

Notable Verbal and Non-verbal Characteristics of American Speechmaking

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This paper deals with a selected few verbal and non-verbal communication styles commonly witnessed in American public speeches, and explores whether the most well-known speechmaker in America, President William Jefferson Clinton, embraces them. The favored verbal patterns are informality and frankness (Barnlund, 1975; and Books, 1996a), while speed and volume comprise the non-verbal delivery techniques (Crystal and Davy, 1969).

The quotations for the verbal portion are extracted from one of President Clinton's State of the Union addresses, whereas his inaugural address allows us to analyze the non-verbal component. President Clinton was found to follow typical patterns of American speakers in regards to both verbal behaviors of informality and frankness and non-verbal techniques of variety in speed and volume.

I . Introduction

This paper is a qualitative analysis of two speeches of President William Jefferson Clinton, his inaugural speech and his 1995 State of the Union address, focusing on four of the most commonly employed verbal and non-verbal communication styles in American speechmaking. Informality and frankness are dealt with in the verbal mode, and varied speed and varied volume in that of the non-verbal. The paper demonstrates that both speeches conform to the characteristic features of American speech.

II . Verbal Communication Styles

A. Informality

One of the first things that non-native English speakers notice about Americans is their propensity for informality as their favored register (Books, 1996a, pp. 19-24; Books, 1996b, p. 35). Register in verbal communication refers to the communication level that is socially based, not the height of the pitch range, and these levels are viewed as appropriate or inappropriate differently in different cultures. Barnlund (1975, pp. 48-55) reported via his Role Description Checklist that both Japanese and Americans rated informality as one of the most prevalent

characteristics of Americans. Within each culture, there are appropriate linguistic hierarchical symbols for different types of situations in which language is used. In order to avoid confusion, criticism, or embarrassment the writer/speaker has to know the right level of sophistication of language to use. The register of a composition/speech can be made formal or informal, depending on the speaker's diagnosis of the audience. But any oral style — slang, jargon, or very high level language — can be useful with certain audiences, and useless or detrimental with others. Table 1 below, which contains terms that could be used in addressing the Republican Party members, illustrates various registers.

Table 1
Levels of Formality and Informality in
Referring to Republicans

LEVELS	EXAMPLES
High (Formal)	Honorable Members
Standard	Republicans
Colloquial or Informal	the G. O. P. Republican friends

Formality, linguistically speaking, is on the wane in this age of casualness, but it is not extinct. Certain words are used which are more formal than others in both Japanese and English, but there is more awareness and admission of the use of formality in Japanese. President Clinton uttered some formal words and phrases in his 1995 State of the Union address. Indeed, the President's very first utterance was to refer respectfully to members of the 104th Congress as "Honorable Members." When he directed his message to the building and the room in which the Congress sat, the President sounded more formal, as in "sacred building" and "hallowed chamber."

Another example is the use of the relative pronoun *whom* which is more formal than *who*. *Whom* is rather unusual in conversational English; the construction is altered and generally left out or replaced with *who* or *that*. Clinton uses *whom* only three times in his entire speech. Considering that it is a matter of style, he only employed the word about one-sixth as many times as it could be used. Here are the extracts of his usage.

- And to Ronald Reagan, *whom* we wish well tonight, and who exhorted us to carry on until the twilight struggle against communism was won.
- We should require lobbyists to tell the people for *whom* they work what they're spending, what they want.
- Thanks to the courage of the people who were here then, many of *whom* didn't return, we did cut the deficit.

Formality is often retained in a public arena. When referring to model citizens, the President addressed them by their full names including their titles, "The Reverend John and The Reverend Diana Cherry." Since Clinton had gotten to know them, he probably addresses them by their first names, John and Diana, in private, but in public, referred to them with their formal titles. Notice that the President followed a natural conversation progression of

going from formal to semi-formal: from "The Reverend" to "Reverend" in the development of his statements (he, did, however, intermingle informality in the usage of "folks" and "a little bit").

The next two folks I've had the honor of meeting and getting to know a little bit, *The Reverend John* and *The Reverend Diana Cherry* of the AME Zion Church in Temple Hills, Maryland. I'd like to ask them to stand. I want to tell you about them. In the early '80s, they left government service and formed a church in a small living room in a small house, in the early '80s. Today that church has 17,000 members. It is one of the three or four biggest churches in the entire United States. It grows by 200 a month. They do it together. And the special focus of their ministry is keeping families together. Two things they did make a big impression on me — I visited their church once — and I learned they were building a new sanctuary closer to the Washington, D.C. line, in a higher crime, higher drug rate area, because they thought it was part of their ministry to change the lives of the people who needed them.

The second thing I want to say is that once *Reverend Cherry* was at a meeting at the White House with some other religious leaders, and he left early to go back to his church to minister to 150 couples that he had brought back to his church from all over America to convince them to come back together, to save their marriages, and to raise their kids. This is the kind of work that citizens are doing in America. We need more of it, and it ought to be lifted up and supported.

Granted President Clinton used certain high register forms, but informality comes across as his preferred choice; in spite of his high office and the formal setting of the Cabinet, Clinton very often chose informal terms or phrases. As above, the President followed a basic pattern or rule of starting with the formal title or name and going to the informal one when he called on exemplary citizens. He named one such citizen using the standard register; he called her by her full name, Cindy Perry, then referred to her informally as Cindy.

Cindy Perry teaches second graders to read in AmeriCorps in rural Kentucky. She gains when she gives. She's a mother of four. She says that her service inspired her to get her high school equivalency last year. She was married when she was a teenager. Stand up, *Cindy*. She had four children, but she had time to serve other people, to get her high school equivalency. And she's going to use her AmeriCorps money to go back to college.

When he addressed the general public, he evoked familiarity, evidenced by "the folks" in "This year, let's give the folks at home something to cheer about." Later he sounded "buddy-buddy" in the use of the word "friends" in the phrase "something that I've heard my Republican friends say." This utterance, "But, I'll tell you something," has a ring of casualness to it as does the part that immediately trailed it, "if you'll give me the line-item veto...."

Another instance is in the use of "you know" to start off a topic instead of standard transitional phrases, which he employed five times:

1. "You know, for years before I became president, I heard others say they would cut government and how bad it was."
2. "You know, I think everybody in this room, without regard to party, can be proud of the fact that our country

was rated as having the world's most productive economy for the first time in nearly a decade."

3. "You know, tonight, this is the first State of the Union address ever delivered since the beginning of the Cold War when not a single Russian missile"

4. "You know, I'm proud of the fact the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any country in the world."

5. "You know, it takes a lot of people to help all the kids in trouble stay off the streets and in school."

The following is a collection of casual expressions that Clinton used: These terminally cited examples are not all-inclusive — there were many more instances of colloquialism.

- "You bet we do."
- "Be straight" (an informal expression meaning "be honest")
- "... work the system ..."
- "four and a quarter" (meaning \$4.25, four dollars and twenty-five cents)
- "bunch" in "There's a whole bunch of people...."

In the opinion of Strunk and White, informality can go too far, to the point of being "breezy" (1979, p. 73) ; they admonish the style as windy, confusing spontaneity as style. Perhaps Clinton is guilty of this "sin" in this selection, "the way things work around here" as well as some of the "breezy" citations above.

Dowis deals with the formality/informality issue by asserting:

No one can decide for you how much informality is appropriate for a given piece of writing or a given audience.

No rules exist except the "rule" of common sense. You must train yourself to think carefully about who your readers are and what they want — about how you want them to react to your message (1990, p. 78) .

This is in sharp contrast to the Japanese language where speakers must use a prescribed level of politeness and formality according to the hierarchical position relative to that of the listener. It is always necessary to worry about ritual and formality.

In this section on informality, the excerpts included every one of the formal expressions used by the president, but only about one tenth of his informal utterances, pointing to the President's preference for informality.

B. Frankness

An outstanding feature of American communication is frankness or candidness (Books, 1996b, p. 35) , which mean simply, honesty. That is not to say that people from other nations are dishonest, but rather that Americans often say, "Here I am, warts and all" right out in public. In the above-mentioned study by Barnlund (1975) , out of 34 possible adjectives to choose from, respondents chose "Frank" as one of the top characteristics of Americans (in second place after "Self- assertive") .

Let us examine the instances and prevalence of Clinton's forthrightness or frankness. To begin with, he did not wait until the middle or end of his speech to announce his New Covenant, but rather, he stated it in the introduction.

This was a sign of frankness or candidness that he was not concealing anything. Such disclosure can heighten the trust of the audience in the speaker, and it may even mitigate their opposition (Books, 1996a, 63) .

Within the first minute, he candidly stated the foul mood of the populace as a whole, "I must say that in both years [1992 and 1994] we didn't hear America singing; we heard America shouting."

The President actually used the word "frank" in his State of the Union address. He was reiterating his dreams and aspirations when he first entered as president, and his attempts to deal with the challenges facing the nation, when he admitted he had erred.

I came to this hallowed chamber two years ago on a mission — to restore the American Dream for all our people and to make sure that we move into the 21st century still the strongest force for freedom and democracy in the entire world. I was determined then to tackle the tough problems too long ignored.

In this effort I am frank to say that I have made my mistakes, and I have learned again the importance of humility in all human endeavor. But I am also proud to say tonight that our country is stronger than it was two years ago.

Another example of openness was when he revealed that something was "rotten in the state of Denmark" right under his jurisdiction:

But we have a lot more to do before people really trust the way things work around here. Three times as many lobbyists are in the streets and corridors of Washington as were here 20 years ago. The American people look at their capital and they see a city where the well-connected and the well-protected can work the system, but the interests of ordinary citizens are often left out. As the new Congress opened its doors, lobbyists were still doing business as usual: the gifts, the trips, all the things that people are concerned about haven't stopped. Twice this month you missed opportunities to stop these practices. I know there were other considerations in those votes, but I want to use something that I've heard my Republican friends say from time to time — there doesn't have to be a law for everything. So tonight, I ask you to just stop taking the lobbyists' perks. Just stop.

Further into the delivery was this candid revelation of his government's dubious research grants, "There was \$1 million to study stress in plants, and \$12 million for a tick removal program that didn't work."

The address gave an honest (and damning) assessment of the state of the union in relation to the economy; unemployment; "threats" to children, families, and values; civil life; and government:

But the rising tide is not lifting all boats. While our nation is enjoying peace and prosperity, too many of our people are still working harder and harder, for less and less. While our businesses are restructuring and growing more productive and competitive, too many of our people still can't be sure of having a job next year or even next month. And far more than our material riches are threatened — things far more precious to us: our children, our families, our values. Our civil life is suffering in America today. Citizens are working together less and shouting at each other more. The common bonds of community which have been the great strength of our country from its very beginning are badly frayed.

Our government, once a champion of national purpose, is now seen by many as simply a captive of narrow interests, putting more burdens on our citizens rather than equipping them to get ahead. The values that used to hold us all together seem to be coming apart.

Perhaps the strongest self-criticism ("self" in the sense that government is part of the man) is the one on the impoverished welfare system.

Nothing has done more to undermine our sense of common responsibility than our failed welfare system. This is one of the problems we have to face here in Washington in our New Covenant. It rewards welfare over work. It undermines family values. It lets millions of parents get away without paying their child support. It keeps a minority — but a significant minority — of the people on welfare trapped on it for a very long time.

III. Non-verbal Communication Styles

This section delves into non-verbal communication techniques/styles typical in American speechmaking and is delimited to variation of speed and volume, concurrently examining a Clinton paradigm, his presidential inaugural address. The "speed" section was broken down into occurrences in sentences, and within syllables, which was subsequently subdivided into clipped, drawled, and held, while fortissimo and pianissimo comprised the "volume" portion. Following a brief explanation of each category, key examples were provided.

A. Varied Speed

1. Speed in Sentences

In most of the inaugural address, Clinton tended to speak at an approximately constant rate; but occasionally long stretches were uttered with distinctive changes in tempo, sometimes to produce different meanings.

Lentissimo, which is two degrees slower than the norm, according to Crystal and Davy (1969, p. 35), was used so that he could catch the audience's ear. These were the President's opening lines, spoken immediately following his salutation to his "fellow citizens." He was particularly slow in his very first words, "Today we celebrate the mystery" and in the last few words, "we force the spring."

Today ... we celebrate ... the mystery ... of American ... renewal This ceremony ... is held ... in the depth ... of winter ... but by the words ... we speak ... and faces ... we show ... the world, ... we force ... the spring

Allegro and allegro are two degrees faster than the norm (Crystal and Davy, 1969, p. 35), and served the purpose of keeping the delivery as brisk and lively as are their definitions. This was suitable because the passage was tantamount to storytelling.

When our founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty ... "

2. Speed Within Syllables

It is usually only in long phrases or in whole sentences that one notices the changes of speed. But, throughout the President's delivery, we are able to note the following contrasts within syllables: clipped syllables, drawled syllables, and held syllables (Crystal and Davy, 1969, 35) .

a. Clipped Syllables

When a syllable is spoken very rapidly, or abruptly, it is said to be clipped. When referring to the sad state of the welfare system in the country, Clinton made certain words stand out by clipping them: "It `rewards `welfare `over `work."

b. Drawled Syllables

Drawled syllables occur when some part of a syllable is slowed down lengthening the segment (or segments) . This added vocal variety imparted a great sense of event in the following where the President elongated the long "e" to pronounce it "e-e-e-e-evil," making it sound more demonic: "I know that in the face of such eeeevil, it is hard for the people in the Middle East to go forward." Drawling was also successfully used in three words of this sentence, "That's at the heart of this New Covenant—responsibility, opportunity and citizenship." The words that were drawled were: "responsibility," "opportunity," and "citizenship." In each case, the syllable with the accent was dragged out and they are, respectively, "pon," "tu," and "ci," which came out sounding "pooon," "tuu," and "ciiii."

c. Held Syllables

Held syllables occur when one makes ready to articulate a syllable but delays the release of its initial segment. The delay produces a "bottling up" of the air for the articulation, which results in an anticipatory silence, perhaps also some audible vocal cord vibration, and greater emphasis on what follows. The held syllable technique occurs before the closure for the letter "t" of "to" is heard at the end of "have," but the plosive stays unreleased for an instant; he articulates, "... would haaaave to change."

B. Varied Volume

Each departure from one's norm of loudness, postulates Crystal and Davy (1969, 35) , carries different, conventionalized meanings producing the label of delight, horror, etc. Clinton cleverly emphasized positive and negative points through varied volume.

There was an increase in volume, termed fortissimo articulation, when the President, after thanking President Bush, thanked Americans. He both speeded up AND increased his volume, which he tended to do for many of his positive statements.

... and I thank the millions of men and women whose steadfastness and sacrifice triumphed over depression, fascism, and communism.

Pianissimo, a decrease in volume, was heard at the end of this piece, and this was accompanied by a slowing down, which established a pattern for many of his negative comments. He particularly decreased speed and volume

around the last three words of this excerpt, "... but threatened still by ancient hatreds, ... and ... new ... plagues"

He used greater volume plus a higher register (in the non-verbal sense of tone or pitch) plus faster speed in this positive fact: "Raised in unrivaled prosperity we inherit an economy that is still the world's strongest." One example of the President lowering his volume plus slowing down is at the end of this negative statement, "... but is weakened by business failures, stagnant wages, increasing inequality, and deep divisions among our own people."

IV. Conclusion

In a summary of the four typical verbal and non-verbal characteristics in American speech, we noted that President Clinton engages in all of them. The President used only a handful of formal expressions and a preponderance of informal ones, i. e., most of the time his diction was quite colloquial. The candid approach, "Telling it like it is," even if it may cause some disharmony, is often preferred, and peppered the President's annualized address. In a verbal analysis, we could say that Clinton and his speech writers injected typical informality and frankness in this State of the Union address.

President Clinton used both faster speed and higher volume a great deal, and often concurrently, often to highlight a positive spin on his material. A slower pace and decreased volume served as humbleness in his frank revelations. It would be churlish not to concede that President Clinton, at minimum in his delivery style, rose to the moment. The added vocal variety imparted a greater sense of event. In addition, this good oral inflected style made ideas instantly intelligible to the audience.

Perhaps one can judge the acceptance of the President's styles from the immediate reaction in the Congress for his State of the Union address (even they acknowledged the successful speech), and outside in front of the White House for his inaugural address: he garnered almost fifty ovations for each.

In performing characteristically, like many other Americans, is he not a mirror of the American public? Perhaps Hart (1984, p. 24) is right when he claims "to study presidential speech is to study the American people themselves."

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