

# A Stylistic Study on John F. Kennedy's Diction to Strengthen the Appeal of *Inaugural Address*

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Diction, as one of the important aspects of stylistics, is deserving of our attention and study. This paper devotes itself to Kennedy's *Inaugural Address*, and concentrates on how the diction strengthens its appeal to the audience. Sound is of great importance and significance and proper use of sound can achieve wonderful effect to strengthen its appeal. Wide use of rhetorical devices makes great contributions to strengthening the appeal of the speech. As a political address, it provides ideal source material for us to study its diction.

*Keywords:* diction, inaugural address, appeal

## 1. Introduction

Kennedy's *Inaugural Address* is regarded as one of the most classical and influential speeches, because of its appeal, attractiveness and popularity. Diction is "the use, choice and arrangement of words and modes of expression, the manner of enunciating words in speaking or singing" (Landau, 2001, p. 198). Diction is a subordinate section of stylistics which is a branch of linguistics that studies style in language and especially in works of literature. A successful public speech must have wonderful and distinguished use of language; that is to say, diction is of great importance. Without any doubt, different words must produce different expression effects. To draw the attention of the audience, the language must be interesting, attractive and appropriate; therefore, the diction is well worth studying. Diction involves sounds, figures of speech and so on; accordingly, this paper focuses on the diction to strengthen its appeal through three parts, namely, the words' sound to form sound symbolism; the figures of speech, the art of employing words. From the perspective of diction, hopefully, it can be helpful and valuable, to some extent, to the stylistics study in public speeches.

### 1.1 Brief Introduction to *Inaugural Address*

As is known to all, *Inaugural Address* by John F. Kennedy is regarded as one of the most classical public speeches all over the world, which stirred and stimulated the thirst for peace and development, the patriotism for their motherland. With wonderful and colorful diction, with amazing and skillful ability in making public speech, with its unique characteristics, the speech is always taken as an instance and a model.

The author, also the deliverer of the speech is John F. Kennedy, who graduated from Harvard University, was elected as the 35th president of the U.S.A, also the youngest president of the U.S.A. His wisdom, courage

and vision are always honored by the people. Unfortunately, he was assassinated in Nov.1963. However, he is living in people's heart and he will live forever with his classical and distinguished *Inaugural Address*.

As a successful public speech, it must have its merits and advantages. As for the thought conveyed in the speech, it advocates peaceful development, friendly negotiation, respecting others, coexisting, and enhancing understanding and cooperation. As for the structure, it is really well-organized and logically-knit. It can be divided into four parts in general, first, general statement of policy; second, addressing friends including allied nations and newly established states; third, addressing enemies, hoping peace and cooperation; lastly, appealing to fellow citizens of American as well as of the world. As for its language features, exactly speaking, diction, is well worth studying and appreciating. From sounds of words to meanings, from the angle of word choosing in public speech, it is safe to say that the diction is distinct and distinguished. Diction of the speech is the main point of this paper.

## 1.2 Explanation of Diction

According to Oxford Concise Companion to the English Language, "Diction" is termed as "A way of style of using words and phrases, especially in a literature tradition, a way of speaking, usually assessed in terms of prevailing standards of pronunciation and elocution" (Mcarthur, 2001, p. 178).

In written text, diction, simply speaking, is the choice and use of words. The importance and the status of word choosing can never be denied and neglected. "Actually, in order to be accurate and clear in meaning, successful speakers tend to choose concrete, familiar words over abstract, unfamiliar ones" (Xu, 2005, p. 127). From the citation above, the conclusion can be got is that diction is absolutely of great importance and significance.

## 2. Sound Symbolism to Strengthen Its appeal

"Sound can make people have imagination and connection to the subjects, such kind of connection and imagination is called sound symbolism" (Qin, 2002, p. 40). That is to say, sounds can imply the meaning, emotion and even attitude, to some extent. The next explanation will be divided into three sections, namely, rhythm, vowels and consonants.

### 2.1 Rhythm

Rhythm, "a strong regular repeated pattern of sounds or movement, a regular pattern of changes or events" (Wehmeier et al., 1492). In fact, rhythm as a term often is applied in poetry appreciation. Here, rhythm is transferred to appreciate prose, non-poetry, which is creative and initiative. Rhythm makes the passage interesting, easy to remember and popularize. In public speaking, it will be perfected and ingenious if rhythm can be used. In *Inaugural Address*, there are two passages often quoted by others, "because it represents the enterprising spirit of which Kenney is a best example" (Shi, 2006, p. 86).

For example, "ask not what your country can do you; ask what you can do for your country." It can be treated as a couplet and the rhythm would be the following according to the meaning:

ask not/ what your /country /can do/for you  
ask what /you can/ do for /your country.

It has some features of music. The first sentence is written in iambic pentameters. Iambic is termed as composed un-stressed and stressed syllable. The words “not, your, do, you” are stressed, conveying the main point and emphases. And it is in iambic pentameter, containing five meters, neither long nor short, which is very suitable here.

The second is not very regular, so it is complex and colorful which contains trochaic trimetres and a dactylic foot. In trochaic trimetres, “ask, you, do” are stressed, and in the dactyle, “your” is stressed, altogether meaning that you should ask yourself what you can do for your motherland, creating a tempo but not stern and stiff, which can result in a very ideal expressing effect.

These two lines are undoubtedly regarded as the most classical and representative expressions, because the patriotism conveyed is powerful and touching, however, the musical rhythm has not been drawn enough attention and appreciation yet. As a matter of fact, just because of the rhythm, they could be so popular and appealing.

## 2.2 Some Sound Symbolism

Linguist Hu Zhuanglin has stated like this: “Sounds consonants are produced by contrasting or obstructing the vocal tract at some place to divert, impede, or completely shut off the flow of air in the oral cavity. By contrast, a vowel is produced without such obstruction so turbulence or a total stopping of the air can be perceived” (Hu, 2001, p. 39). Tough sound itself cannot express the meaning; undeniably, sound can imply something, for example, emotion and attitude. “It is thought that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, but there are some natural relations between them” (Qin, 2002, p. 38). For example, [i:] is high, tense, formal, spread, producing a feeling of “slim and sharp”; the pronunciation of “o” in “cozy”, is low, tense, bank, round, producing a feeling of “comfortable”. Even great poet and critics Alexander Pope said, “The sound must seem an echo to the sense” (Qin, 2002, p. 42).

### 2.2.1 Vowel

In *Inaugural Address*, the sound symbolism can be found easily, which makes a great contribution to the meaning expressing, thus strengthening its appeal. For example, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation.” There are 6 words in total, but there are 12 vowels, including 4 diphthongs, more effort and energy should be used; thus the sounds sound very forceful and powerful, even very serious, showing his great faith, determination and confidence to face difficulties and creating a more ideal society, and thus, the audience must be aroused and stirred.

### 2.2.2 Consonant

Consonant also has very colorful sound symbolism. For example, “so let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. “There are 24 words, but there are 9[s] and 2[z]. Such dense arrangement of consonant cluster is spectacular and rare. [s] and [z] are fricatives in terms of manner of articulation. In terms of place of articulation, [s] is alveolar, [s] is voiceless, but [z] is voiced. They have a sense of strictness, seriousness, sincerity, grace, and decisiveness, echoing the meaning that everything will start anew, politeness does not mean weakness, sincerity needs time to proof.

In paragraph four, “We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty” (Zhang, 1995, p. 57). [P] is repeated here, when we pronounce this sound, we transmit our stream of air from our inner body to the outside, having a sense of release

and showing the strong emotion and determination. As a classical sentence, there is a lot of praise. For example, "as this is not only a carefully thought out, well-balanced sentence easy to remember and elegantly pleasant to read aloud, but also a sentence that best expresses the proud feelings of the American as the self-appointed leader of the 'free democracies'" (Shi, 2006, p. 86).

### 3. Rhetorical Devices to Strengthen Its Appeal

There is abundant use of rhetorical devices in *Inaugural Address* to make the speech more attractive, vivid, forceful and elegant, to strengthen the appeal to the audience. Owing to abundant use of figures of speech, the address becomes so appealing and valuable. Professor Mei Renyi has studied a lot about figures of speech:

Figures of speech are forms of expression that depart from normal word or sentences order or from the common literal meanings of words, for the purpose of achieving a special effect. In everyday speech and writing and in literature the chief functions of figures of speech are probably to embellish, to emphasize or to clarify. They are used to give tone or atmosphere to discourse, to provide vivid examples, to stimulate thought by startling the reader or listener, to give life to inanimate objects, to amuse, or to ornament. (Mei, 1995, p. 481)

Figures of speech do make great contributions to strengthening its appeal, making the speech interesting, acceptable and distinguished. "The following may be considered one of the serviceable classifications of the present day: 1. figures of resemblance or relationship. 2. figures of emphasis or understatement. 3. figures of sound" (Mei, 1995, p. 481). Accordingly, the discussion of figures of speech will be parted into the following divisions.

#### 3.1 Figures of Sound

Figures of sound means the rhetorical devices related to the sound, for example, alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme and so on.

##### 3.1.1 Alliteration

"The use in a phrase or sentence of words beginning with the same letter or sound. Alliteration should be used only when the writers makes a strong emotional response to his subject" (Mei, 1995, p. 490). That is to say, as an important figure of speech, it can enhance the strength and the tone. Alliteration can be found everywhere in the address. For example:

(1) friend and foe alike

The words "friend" and "foe" are opposite in meaning, but they share the same sound [f] in the beginning. On the one hand, it can enhance the emotional tone; on the other hand, it forms interesting sound effect. Suppose the word "foe" is replaced by "enemy", the expression effect must be affected.

(2) sovereign states

These two words share the beginning sound [s], having a sense of seriousness, respect and awe. The phrase intends to express a sense of awe, showing respect for nation's independence and right, then, the audience will be convinced more easily. If one of the words is changed, then alliteration can not be formed, the expression effect will not be so desirable.

### 3.1.2 Assonance

“Assonance: the use of the same, or related, vowel sounds in successive words” (Mei, 1995, p. 491). Assonance makes the sound more attractive and artful, that is to say, the use of assonance can make the words sound pleasant. For example: United, divided.

### 3.1.3 Consonance

“Syllables ending with the same consonant are described as having consonance” (Hu, 2001, p. 291). This figure of speech also makes the language sound pleasant and attractive.

Last ----best          Well----ill

## 3.2 Figures of Resemblance or Relationship

Figures of resemblance or relationship has a large range, simply meaning the rhetorical devices related to relations of similarities or intimating, which include metaphor, personification and so on.

### 3.2.1 Metaphor

“Metaphor: The substitution of one thing for another or the identification of two things from different ranges of thought. It is often loosely defined as ‘an implied comparison,’ ‘a simile without like or as.’ Metaphor is considered by the most important and basic poetic figure of speech and also the commonest and the most beautiful” (Mei, 1995, p. 482). Anyway, we may say that metaphor can make language more vivid and interesting. Of course, the employment of metaphor in public speech is of great help and value to polish and perfect language. Only if the language is attractive and suitable, the speech can make the audience interested in the speech. In the address, a lot of metaphors have been applied to make the language much more colorful and wonderful. The example is provided in the following: “to assist free men and free government in casting off the chains of poverty”.

This is a metaphor, covering two domains, the source one is the “chain” in literal meaning, a strip of thing made by hard metal, usually used to tie, fit or fetter other things; the target domain is the suffering, the misery, and the pain suffered by the people living in poor areas. This metaphor is very classical, because comparing “poverty” to “chains” not only makes the language vivid and living, but also expresses the painful suffering caused by poverty, just like a iron chain confining and fettering people’s freedom, let alone happiness. Imagine there is no “chain”, the expression would be very dry, having little appealing power.

### 3.2.2 Personification

“Personification: a figure that endows objects, animals, ideas, or abstractions with human form, character, or sensibility” (Mei, 1995, p. 483). In a word, personification makes the non-human act or think like human-beings, giving them lives and emotions. The application of this figure of speech also deserves our attention.

For example, “Now the trumpet summons us again.” In fact, as an instrument, “trumpet” can not have the action of “summoning”, but personification gives it life, making the language colorful and living.

### 3.2.3 Euphemism

“Euphemism: the substitution of an inoffensive expression for one that may be disagreeable, as in the use of ‘pass away or pass on’ for ‘die’ ” (Mei, 1995, p. 484). From the definition, we can see that euphemism is an ideal and clever way of expressing the disagreeable and offensive topics in polite and graceful manner. Inevitably, in public speech, some sensitive topics can not be avoided, but in order not to offend some groups, using euphemism

is a wise and effective choice. The abundant application of euphemism in the speech indeed contributes a lot to achieving the effect that some sensitive topics are mentioned but the language is graceful and acceptable, thus, making the speech more polite and appealing, showing Kennedy's broadmindedness and tolerance.

### 3.3 Figures of Emphasis or Understatement

In rhetorical devices, there must be words or expressions to emphasize or exaggerate, to achieve a certain effect. These figures of speech include litotes, antithesis, climax and so on.

#### 3.3.1 Litotes

"Litotes: a form of understatement which gains its particular effect by phrasing in the negative what it wishes to say positively" (Mei, 1995, p. 485). That is to say, as a figure of speech, litotes intends to emphasize, pinpoint and affirm something by using negative, exactly speaking, opposite expressions. Litotes can enhance the tone and show the speaker's determination, for example: "I do not shrink from this responsibility". This expression is a classical litotes, and the speaker intends to express the determination and confidence to take on the responsibility, but he used negative word "not", enhancing the expression effect.

#### 3.3.2 Antithesis

"Antithesis: the setting of contrasting phrases opposite each other for emphasis. In true antithesis the opposition between the elements is manifested through parallel grammatical structure" (Mei, 1995, p. 485). As a figure of speech to strengthen the tone and for emphasis, it makes the tone of language powerful. The structure is complete; by comparison, the focus can be pinpointed.

United, there is little we cannot do in a host of co-operative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do. This sentence is antithesis, having two comparison parts: "united" and "divided". Such comparison leaves us deep impression and has desirable expression effect.

#### 3.3.3 Climax

"Climax: arrangement of phrase or sentences in ascending order of importance" (Mei, 1995, p. 489). From the meaning of the word "climax", we can guess that it means the highest or the most important part, or consummation. The order of the word in ascending order of importance reflects that the speaker's emotion is increasing step by step. In other words, climax reflects the stronger and more powerful emotions and has great influence on the audience.

"The energy, the faith, the devotion".

This is a classical climax, the three words: "energy", "faith" and "devotion" are arranged in ascending order according to the strength and importance. Among the three words, "energy" is the least important; however, "devotion" is the most important and demanding. That is to say, the "devotion" should be given the top priority. The emotion expressed is very powerful and can be felt in heart by the audience.

### 3.4 Allusion

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, allusion is termed "something that is said or written that brings attention to a particular subject in a way that is not direct" (Wang, 2004, p. 48). In fact, most of us have the feeling that allusion is full of culture and profundity.

### 3.4.1 From the Declaration of Independence

Declaration of Independence is the base of the establishment of the U.S.A, which has an extreme status in American life, especially in politics. Many faiths and beliefs in it are universally recognized and admitted, and thus it enjoys high status and respect. Allusion from Declaration of Independence is of great importance in strengthening the appeal, because when the audience echoes in the speech, they must feel the same as Kennedy.

Zhang Hanxi also interpreted like this:

The belief that the right of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God: refers to a passage in the American Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Zhang, 1995, p. 56)

Form the quotation, we can see that this allusion is closely related to the thought shared by the American people. Naturally, the allusion here makes people feel awe and piety, strengthening its appeal to the audience.

### 3.4.2 Form the Bible

The Bible is the most popular book in the culture of mankind. It is the essential of western civilization having shaped the western civilization more decisively than anything else ever written. It is much more than a religious book. Reflecting more extensively western ideas and culture, the Bible is really an encyclopedia. All in one, it is literature; it is a record of great minds. It has left an enormous influence on the human race .When mentioning the Bible, the people in Western world must have a sense of respect, piety and awe. Allusion from the Bible makes the speech have a religious feature.

There is an expression "the command of Isaiah to 'undo the heavy burdens...and let the oppressed go free'" (Zhang, 1995, p. 18). This allusion shows that Kennedy has the responsibility and confidence to save the people in need and free the oppressed ones, which is very convincing and profound.

## 4 Conclusion

Without any doubt, *Inaugural Address* is one of the most classical and influential political speeches all over the world. Through detailed discussion and explanation, it is safe to say that wonderful diction is indeed one of the factors resulting in its success, permanence and constant appeal to the audience.

Firstly, sound symbolism and rhythm are dominant features. As a speech, sound should be given the priority. Without flawless sound or rhythm, it is impossible to have desirable appeal and attractiveness. Sound, sometimes, can imply attitude and emotion, and thus, studying sound is necessary. Secondly, since the focus is diction, the choice of words and expression, inevitably, figures of speech should be mentioned, and choice of words can lead to figures of speech. In general, figures of speech make the language fresh, vivid, interesting and appealing. Thirdly, as a political speech, the careful and wonderful choosing of words is impressive. In order to be suitable on political occasions, the language should be formal, grand and accurate. In order to stir the audience, the language should be forceful and powerful. What's more, to show the address's gentility and respect for the audience, the language is elegant and lofty. A successful speech must excite or move the audience, and thus the applying of the words seeking common ground can reach the effect. The distance is shortened and the atmosphere is familiar and affable.

As one of the important writing styles, public political speech has its unique features in language, content, structure and so on. *Inaugural Address* is not exceptional. It has its own distinguished characteristics, and thus it can have extreme influence in history and great appeal to the audience.

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