

An Analysis on American President's Identity Construction from the Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract: Political discourse can effectively convey the intentions of leaders and help shape their positive public image. The former US President Nixon resigned after the Watergate scandal, causing a great sensation. This article is based on a linguistic perspective, starting from word formation, modality, and rhetorical devices. Taking President Nixon's resignation speech as the research text, through individual examples of the text, it explores how President Nixon can use discourse to construct a public image that is about to collapse. Research has found that President Nixon primarily constructed three core images: passive victims, outstanding leaders, and trusted partners, in order to ease tensions with the public and restore his personal public image.

Keywords: Watergate scandal, Public image, Political discourse, Linguistic perspective.

1. Introduction

1.1 Language and Politics

Shaffner (1997) suggests, any political action will be influenced and controlled by language, as politicians tend to use language to fulfil a politically driven aim. Political speech, as a form of political action, makes a great contribution to the realisation of a specific function in accordance with this aim (ibid.) For example, politicians will use political speeches to create his / her public identity and establish a close relationship with the public, save face, or simply to hand over ...

If we look closely at the political speeches politicians made, it is not difficult to find that they put a great deal of work into the linguistic choices which they consciously use. As well as a vehicle for communicating a particular political stance, these linguistic choices can contribute to the presentation of himself as a distinctive person. Sometimes, it is due to their differences from others that they can achieve political success, because they do not need to perform a role in a textbook style (Fairclough, 2000). Apart from dressing and so forth, political style can be honed and constructed by language.

By exploring political speeches, we can therefore reach a better understanding of a politician's public identity. Thus, this essay will explore what 'style' / 'identity' is and specifically analyse the linguistic creation of identity in Nixon's resignation speech on August 8, 1974. By referring to the political context (the Watergate scandal), this essay will investigate the three core identities which Nixon builds and consider how they are realized by linguistic features.

1.2 Selection of the Text

The text used for analysis comes from Nixon's resignation speech (see Appendix A). There are several reasons for the selection. Even though he passed away two decades ago, Richard Nixon is the only president in American history who have resigned (Katula, 1975). Also, Nixon is an extremely self-respect person and his personality is influenced by his family background to a large extent (Volkan and Itzkowitz, 2013). The Watergate scandal makes him so notorious that he needs to do things to alter people's perception about him. So it is worth investigating what he was going to say in his resignation speech to fulfil a certain political aim, such as responding to the Watergate scandal, saving his face, re-creating his identity and so forth.

2. Research Context

2.1 Political Context

The Watergate scandal gets its name from the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C.. It happened in the United States in the early 1970s, which led to the resignation of the US President Richard M. Nixon (Feldstein, 2004).

On June 17,1972, the police caught five men breaking into the Democratic National Committee offices inside the Watergate building (ibid.). These men were attempting to fix the bugs that were used to secretly record and spy the conversations in the office. From the investigation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Watergate break-in was found to be a conspiracy designed for helping President Nixon win the re-election (ibid.). Many government officials connected to Nixon had to resign or be fired. Even some of them were accused of crimes due to their involvement in the event. Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate Watergate Committee began court hearings (ibid.).

All the investigations revealed that the tape-recording system in Nixon's office made him have recorded many conversations. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the president is obliged to hand over the tapes, but Nixon refused it. Meanwhile, there was increasing pressure for Nixon's impeachment (ibid).

On August 8, 1974, Nixon announced his resignation. He is the first and only president in American history to have resigned. The vice president Ford was sworn in as President the next day. It was under such a political context that President Nixon delivered the resignation speech. Eventually, Ford pardoned all the charges of Nixon (ibid).

2.2 Theoretical Bases

Styles are defined by Fairclough (2003, pp.160) as 'the discoursal aspect of ways of being, identities'. That is to say, it means the ways in which people use language to perform distinctive identities or use language to express something about 'themselves' they would like to be seen by the audience. In simple words, how one speaks, and how one looks can partly embody who one is. For example, Tony Blair gave us an impression of openness and approachability by consciously using language marked by informalization (Pearce, 2005), and this style helped him have a closer relationship with the citizens. Even we can see (Fairclough, 2000) that Tony Blair's styles are not unchangeable. It will vary as the occasions and space. All the changes are for the fulfilment of political needs.

Thus, further exploration of style from the perspective of linguistic features can help us have a better understanding of how leaders' style are established. As Fairclough (2003) suggests, styles can be realized by a series of linguistic features, such as phonological (i.e. stress, pronunciation) and lexical features (i.e. metaphor).

3. Method

It is found that my scholars (Benoit, 1982) have done a rhetorical analysis on Nixon's resignation speech, but Fairclough's approaches to text analysis have not been used to analyse Nixon's identity. Fairclough's analysis (2000) of Tony Blair's political style explored how Tony Blair's speeches contribute to the establishment of his three core identities ('normal person', 'tough' and 'wartime leader'). The essay will adopt the same method to investigate how Richard Nixon used language to build his identities, save his self-image and rebuild his relationship with the audience. Fairclough (1992) offered a set of approaches to text analysis, such as topic control, modality, politeness, wording and metaphor and so forth. Both lexical and grammatical choices can jointly contribute to the speaker's style. Also, some stylistic devices which can help us explore some features of the speech will be briefly discussed. These linguistic features will be analyzed and discussed in details, from which it is possible to identify Nixon's multiple identities / styles.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Identity One: Passive Victim

Table 1- Passive Victim Identity

Code	Passive Victim Utterances
P1	I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal agony it would have involved.
P2	To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.
P3	Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.
P4	I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong — and some were wrong — they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation.
P5	And to those who have not felt able to give me your support, let me say I leave with no bitterness toward those who have opposed me, because all of us in the final analysis have been concerned with the good of the country, however our judgments might differ.

4.1.1 Word Meaning

P1 I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal **agony** it would have involved.

Just as Fairclough (1992) suggests, focusing on a word sometimes can be helpful for text analysis. So let us move to some single words Nixon uses for strengthening his Identity One.

From P1, it is clear seen that Nixon uses the word 'agony' which is defined as 'extreme mental or physical suffering' (Quirk, 1987, pp.26). This word 'agony' is not as common as 'pain', but its degree of mood is intensified obviously. By using this word, Nixon shows his long-term and deep suffering after Watergate scandal. It can better arouse public sympathy for his sufferings so that the public will naturally shift their attention from the scandal event. The tension between Nixon and the public can be eased. Thus, the effects of pathos (modes of persuasion) / emotion can be achieved. A passive victim identity is well presented in front of the public.

P2 To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal **vindication** would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.

‘Vindication’ is defined by Longman Dictionary (Quirk, 1987, pp.1595) as ‘proof that someone or something is right, reasonable, or justified. In P2, by using the word ‘vindication’, Nixon seems to convey to the public the underlying information that he is innocent, passive victim. In other words, Nixon seems to deny his connection to the Watergate scandal.

Furthermore, the reason he chose to resign rather than defend for himself is that he hopes that the Congress put their energies on the issues of peace and prosperity. He gives us an impression that even though he suffers from injustice, he always puts the interests of the nation above his personal, reinforcing the connotations of Nixon’s self-sacrificing spirit.

P3 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.

P3,

following P2, is an independent paragraph in Nixon’s speech. It is clearly seen that P2 is the reason for P3, which further emphasizes his victimhood. In structure, it forms a connecting link between the preceding and the following.

P5 I leave with no **bitterness** toward those who have opposed me, because all of us in the final analysis have been concerned with the good of the country, however our judgments might differ.

In P5, Nixon expresses his gratitude for those who always believe in and support him. At the same time, he will leave without ‘bitterness’ towards those who suspect him. According to the definition of ‘bitterness’(Quirk, 1987, pp.119), it means ‘anger and disappointment at being treated unfairly. So the audience will be naturally reminded of Nixon’s victim identity. Furthermore, the audience will not only sympathize Nixon’s experience but also admire Nixon’s tolerance (even though he was treated unfairly, he still forgives those people).

4.1.2 Modality

P4 I **would** say only that **if** some of my judgments were wrong — and some were wrong — they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation.

P4 can be seen as the most direct response to the Watergate scandal. Before P4, Nixon is trying to avoid admitting or mentioning his wrongdoing. But in P4, Nixon uses the modal verb ‘would’ creating a low possibility that he would make wrong judgements. The modal verb ‘would’ hedge the following sentence, making it only an assumption that he would make any mistakes. At the same time, subjunctive ‘if’ also weakens this possibility. What is important as well as interesting point is that Nixon attributes all his possible mistakes to the consideration of the interests of the nation.

4.2 Identity Two: Outstanding Leader

From the analysis of passive participant identity, it is obviously seen that Nixon tries avoiding mentioning the negative influence of the Watergate scandal, highlighting that he was not involve in

this event. The purpose of such utterances is to make American people disregard the Watergate event and pay attention to his positive image. At the same time, Nixon portrays an outstanding leader identity by putting the emphasis on what he did for the country during his presidency. Nixon's speech gives us an impression that the two identities do not contradict because his wrongdoing is also for the interests of the country.

Table 2-Outstanding Leader Identity

Code	Outstanding Leader Utterances
L1	This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office.
L2	In all the decisions, I have made in my public life I have always tried to do what was best for the nation.
L3	Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.
L4	...to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.
L5	We have unlocked the doors that for a quarter of a century stood between the United States and the People's Republic of China.
L6	We have ended America's longest war.
L7	Together with the Soviet Union we have made the crucial breakthroughs that have begun the process of limiting nuclear arms.
L8	we must set as our goal, not just limiting, but reducing and finally destroying these terrible weapons, so that they cannot destroy civilization.
L9	We must continue to develop and expand that new relationship, so that the two strongest nations of the world will live together in cooperation rather than confrontation.
L10	We must press on, however, toward a goal not only of more and better jobs but of full opportunity for every American.
L11	As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.

4.2.1 Wording

L1 This is the **37th time** I have spoken to you from this office.

First, I shall look at the wording of the Identity Leader. According to the definition given by Locke (2004, pp.50), wording refers to "the ways that meanings can be worded differently according to perspective". In other words, one can use different wordings to express the same meaning so that different effects can be achieved. As the opening of the speech, by using the concrete time '37th' rather than 'last time', Nixon provides us with the perceivable length of time that he has spoken to the public for 37th time already. This strengthens his credibility /ethos as a president. It shows that he is absolutely qualified to give speech. This also accord with the modes of persuasion (ethos, logos, pathos) given by Aristotle.

4.2.2 Word Meaning

L2 In all the decisions I have made in my public life I have always tried to do what was best for the nation.

L3 Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.

L4 to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.

In L2, L3, and L4, such modifiers (i.e. all, always, best, each time, every) are used frequently. They all maximize the degrees no matter in amount (all the decisions, every), time (always, each time) or depth (best). Nixon shows to the public his dutiful leader identity by frequently using these words. He seems to keep the audience informed of the fact that all he has done is for the considerations of the nation, even though it is wrong.

4.2.3 Modality

As Halliday suggests (1994), modality refers to the speaker's judgement / attitudes towards the probabilities. Verschueren (1999) also gives a similar description, modality involves one's attitudes towards the content of an utterance, which can be certainty or doubt, possibility or necessity, and even permission and obligation. In other words, by exploring modality, it is possible to identify the speaker's stance.

In L8, L9 and L10, Nixon uses the modal verb 'must' to convey a future necessity and urgency of destroying the weapons, developing new relationship with other countries, and providing better job opportunities. This shows that even though he will not be president any more, he still puts the issues home and abroad in the first place.

L11 As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.

Although it is not a modal verb, the verb 'confident' functions as a modal verb does. It shows a certainty because 'confident' can be interpreted as 'sure' here. Nixon uses the confirmative mood to highlight his past achievements.

4.2.4 Stylistic Devices

L5 We have unlocked the doors that for a quarter of a century stood between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

L6 We have ended America's longest war.

L7 Together with the Soviet Union we have made the crucial breakthroughs that have begun the process of limiting nuclear arms.

Parallelism is the most frequently used stylistic devices in Nixon's speech. In L5, L6, and L7, Nixon uses the perfect tense (have unlocked, have made, have ended) three times conveying to the audience what has been made during his presidency. Also it can be seen that the objectives following the three verbs are modified by 'a quarter of a century', 'crucial' and 'longest'. This

intensifies the mood again so that an outstanding leader identity is reinforced. The audience will pay attention to the positive influences Nixon has had.

Also, as Fairclough (2003) states, parallelism, as a rhetorical device, can strengthen the aestheticization of the public identities. In other words, by using parallelism, the speaker can attract the audience's attention to the structure (Leech and Short, 1981) because it can give the audience a sense of 'overall cohesion', 'keeping it balanced' and 'intentional throughout' (McGuigan and Moliken, 2011). Nixon frequently uses parallelism not only drawing the audience's attention but also giving them a sense of aesthetics.

4.3 Identity Three: Reliable

Not only does the Watergate scandal ruin Nixon's political career, but also spoils his political identity. After this scandal, Nixon gives the public an impression of abusing power, being unreliable (Summers and Swan, 2001). Nixon tries to re-create his identity and alter the public's perception about him. He wants and needs to win the public's trust again. From Nixon's speech, he creates a 'reliable' president identity.

Table3-Reliable Identity

Code	Reliable Identity
R1	I must put the interests of America first.
R2	But the interests of the nation must always come before any personal considerations
R3	They were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation.
R4	...carry out the duties of this office in the way the interests of the nation will require.
R5	Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.
R6	As we look to the future, the first essential is to begin healing the wounds of this nation.
R7	To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American.

4.3.1 Repetition

In R1, R2, R3 R4 and R5, the word 'interests' appear for five times. Every time it appears, the word 'interests' will almost be followed by the word 'nation'. Nixon repeats and emphasizes this word four times in order to show that he does not abuse his power for his personal interests. He seems to remind the audience that what he has done is absolutely for the interests of the nation and he is reliable.

4.3.2 Metaphor

Metaphors are linguistic signs that make abstract ideas more concrete and tangible (Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In R6, Nixon uses metaphor 'wounds' to describe what the nation has experienced, which makes the audience feel or touch what the nation is suffering. Also, 'healing the wounds' makes people have the idea of associating 'wound' with 'doctors'. Nixon is like a doctor who heal the wounded and rescue the dying so that his reliable identity can be created.

4.3.3 Wording

R7 To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American.

Nixon uses the word ‘kinship’ emphasizing the close connection between the public. According to the meaning of the word ‘kinship’, it implies that Nixon sees all (‘each and every’) American as intimate friends as they share a similar background or same ideas and feeling. It also show that Nixon is eager to be viewed as a reliable friend by giving such wording.

4.4 Discussion

From the analysis above, it is clearly seen that President Nixon tries to create three core identities so as to alter the audience’s perception about him. The three identities do not exist separately. Instead, they link with each other, jointly contributing to the creation of Nixon’s identity.

(1) Content: Actually, we can see that at the very beginning of Nixon’s speech Nixon tries to deny his wrongdoing by creating a victim identity. Then, he constructs an outstanding leader identity so as to change the public’s prejudice towards him and shift their attention. In order to further strengthen his outstanding leader identity, he uses his reliable trait again to gain the public’s trust.

(2) Structure: Nixon uses long and complex sentences to shift the public’s attention from the severity of his wrongdoing. At the same time, short and concise sentences are frequently employed in his speech to attract the public’s attention to what he wants them to remember, that is, he is an outstanding leader and reliable person.

5. Conclusion

This essay has mainly investigated how Nixon uses language to create his three core identities in his resignation speech on August 8th. 1974. Since this is the first time in history that a president has resigned, it is necessary to explore the linguistic features along with the political context (the Watergate scandal). At the beginning of this essay, the definition of style has been discussed. Then, by analysing some specific linguistic choices in Nixon’s speech, this essay has found three core identities Nixon tries to establish: passive victim identity, outstanding leader identity and reliable person identity. Nixon tries to re-construct his relation with the public by creating the three key identities.

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