

ACCESS UPDATE

“Vote for my husband!”



by Therese Holm

The ultimate nightmare: You are standing before a podium looking out on to a sea of people. A microphone in front of you picks up your every word, camera lenses are pointing towards you from every angle, ready to capture every gesture you make. Millions of viewers are watching you, waiting for you to convince them to vote for your husband as the next American president. How can you persuade them?

In the preparations for a presidential election the presidential candidates give many speeches in which they explain their visions and the plans they wish to implement should they be elected President of the USA. Other party members, previous presidents and current celebrities will also speak out to support their candidate. In this year's presidential campaign, however, the speeches of two women attracted more attention than many of the other speeches combined.

In August and September of 2012 Michelle Obama and Ann Romney addressed, respectively, the Democratic and the Republican National Conventions. Each woman had the same goal: To obtain more votes for their husband in the presidential election in November. So, what do you say to get more voters on your husband's side? In this article we shall compare and contrast the speeches the two women made to see how they argue to convince the audience to give their vote to either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. But first, let us look at some terminology and rhetorical devices that are useful when analysing speeches.

TERMINOLOGY: RHETORICAL DEVICES

Allusion: Quoting directly from another known source, for example the Bible or another famous speech ("I have a dream ...").

Alliteration: The repetition of a consonant sound in two or more neighbouring words. For example: "dignity and decency", "a desperate decade of decline".

Antithesis: Explaining what you do NOT want to do, often followed by what you do want to do. For example: "I do not want to wait until everyone is ready – the change must come now".

False dilemmas: When the speaker offers a limited number of options, while in reality more options are available. For example: "Either we cut the social programs or we live with a huge deficit, and we cannot live with a huge deficit!"

Hypophora: When the speaker poses a question and answers it herself. For example: "What is the solution? The solution is to create more jobs!"

Juxtaposition: When two contrasting elements are put together for rhetorical effect. For example: “heaven and hell”, “through fire and ice”, “young and old”, “weak and strong”.

Parallelism: Repeating parts of a sentence within the same sentence for rhetorical effect. For example: “If anyone wonders why you should leave your sofa, why you should go to the polling station and why you should vote ...”

Repetition: Repeating parts of or an entire sentence.

Rhetorical question: A statement formulated as a question which does not require an answer. For example: “Are those the values that made our country great?”

Tricolon: The use of three successive sentences, each about the same in length, but increasing in power. For example: “We will fight! We will kill! We will win!”

Varied sentence length: Using sentences of different length to emphasize a point in the shorter sentence. For example: “This man is the hardest working man you will ever meet, with a dedication towards his work like no one else I have ever known. This is the man you need.”

In addition to this, we often identify three ways of arguing in a non-fiction text: Ethos, pathos and logos:

Ethos: When you argue using authority and credibility.

Pathos: When you argue using feelings and moral certitude.

Logos: When you argue using logic and reason.

Before you read on, take some time to read the transcripts of the two speeches, or watch them on YouTube. (Search for “Transcript/Video of Ann Romney’s speech at the Republican National Convention”, or “Transcript/Video of Michelle Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention”.)

Being able to correctly identify the rhetorical devices used is of course essential when it comes to analysing a speech. Just as important is being able to explain why the speaker has chosen to use the rhetorical devices, and what effect they have on the text. Moreover, it is necessary to look at how the speaker argues for her cause – and how the speaker tries to get her message across. Let us have a look at how Ann Romney and Michelle Obama try to convince the viewers to give their vote to their respective husbands.



Ann Romney (L) speaking at the Republican National Convention (RNC) at the Tampa Bay Times Forum in Tampa, Florida, on August 28, 2012, and Michelle Obama (R) delivering a speech at the Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte, North Carolina, on September 4

“I want to talk to you about love”

Ann Romney starts her speech with an antithesis by telling the audience what she is *not* going to talk about: “I want to talk to you tonight not about politics and not about party”. This makes Romney’s agenda rather different from the other speeches at the national convention, which usually only revolve around politics and party. She continues: “Tonight I want to talk to you about love”, a sentence which signals that the tone of this speech will be different and probably more personal than other speeches the audience has heard during the convention.

Michelle Obama chooses to start her speech by reminding the audience of her authority, using ethos when she says: “Over the past few years as First Lady, I have had the extraordinary privilege of traveling all across this country”. She then quickly resorts to pathos, when she says that everywhere she has been she has “seen the very best of the American spirit”, and continues by giving examples of this spirit through a series of tricolons, starting with the words “I have seen it in ...”. This structure is rather similar to Romney’s speech, where her approach is similar to a tricolon, starting with the words “I want to talk to you about ...”. Both women thus choose to start their speech by talking about their feelings, but while Obama gives examples of her admiration for the American spirit, Romney focuses more on the “one great thing that unites us” – love.

“They are here among us tonight”

The love that Romney talks about extends not only to the man she “met at a dance many years ago” or the love “we have for our children and our children’s children”, it extends to “those Americans, our brothers and sisters, who are going through difficult times”. She then continues to explain who “those Americans” are, and that “They are here among us tonight; they are here in neighbourhoods across Tampa and all across the USA”. This juxtaposition of “us” and “them” is interesting to note – one could ask whether the people in the audience at the convention feel that they belong in either category?

When Obama gave her speech, some days later, she made a point out of stating that for Barack Obama, no such juxtaposition exists: “there is no such thing as ‘us’ and ‘them’”. She then continues: “he doesn’t care whether you’re a Democrat, a Republican or none of the above ... he knows that we all love our country [...] he’s always looking for the very best in everyone he meets”. While Romney expresses her sympathy for “those Americans” who are going through difficult times, placing herself outside that category, Obama talks about the people she meets every day, saying that “they make me proud... every day they remind me how blessed we are to live in the greatest nation on earth”. It seems that Romney wishes to express her sympathy for Americans going through a tough period; while Obama focuses on how proud Americans make her. And it is perhaps not surprising that the two speakers argue differently, given their positions. Obama, having been First Lady for four years, wants to express that her husband, the president, cares for the well-being of all Americans. He is, after all, everyone’s president, not just working for those who voted for him in the last election. Romney, on the other hand, wants to point out that things have not been easy for people during this last presidential period, partly because of the political decisions that have been made.

“I’m not sure if men really understand this, but ... ”

Romney again turns to ethos when, like Obama, she says that she has been “all across the country for the past year and a half”. But instead of being impressed with the American people, as Obama was, Romney has “heard these stories of how hard it is to get ahead now”. And according to Romney, one group of the population has struggled more than others: women. If we listen carefully, she says, we could hear a “great collective sigh” late at night, coming from Americans who are not sure how they will make it through another day”. She continues: “And if you listen carefully, you’ll hear the women sighing a little bit more than the men”, before asking the rhetorical question: “It’s how it is, isn’t it?” For a second you may be tempted to believe that she is addressing all women of the nation, but in

her next sentences she clarifies this: “It’s the moms of this nation [...] who really hold this country together”, before adding another rhetorical question: “You know it’s true, don’t you?” The four last years may have been hard for many Americans, but according to Romney, the moms have had to struggle the most. Appealing to the moms with pathos through a series of repetitive sentences starting with “You know”, she ends up singing the moms’ praise. Not only are the moms “the best of America” and “the hope of America”, she also uses a kind of false dilemma when she says “There would not be an America without you”.

Having sung the moms’ praise, Romney wants to include all American women in her next sentence. She does this by creating a verbal barrier between men and women through this antithesis: “I’m not sure if men really understand this, but I don’t think there’s a woman in America who really expects her life to be easy”. This is an interesting sentence to interpret, as a number of questions arise: Does Romney think that American *men* expect their lives to be easy? Is that why men cannot understand how the women feel? Or is she trying to provoke the men listening to her speech by teasing them and challenging them? Is she trying to be coquettish towards the men and at the same time make the women who do not have children feel included? It is not entirely clear from the context what she is trying to do here.

“A kindred spirit”

Both Obama and Romney want the audience to get to know their husbands better. Therefore they spend a large part of the speech talking about their own and their husbands’ backgrounds, their values and what they stand for. Using pathos, a vivid language and numerous sensory details, the speakers share information about their husbands through a narrative which takes the listeners back to when the presidential candidates first met their future wives. “He was tall, laughed a lot, was nervous”, Ann Romney remembers. “He was a guy whose proudest possession was a coffee table he’d found in a dumpster”, Michelle Obama reminisces. Both speakers emphasize the beauty in not having a lot, but having love for one another. Romney’s remarks about being “very young, both still in college” when they got married, and then having to eat “lot of pasta and tuna fish” – presumably because it is a cheap meal – echoes Obama’s tricolon statement about being “so young, so in love and so in debt”.

Midway through the speeches, both women start to talk about their own and their husbands’ families, again using the narrative style, and emphasize how important the families have been for them. “I am the granddaughter of a Welsh coal miner”, Romney says, “who was determined that his kids get out of the mines”. “My father was a pump operator at the city water plant, and he was

diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when I was young”, Obama tells the audience. “Mitt’s dad never graduated from college. Instead he became a carpenter”, Romney continues. “Barack was raised by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills, and by grandparents who stepped in when she needed help”, Obama says. Why all this talk about family background, one may wonder. Part of the reason could be to show the audience and the listeners that even though the two men in question now are in positions of power, it was not always so – hard work has paved the way. “Mitt Romney was not handed success”, his wife says, “He built it”. Similarly, Michelle Obama points out that “for Barack, success isn’t about how much money you make, it’s about the difference you make in people’s lives”.

Another reason for the narrative about family background, is that it helps explain how the two men were taught the values they carry with them today. These values are clearly stated through the use of alliteration – “family, faith and love of one’s fellow man”, says Romney, “dignity and decency”, says Obama.

Finally, it gives the audience some images they are likely to remember after the speech is over. Romney’s pasta and tuna fish and Obama’s rusty car and too small shoes serve the same purpose: They show the audience that the presidential candidates are “real” people who have worked hard to get to where they are, and that they still remember where they came from.

“No one will work harder”

Towards the end of the speeches, after having used the narrative style for some time, both speakers change tactics and employ a number of repetitions to enhance their message. Obama does this when she lists several decisions her husband has made in the past four years, using “That’s why...” as the repeating phrase. She does the same a bit later in the speech, when she explains her love for her husband. “I love that...” she says, repeating the phrase three times. And at the end of the speech, she repeats the phrase “if I / we want” within the same sentence, thus creating parallelism.

Romney is also fond of repetitions, and several places in the speech she repeats a phrase three times over. “No one will...” she says, hammering the message into the audience in short sentences. A bit later she assures the listeners that “This man will not fail. This man will not let us down. This man will lift up America”. Since the first two sentences here are examples of antithesis, the third becomes even more powerful, when she says what this man will do, rather than what he will not do. Towards the very end of her speech, Romney’s sentences become shorter and more concentrated: “This is our country. This is our future. These are our children and grandchildren. You can trust Mitt. He loves America”. These sentences are a strong contrast to the narrative style she uses when she talks about their families and backgrounds – and serve a different purpose, of course.

While the talk about family background creates an image of her husband that the voters can relate to, the last part of the speech is more about selling the political message “vote for my husband”.



Mitt Romney (L) embracing his wife Ann and President Barack Obama (R) embracing First Lady Michelle Obama at the conclusion of the final presidential debate, October 22, 2012 (©NTB scanpix)

“My most important title is still mom-in-chief”

There are many similarities between the two speeches we have examined here. The goal, the content, the structure, the way the two speakers talk about their backgrounds with much pathos, even the values they say their husbands represent, seem to be the same. But one woman is trying to get her husband elected, while the other is trying to get her husband re-elected. Therefore Michelle Obama has to focus more on the positive changes she feels her husband has contributed to in the past four years, while Ann Romney has to point out that the past four years have been hard for many voters with a Democrat in the White House. Romney is trying to connect with the moms of America by spending a fair bit of her speech singing their praises. Obama, as First Lady, has to address all Americans in her speech – and chooses to do so by focusing on how proud she is of the American spirit. But she also emphasizes what an honour and a privilege it is to serve as First Lady – even if being a mom is still her most important job.

It is not really surprising that Romney has a biblical allusion in her speech (“Give and it shall be given unto you”), while Obama mentions “a young preacher [who] could lift us to the

mountaintop with his righteous dream". Nor is it surprising that both women express very clearly what their role is: "I say all of this tonight not just as a First Lady ... and not just as a wife", Obama says, and continues: "My most important title is still mom-in-chief". "I can only stand here tonight, as a wife, a mother, a grandmother, an American", Romney says. Since her children are grown up and have children of their own, it is perhaps only natural that Romney feels that being a wife is her main role, while Obama, who has two young daughters, feels that being a mom is her number one priority.

The love and respect both women feel for their respective husbands is apparent throughout the speech and culminates in their final sentences: "We must once again come together and stand together for the man we can trust to keep moving this great country forward", Obama says. "You can trust Mitt", Romney assures the audience; "He loves America. He will take us to a better place, just as he took me home safely from that dance. Give him that chance". Both speakers choose to end the speech using a metaphor for movement: they both insist that their husband, if elected, will move the country forward or take the voters to a better place. Interestingly, the speaker promoting the re-election of her husband used the word "change" in the presidential campaign four years ago. Now she asks the listeners to stand together with her. Romney asks, not for change, but for a chance.

DISCUSS:

- 1 Which catch phrases and sentences do you think the audience will remember after having heard the two speeches?
- 2 Only Romney uses rhetorical questions and hypophora. What effect does this have on her speech?
- 3 How do you think people would have reacted if Mitt Romney had said "I'm not sure if women really understand this, but ..."?
- 4 "I want to talk about love", Romney said. In which ways was her speech about love? Did she end up talking a bit about politics after all?
- 5 Michelle Obama also expresses a lot of love in her speech – what does she express her love for?

FURTHER ANALYSIS:

- 1 The two women use both their husbands' first names ("Mitt" and "Barack") and their full names when they talk about them. Find two examples of both and discuss when they use just "Mitt" and "Barack" and when they use the full name – and why you think they do this.
- 2 Both Romney and Obama make direct and indirect references to "The American Dream" in their speeches. According to what they say, how has the American Dream been present and important both in their own and in their husbands' lives?