lexical level, pragmatic level, and semantic level (Simpson 2004:5). Stylistics explores language and its creativity in context; therefore, it facilitates a deeper understanding of the structure and contents of a text.

About the Speaker

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was the first democratically elected President of South Africa. He served as a president from 1994 to 1999. He was an anti-apartheid revolutionary, lawyer, political leader, and philanthropist. He was accused of treason and was imprisoned for twenty-seven years during his struggle for championing the cause of the Anti-apartheid Movement. Moreover, He served in the office of the African National Congress Party as the eleventh president from 1991 to 1997. He was bestowed upon hundreds of prestigious awards and honours. Some of them are Nobel Peace Prize, Lenin Peace Prize, Bharat Ratna. Moreover, he was conferred with many honorary Doctorates from many prestigious universities and Harvard University is one of them.

The present address is Nelson Mandela's speech at Harvard University when he was awarded the honorary PhD degree in a special convocation on 18 September 1998.

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Analysis of tropes and figures

In the analysis, I have analyzed the select speech through a qualitative approach from a stylistic perspective. For this purpose, I minutely read the text of the speech and selected the sentences which explicitly illustrate distinctive tropes and figures of speech.

7.1. The use of metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech that is used to speak of one thing in terms of another. Simile is a type of metaphor where one speaks of one thing in terms of another by using words "as" and "like". Instances of metaphor are:

"We enter the new millennium in the hope that the rich fruits of learning, science and technological progress will in this coming century truly be shared by all in this global village in which we live".

7.2. The use of simile

Abrams and Harpham (2015) define simile as "a comparison between two distinctly different things is explicitly indicated by the words like or as" (Abrams and Harpham 2015:133). Instances of simile:

"…emergence of men and women and indeed of institutions that have chosen the world as the theatre of the operation as the platform from which to ventilate their thinking and their ideas".

In the above-given examples, Mandela used metaphor. He uses a metaphor when he says "rich fruits of learning". "Learning" is presented as if it were a tree and fruits grow on it. Further, he uses a metaphor when he says "global village" to substitute the globe. It is a metaphor because a village is such a geographical area that does not have any boundary within itself while the world is divided by many international boundaries. He also uses a metaphor when he compares "the world" with "the theatre of operation".

7.3. The use of alliteration and assonance

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For the effect of musicality, Mandela used Alliteration, Assonance, and Homoeoteleuton. Abrams and Harpham (2015) define alliteration as "the repetition of speech sound in a sequence of nearby words" and assonance as "repetition of similar or identical vowels—especially in stressed syllables—in a sequence of nearby words" (Abrams and Harpham 2015:12). Alliteration is the most frequently used figure of speech in the speech of Mandela. Some most explicit examples of Alliteration are:

"Conferred at a specially convened Convocation"

"Symbolic significance"

"Civil society"

"Reconstruction and regeneration"

"Suddenly switched subject and said"

Instances of assonance are:

"C**o**ntinues to c**o**nduct",

"G**i**ven you a gl**i**mpse",

"V**i**vid p**i**cture"

7.4. The use homeoteleuton/homoeoteleuton

Merriam Webster Online Dictionary defines homoeoteleuton or homeoteleuton as "an occurrence in writing of the same or similar endings near together (as in neighbouring clauses or lines) whether happening by chance or done for rhythmical effect". The use of this figure of speech is quite intentional and used for the effect of musicality. and avoidance of monotony. Instances of homeoteleuton are:

"timely and to be greatly"

"reconstruction and regeneration"

"institution has served its nation with distinction"

7.5. The use of hyperbole and litotes

Mandela used hyperbole for the effect of intensification and emphasis. Abrams and Harpham (2015) define hyperbole as "the extravagant exaggeration of fact or possibility". He also

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employed litotes with the purpose of indirectness and emphasizing an issue. Abrams and Harpham (2015) define litotes as "the assertion of an affirmative by negating its contrary" (Abrams and Harpham 2015:169). The use of hyperbole and litotes is very limited, but they are very effectively employed to stir the thoughts of the audience and highlight an issue. The instances of hyperbole are:

"There could not have been a more moving start to the visit than one which included being honored in this way by one of the great educational institutions of this nation and of the world".
"Few people will deny that the University of Harvard is one of the institutions that have chosen the entire world in order to bring strength and hope to those who otherwise would have had no future at all".

The examples of litotes are:

"I humbly accept the award in that spirit, while at the same time wishing you to know that we are not unaware of, nor unmoved by the great compliment you pay us by conferring this degree at a specially convened Convocation".

7.6. The use of scesis onomaton

Mandela used the figure of speech Scesis Onomaton for the sake of intensification, emphasis, and grabbing attention of the audience. Mohan (2019) defines 'scesis onomaton' as "a set of two or more different words with the same meaning occurs within the same sentence" (Mohan 2019:43). The use of this figure of speech is also very limited, but it is very strategically and effectively used. The instances of Scesis Onomaton are:
"The disparity between the developed and developing world, between North and South, reflects itself also in the sphere of educational and intellectual resources".
"Mister President, we accept this great honour bestowed upon us today as a symbol of how South Africa and the United States, Africa and the West, the developing and the developed world, are reaching out and joining hands as partners in building a world order that equally benefits all the nations and people of the world".

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Conclusion

The analysis shows that Mandela used metaphors to arouse various emotions among the audiences with the purpose of persuasion and rhetorical effect. Further, he used metaphor for the sake of comparison and draw mental images of certain abstract ideas. He used alliteration, assonance, and homoeoteleuton for musicality and highlighting certain issues of international importance. Mandela used many figures of speech for intensification, emphasis, and grabbing the attention of the audience. They are scesis onomaton, and hyperbole and litotes. Although the use of these figures of speech is very limited, they are very strategically and effectively used. On the basis of the analysis, it can be said that figures of speech are the important stylistic devices used in public speeches. Besides, Mandela was a great orator who used various tropes and figures of speech for persuasive and motivational effects.

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