



## Analysing Political Speeches

Students are quite frequently asked to analyse a (political) speech, eg by an American president, or British prime minister important politicians like the secretary general of the UN. Usually you only get part of the speech, ie an excerpt from a longer text, but sometimes you might even be played the speech in a video or as an audio recording.

Political speeches aim at convincing the listener by arguments, to persuade him or her on an emotional level or even manipulate him. Often there is a mixture if these.

You need to have some socio-political background knowledge, eg about political events or ideas like the American Dream in order to be able to analyse the speech properly. You are usually also asked to comment on the things said on a personal level.

### Political Speeches

1. A political speech generally starts with an introduction by which the speaker intends to attract the audience's attention, for example by
  - making clear the purpose of the speech
  - mentioning the topic and by emphasizing its importance
  - beginning with a question or a little story
  - showing or referring to something related to the topic, such as an object, a photo, statistics, etc.
2. In the main part of the speech the speaker tries **to maintain the audience's attention**, for instance by
  - forming rather short and clear sentences
  - developing his/her thoughts and main points step by step
  - backing up his/her main ideas/points with facts and background information
  - suggesting what should be done to improve the situation or presenting solutions to the problem
  - including personal experience, examples or a story to make his/her speech more lively, establish a "personal" relationship to become well-liked
  - using rhetorical devices such as repetition, alliteration, comparisons, etc.
3. At the end of his/her speech the speaker may appeal again to the audience's intellect and/or emotions, for example by
  - summing up his/her main ideas/arguments in one or two sentences
  - briefly mentioning what the outlook might be
  - asking the audience to support his view, ideas, programme, etc.

### Some important aspects for the analysis of political speeches

Close reading of the text, with special attention to

- a) key words and phrases
- b) clusters (a series of words that are related to each other in meaning)
- c) oppositions (e.g. negative/positive; near/distant; familiar/alien)
- d) the use of key symbols, slogans, stereotypes;
- e) abstractions and generalizations versus the presentation of specific issues or events:
  - how are these two levels related to each other?
  - how does one level outweigh the other?
- f) metaphors, analogies, illustrations - from what spheres of life are they drawn (e.g. nature; religion) ?
- g) other characteristic features of style (choice of words and syntax), e.g.
  - short simple statements;
  - numerous colloquialisms and slang expressions;
  - numerous poetic and learned expressions
- h) the use of personal pronouns (e.g. 'I', 'us', 'we', 'you', 'they' etc.) and the meaning of these pronouns in the context of the speech
- i) patterns of identification and solidarity:
  - who is 'we' and who does the speaker refer to by 'they'?
  - what role models or heroes are being praised, what sphere of life is touched upon?

### Some stylistic devices

#### (1) analogy

Analogy means resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike.

Example: There is an analogy between the branches of a tree and those of a family.

Both simile and metaphor are based on analogy!

#### (2) simile



A simile is a figure of speech in which two things are compared because they have something in common although they are different in all other respects. Its general purpose is to make the description more vivid and more striking.

In a simile the comparison is explicitly stated with the help of as or like.

Example: *My love is like a red, red rose.* (Robert Burns)  
*I wandered lonely as a cloud.* (William Wordsworth)  
*Miss Amelia Jones is like a fussy old hen.* (Anon.)

### (3) metaphor

A metaphor is a simile condensed: A simile says merely that one thing is like another, whereas the metaphor says that one thing is another. The simile "Miss Amelia Jones is like a fussy old hen" becomes a metaphor if 'like' is dropped.

Example: *All the world is a stage...* (Shakespeare) *Life is but a walking shadow.* (Shakespeare)  
*The countess sailed across the room.* (Anon.)

### (4) alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of a consonantal sound of two or more neighbouring words.

### (5) repetition

The repetition of words or phrases is sometimes made use of for the purpose of emphasis.

Example: *It's his only wish, his only ambition, the only plan he pursues.* (6) parallelism

In parallelism two or more parts of one sentence ( sometimes of two or more sentences) are given a similar form so as to give the whole a definite pattern. This symmetry tends to produce an agreeable rhythm. It can also help to bring out the point of a paragraph - to emphasize a contrast, for example, by balancing some words or parts of speech against each other.

Example: *We charge him with having broken his oath, we accuse him of having given up his people, and we censure him for having violated against the articles of the Bill of Rights.*

### (7) antithesis

As a rhetorical figure antithesis denotes the opposing of ideas by means of grammatically parallel arrangements of words, clauses or sentences so as to produce an effective contrast.

Example: *He gave everything to those who deserved it, but he did not give anything to those who were idle.*

## Some useful phrases

- The speaker delivers / gives / makes a speech ...
- The speaker draws his/her audience's attention to ...
- He / she informs about...
- He/she appeals to feelings and emotions by ...
- He/she intends/tries to convince/persuade the audience by...
- The speaker tries to win the audience over to his side

To achieve the greatest impact speakers use a multitude of rhetorical and stylistic devices. Have a good look at the task you are given – usually a 'task 2', namely what aspects of the speech you are asked to examine (⇒ *operators*). Usually this is done with reference to the intention of the speaker or the effect of the speech on the audience.

## Some rhetorical devices:

The following phrases and expressions can help you to prepare a good analysis:

- The speaker uses/employs/makes use of colloquial/current/common/formal/technical... words/phrases/expressions/language/terms
- He/she alludes to/suggests that...
- He/she draws a comparison/an analogy between ...
- He / she compares / contrasts A with B
- The speaker uses images/examples/metaphors/ personification ... to convey a lively/vivid/ graphic / impression
- He/she illustrates his/her argumentation by...
- He/she repeats .../uses repetition/alliteration/ analogies to underline/stress/underscore that...
- He / she criticizes (sth in an ironical way) / attacks sb ... His/her criticism/irony is directed against/ attacks ...

In case you are asked to write a reply to the speech in form of another speech refer to the above list of features to write your reply.



**Application:**

example	keyword analysis
a) Blankets and mattresses hung like tongues from the windows.	
b) Bees work endlessly to produce as much honey as they can. On my trip to China I got a similar impression. Chinese people seem to be able to work without ever making a break.	
c) After life's fitful fever ...	
d) He cried out what he felt, he wrote down what he thought and he relied on what he saw.	
e) The snake was hissing secretive sounds.	
f) They were not the captives of their own doubts.	