

President Kennedy & Strategic Speech: Rhetorical Grammar in Politics

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Abstract

This paper argues that context and situation influence the use of rhetorical grammar in the political arena. Specifically, the essay will analyze how two popular strategies in rhetorical grammar, parallelism and rhythm, are used in the speeches delivered by President John F. Kennedy. By exploring these choices in two of Kennedy's speeches, the Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Address at the University of Washington, we will be able to see how they operate within their respective contexts. These two speeches are situated in different settings, as they were addressed to different audiences who were preoccupied about very distinct matters. This juxtaposition will illustrate the ways in which grammatical strategies can vary based on the surrounding context. Additionally, the essay will conclude with the implications of this research for studying rhetoric in political discourse, as well as in the fields of writing studies and literacy studies.

American politics are framed around persuasion, and in fact, our political system would not make sense apart from debate and the free sharing of ideas. Politicians have agendas, visions, and goals for the country, and in order to encourage the people to follow their plans, they have to use persuasive techniques. How do they accomplish this? How is rhetorical grammar used to persuade an audience in the political arena? This paper will investigate the uses of parallelism and rhythm in two speeches from President John F. Kennedy, a skilled orator and master of the English language. This analysis will show the effects of the rhetorical decisions Kennedy makes regarding parallelism and rhythm, as well as how the contextual circumstances in which his speeches are situated determine how the select rhetorical strategies are employed.

Parallelism is a grammatical pattern involving the “repetition of whole structures, such as phrases and clauses” (Kolln and Gray 152). However, as will be discussed, parallelism is not limited to lists of phrases or clauses that all begin with the same word. In unison with rhythm, Kennedy skillfully employs several forms of parallelism in several of his speeches. Using parallelism for persuasion goes all the way back to Aristotle, who introduces the concept of the *paradeigma*, which “is usually translated as example but...would be more correctly translated as parallel case” (Fahnestock 126). Aristotle demonstrates that parallelism is more than a stylistic choice; it is a form of reasoning: “Argument by example...has the nature of induction, which is the foundation of reasoning” (Rhet. II.20, 1393a25–26, trans. Roberts). Parallel examples, therefore, have the ability to present audiences with similar cases or situations in order to strengthen the arguer’s claim on an evidentiary level.

While this is certainly one powerful ability of parallel structure, it is not limited to inductive reasoning in the Aristotelian framework. Parallelism is also used stylistically, albeit with no less of an intent to persuade. In his Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy argues that the leaders of Cuba do not act in either Cuba’s best interest nor in the interest of the Americas, but that their primary loyalty is to international communism. Following this, he makes an intriguing move by turning the attention to the desire for freedom in the Cuban people. In the process, Kennedy uses parallelism to make this move: “I have no doubt that most Cubans today look forward to the time when they will be truly free—free from foreign domination, free to choose their own leaders, free to select their own system, free to own their own land, free to speak and write and worship without fear or degradation” (Kennedy). Each clause in the list contributes to Kennedy’s notion of freedom, which he illustrates to his listeners through a succession of similarly sized examples prefaced with the word “free.” According to Fahnestock, such word repetition effectively draws attention toward a list of examples: “In prose, readers are probably least likely to notice or be affected by parallelism created by length, intonation, or syntax if these features are not reinforced by sound patterns or semantic similarities” (131). This means that we are more captivated by phrases or clauses that sound the same, either due to repeating certain words or sharing general similarities in sound or in structure.

Additionally, beginning each example with “free” articulates the value of the idea of modern democratic freedom. In other words, Kennedy seems to be saying that foreign domination, electing leaders, and speaking without fear are inherently good because of the word “free,” which carries a positive connotation. Because his immediate audience is the American people, this emphasis on freedom speaks directly to a core principle that every patriotic citizen can align themselves with.

Another example of parallelism comes from President Kennedy’s Address at University of Washington: “We cannot, as a free nation, compete with our adversaries in tactics of terror, assassination, false promises, counterfeit mobs and crises. We cannot, under the scrutiny of a free press and public, tell differ-

ent stories to different audiences, foreign and domestic, friendly and hostile. We cannot abandon the slow processes of consulting with our allies to match the swift expediciencies of those who merely dictate to their satellites” (Kennedy). Each sentence begins with “we cannot.” This conveys a sense of urgent importance and the seriousness of needing to take the moral high ground by remaining consistent in the information we give other nations, consulting with our allies, and preserving freedom. In essence, Kennedy is calling for a country of integrity, which he communicates with clarity due to the parallel structure of all three sentences. Furthermore, the words “we cannot” start each sentence, and this repetition only adds to the message of urgency. We can see further accentuation of this message by specifically focusing on the word “cannot.” It presents an obligation or duty, and it demonstrates Kennedy leaving no other option available. Kennedy essentially states that it is our responsibility to advance beyond the levels of our enemies, and that our country is only permitted to progress, never to regress.

Lastly, notice that Kennedy does not start each sentence with “This country cannot...” Because Kennedy is addressing his speech to an intended audience of university students who likely have goals and desires to become major influencers in the world, he uses the word “we” to include them in this future vision for the United States. Moreover, the “we” implies a much broader audience, one beyond the students at the University of Washington. Kennedy is extending his message to the entire nation. The entire nation is involved in this journey to forget a stronger future, which is why we need disciplined, responsible, and intelligent leaders to steer the nation in the right direction. The fact that Kennedy repeats “we cannot” multiple times facilitates the remembering of what he is saying, ensuring that he drives home his message of creating and securing a nation of integrity.

In addition to parallelism, the rhythm of a statement carries significant rhetorical weight. Rhythm, according to Kolln and Gray, emerges when we read: “[Y]ou naturally stress some words, or syllables within words, more than others... [S]ome words receive more emphasis than others” (157). The stressed portions of the text are what we as readers will take to be the most significant pieces of information. Thus, in order to communicate the most crucial aspects of the argument, the speaker should know how to emphasize those parts through some rhythmic techniques that will be explored in Kennedy’s speeches.

President Kennedy was quite skillful at varying the rhythm of his statements, which is evident in his Address at University of Washington: “A willingness to resist force, unaccompanied by a willingness to talk, could provoke belligerence--while a willingness to talk, unaccompanied by a willingness to resist force, could invite disaster” (Kennedy). Kennedy is explaining that being a bellicose country without any diplomacy could stimulate unnecessary war, while diplomacy without preparing for war is too dangerous to the country. When hearing the audio of the president delivering the speech, one would notice that the commas after each phrase and the dash in between “belligerence” and “while” are places where he makes a slight pause, accentuating each point in the statement. The

structure of both halves of the sentence mirror each other. Each side of the dash describes a willingness to take a certain action, what

that desire lacks, and what would result from that willingness. Due to this similar structure, both halves have almost exactly the same rhythm, which is helpful to juxtapose the two statements and to show that each route actually leads to negative results for the nation, even though they seem to be radically different.

What is also particularly intriguing about this example is that it shows how parallelism and rhythm can work together. Each side of the dash in the quote is a mirror image of the other, and they are both broken into three parts. These features alone demonstrate parallel structure, the

type that Fahnestock calls syntactic parallelism, in which “the same sequence of sentence constituents...[are] repeated in successive phrases or clauses” (129). This shows that the rhythm of each half of the statement mirroring the other can be attributed to parallelism. In fact, the rhythmic features of the statement are because of the parallelism, including the words that are emphasized and the similar three subdivisions of each half of the sentence. Thus, parallelism and rhythm are not mutually exclusive but can be codependent on each other.

A second example of an effective use of rhythm can be found in Kennedy’s Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis. Unlike his address at the University of Washington, Kennedy is directing his message at a frightened American audience. The Cuban Missile Crisis presented a clear threat to American national security, with nuclear weapons pointed at the United States. Throughout the speech Kennedy is trying to persuade the nation that his naval blockade of Cuba was the best way to react to the nuclear threat. After presenting evidence that the Cuban government was in fact using nuclear materials as weapons against the U.S., he states that “[t]he 1930’s taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged ultimately leads to war” (Kennedy). This choice of sentence structure expertly employs end focus, which is a rhythmic pattern in which “the prominent stress...occurs in the predicate, on the new information, generally on the last or next-to-last unit in the sentence” (Kolln and Gray 158). In this particular quote, Kennedy uses the statement about the 1930’s to anticipate the more important information following the colon. This works to shift the focus to the latter part of the sentence, highlighting the idea that aggressive behavior must not go unchecked. Because this section of the sentence is more detailed and is essentially a development of the statement before the colon, the focus of the sentence as a whole shifts toward the end.

Additionally, the colon itself significantly influences the rhythm of the sentence, causing it to possess end focus. As Kolln and Gray state, the clause before the colon “sets up an expectation in the reader. The colon says, ‘Here comes the information you’re expecting,’ or ‘Here’s what I promised’” (61). Due to this expectation of what will come next, the reader or listener will place more attention on the information after the colon. In this case, Kennedy’s listeners were likely thinking, “What did the 1930’s teach us? What lessons did we learn?” Therefore, besides the rhythmic structure of the sentence itself, the anticipation of

the audience members, created by the effect of the colon, also helps to create end focus, which allows major points to be emphasized.

Kennedy's skilled use of parallelism and rhythm provides some insight into how rhetorical grammar operates in the written and the spoken word. Each of these grammatical moves also vary in their rhetorical uses, which is largely due to the context of the situation, as well as the audience President Kennedy was talking to. By applying the work of Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray, we were able to understand how these grammatical techniques work in the English language. Ultimately, this research highlights some of the identifying features of rhetorical grammar, such as choosing to use parallelism and rhythm based on the respective audience. Thus, when researching rhetorical acts and artifacts, scholars and students in writing studies can have a new appreciation for grammar in political speeches and what the grammatical choices of the speaker is contributing to the rhetorical effect of the speech. Parallelism and rhythm are common grammatical moves in political speeches. Why do politicians gravitate towards these choices instead of other ones? In the instances that were analyzed in this paper, President Kennedy employed both parallelism and rhythm in a way that made his information clear, memorable, and believable. Additionally, his speeches showed that parallel structure and rhythmic style are not always independent of each other. Rhythm can actually be the effect of parallelism, or vice versa. While we might overlook grammar as a practical way to persuade an audience, the reality is that a skillful crafting of phrases, clauses, and sentences can contribute significantly to how a message is communicated and how it is received.

Convergence Rhetoric

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