

POWER, LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT: THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF BILL CLINTON'S *BETWEEN HOPE AND HISTORY*

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This paper explores the importance of language in gaining power as well as in appealing to one's audience in diverse contexts. Thus, this paper will be considering Bill Clinton's book, *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century* (1996) from a sociolinguistic perspective to underscore its significance in terms of power, appeal and ideological persuasion to the American voting public. Published in New York by Random House, the book deals with how President Clinton used the agency of sociolinguistics and well crafted language to achieve power that resonates with his winning the presidential election for the second term. Also, it will be argued in this paper that a sociolinguistic reading of the book brings out the author's general political and philosophical worldview. It has to be noted that though a sociolinguistic study, only the diction, lexis and semantics of the language used in the book will be analysed.

Keywords: Clinton; Context; Ideology; Language; Power; Sociolinguistics.

In a society such as ours...there are manifolds of relations of power that permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.

--- Michel Foucault, *French philosopher and theorist*.

Introduction:

A sociolinguistic reading of *Between Hope and History* unpacks the thrusts of the book that are couched in Bill Clinton's overall political and ideological philosophy as well as the achievements of his first tenure of office as President of the United States of America. The book also states the hallmarks of his campaign manifestoes for his second term through the use of apt linguistic and sociolinguistic elements. The acknowledgement of language as a medium for acquiring power is integral in all communicative situations aimed at rhetorical or sociolinguistic value. An outstanding feature of Bill Clinton's *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century* is its attention to the demand of sociolinguistics, which is amply demonstrated in the book to be an effective method of achieving political and ideological ends as well as reaching out to the electorate. Call *Between Hope and History* a panoply of President Bill Clinton's political apparatus, his campaign rhetoric for winning presidential election of 1996 or "a snapshot of President Clinton's 'New Democratic' philosophy as he segues from his first to (he hopes) second term" (Toner: 1996: 1), the book trenchantly assays the Clintonian "the age of possibility" rhetoric. Clinton's "the age of possibility" language is couched in the triumvirate: opportunity, responsibility and community – which are the three main divisions (chapters) of the book. It is on this tripod of political, philosophical and ideological ethos that Clinton's second term rests; it is on it that part of the political achievements and policies of his first term rest as well. In substantiating this, Clinton makes the same point in his acclaimed autobiography, *My*

Life (2005). As Bill Clinton asserted the book “highlighted the policies of my first term through stories of individual Americans who had been positively affected by them, and articulated where I wanted to take our country in the next four years” (Clinton 2005: 722).

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical method used in this study in relation to how the social constitution of Clinton’s audience shapes his use of language is sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that deals with the effects of context, expectations, norms and mores among others impact on language use in a particular social setting. Downes (1984) defined sociolinguistics as “that branch of linguistics which studies just those properties of language and languages which require references to social, including contextual, factors in their explanation” (1984: 15). In the same way, for Coulmas (1997), “the primary concern of sociolinguistic scholarship is to study correlations between language use and social structures” (1). The foundation of sociolinguistics is to interrogate the effects of contexts on language use. This is crucial in apprehending the book being investigated.

Language and Context: Appeal, Effects and Power:

In the preface to *Between Hope and History*, Clinton takes cognisance of the visionary failure of the preceding administration; he also comments on the moral, economic, political and leadership deficits of Republicanism, which is enmeshed in trickle down economics that constantly holds the populace down in political calculus. To this end, Clinton makes allusion to the Bible for sense of vision and morality to shepherd Americans out of their economic and political stalemate. Therefore, by understanding the need for inclusive and populist-oriented government that takes full responsibilities of its citizens against the backdrop of “Reagan Revolution”: the precursor to Bush administration that preaches “less government is almost always better than more of it” (Clinton 1996: 89).

Thus, Clinton’s understanding of the social and political context of that period is needful in making apt statements relevant to the occasion as exemplified in the book. It is a type of government that stands between responsibility and opportunity – the one that brings about community, what Nigel Hamilton calls “society as community” (2003: 228). Clinton makes this attempt in recognition of the mistakes and inaction that permeate political sloganeering in projecting electioneering manifestoes and vision:

In the last four years, we have pursued this responsibility in four broad areas: first, strengthening individual and community responsibility through, among other things, welfare reform and crime prevention; second, meeting public responsibilities better by reinventing the federal government; third, encouraging businesses to take more responsibility for the welfare of their workers and their families; fourth, working at all levels of society to address our responsibilities to future generations by improving how we protect our natural environment. (65)

Said within the borders of power acquisition, Clinton in the above statement uses apt language – exemplification, reference and concrete instances to establish the possibility of his “the age of possibility” political ethos, which can be deduced from his lexical choice as well as clear demonstration of his political and ideological leanings.

Ideology, Language and Power:

Language is a major means for the transportation of ideology and power. Simpson (1993) sees ideology as “ways in which what we say and think interacts with society” (5). The definition of ideology offered here has strong relationship with the use of language in the context of power acquisition. Bill Clinton exemplifies socio-linguistic based words to convey power and ideology. Clinton’s appropriate, effective use of words engrained in well tailored expressions for political and ideological effects are quite illustrated in the book. As an ideologue, Clinton asserts

that words matter that they have a power that can change
men and their worlds, sometimes dropping the scales from their eyes
or shackles from their hands. Ideologists believe in the power of the
idea as vested in the word. (Gouldner 1976: 27)

In supporting the above, Clinton believes that people are open to suasion capable of changing political culture by appealing to their ideals and political attachment through appropriate language use.

Thus, appropriate use of language within the right context places premium on sociolinguistic elements capable of igniting some effects: this amounts to ideological persuasion that foregrounds power. In this connection, Anton Pelinka therefore says that

Language reflects power structures – and language has an impact
on power structures. Language can be seen as an indicator of social
and therefore political situations – and language can also be seen as
a driving force directed at changing politics and society. Language
is an in-put as well as an out-put factor of political systems:

It influences politics – and is influenced by politics. (in Wodak 2007: 1)

Thus, the language of *Between Hope and History* is mainly about discourse of power and ideology mediated through recognition of what word is capable of doing if applied in the right sociolinguistic setting.

Diction and Purpose:

The use of appropriate vocabulary in a given sociolinguistic setting or context is an important step in determining the meaning, attributes and value that are attached to a people, and, which therefore impacts on the subject positions being set up. In the statements to be analysed here, there are diverse ideological based lexes that carry different meanings as well as political positions which are coded in vocabularies used. Accordingly, the use of right vocabulary is a form of persuasion that is ideologically motivated. This is even more crucial as we live in the present order that Fairclough calls era of “linguistic turn” (1992: 2), a period in American history where there is “a pitched battle for the hearts and minds of U.S” public (Kopperud (1993: 20). The battle referred here is the one aimed at ideological dominance and power acquisition.

Talking about community, in the third segment of the book, Clinton warns that for the American people to live as a community, they must know that it is a function of responsibility and opportunity. After acknowledging that “The most fundamental responsibility of any government is to protect the safety of its citizens” (75), he goes ahead to assert that responsibility is a duty every citizen owes: the government, parents, churches, civil society, among others (71). And in corroborating the opportunities that his administration has made available to the American people, Clinton uses the right vocabulary to articulate a major aspect of the opportunities. This aspect deals with education, a focal point of Clinton’s administration; Clinton sees this area as a driver of other facets of opportunities, especially in the present

global economic order: a period Peter Drucker dubs “knowledge worker” (1999) age. Clinton states downright that

we have moved into a world where knowledge, which has always been a key to individual opportunity, is now the key to the success of the whole society and is literally the dividing line between those who can continue to do well for a lifetime and those who risk being left behind. (50)

Regarding diction, for stylistic felicity, appropriate use of words couched in texts whose various parts are semantically balanced demonstrates coherence, balance and symmetry. Such textual arrangement calls for appropriate locution that has direct relationship with the context. Thus, the use of required diction – choice of words – enhances the sociolect adopted as well as brings the situational constraints responsible for the textual variation used in the context.

In considering how apt expressions could galvanise support as well as provoke right political thinking, President Bill Clinton places premium on good language choice (diction) that wrings out the saliency of his politics. His idea here is similar to Edward Sapir’s when he reasoned that

Language is not ordinary thought... it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for the society. (1929: 29)

The significance of relevant words for communicative effectiveness and sociolinguistic appeals are what the above quote depicts. The sociolinguistic tradition which consigns contradiction resulting from using the same expression for different situations for power is what Alvin Gouldner tagged “paradoxical linguistic liberalism” (1976: 52). In recognising the pitfalls of this sociolinguistic pattern, Clinton uses language nuanced with apt diction that agrees with the social condition of his readers or voting public for maximum political ends. In advancing this,

in the face of bewildering, intense, sometimes overpowering change, people react differently... And there are those who embrace the future with all its changes and challenges and engage in what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once called “*the action and passion*” of our time... F. Scott Fitzgerald, said we grew up “*to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken*”. In the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, we embraced a view of ourselves and our democracy that Franklin Roosevelt described as “*built on the unhampered initiative of individual men and women joined together in a common enterprise*”. (15-16)

Through the use of appropriate language choice based on relevant metaphors as well as references, Clinton takes a deep into the sociolectal importance of word choice. Thus, by referring to past distinguished American Presidents – even Theodore Roosevelt, who is not a Democrat, Clinton’s statement transcends party line as well as adumbrates the realities of his credential regarding contesting for the second term. In another instance, Clinton uses the right diction for effect: “We have been expanding our vision of a ‘united states’ ever since the failure of the Articles of Confederation caused the states to agree on a national Constitution...” (88). Clinton’s use of such phrases like ‘United States’, ‘vision’ and even ‘failure of the Articles of

Confederation’’ portend his idea about community and ‘‘big government’’ (88) ideal that is couched in re-inventing ‘‘America’s oldest democracy’’ and making the people the reason for governance.

Conclusion:

This study is based on how the agency of language verged on socio-linguistically conscious expressions could galvanise power, appeal and ideological persuasion given varying contexts. Thus, this is crucially important in order to appreciate the imports of President Bill Clinton’s *Between Hope and History: Meeting America’s Challenge in the 21st Century*. Also, it has been stated that a sociolinguistic reading of this text that runs within the axes of diction, semantics, power and contexts will bring the essence of the book within the parameters of Clinton winning the second term as well as gaining the trust of the American people. This is achieved by Clinton’s use of appropriate words to suit the contexts in which they are applied.

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