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PRACTICAL ARGUMENTATION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Analysis of President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze practical reasoning and practical argumentation schemes in the speeches of the 44th President of the United States – Barack Obama. It looks into the State of the Union Addresses delivered annually in the United States Congress (2009-2012) and focuses on the selected text of 2010, applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical framework. Emphasis is put on the stated values behind the practical reasoning – analysis has shown that the *Claims for action* and *Goals* are guided by the values of *unity, fairness and responsibility*. *Claims for Action* and *Means-goals'* relations to the set *Goal* of the identified practical argument are strong and reasonable. This paper also identifies common rhetorical devices used by the speaker to achieve persuasive rationalization of the advocated measures.

Key words: practical argumentation, Critical discourse analysis, State of the Union address,

1. Introduction

The Constitution of the United States of America, Article II, Sec. 3, Clause 1 requests the President of the United States to inform congress 'from time to time' about the State of the Union. The first speech acknowledged as the State of the Union message / address was delivered by the President George Washington to a Joint Session of Congress on January 8, 1790. ⁱ Since then, according to the project-History, Arts and Architectureⁱⁱ, there have been 95 in-in person annual messages/addresses. Considering their importance, the messages pronounced by the president are elaborated and crafted carefully and constitute interesting material for analysis.

Few would argue about the spectacular public speaking skills and charismatic oratory of Barack Obama. The 44th President of the United States is seen as a gifted speaker and distinguished leader in recent history. His political discourse features are emphasis on change, hope and unity of nation. While working on the present article, I have looked at Obama's State of the Union Addresses to see how practical reasoning is formulated, what are the leading values and arguments.

To illustrate a practical argumentation scheme, attention is drawn on two major topics identified in the text of 2010 - employment and research and innovation development. These issues are addressed in all SoU addresses of President Barack Obama, they remain as major claims of action in the speeches of 2009-2012. The analysis shows that the word choice the president makes is often related to competitive context. While describing state of the arts, the speaker applies metaphors that are related to contest, examination, overcoming challenges and thus, to my mind, highlights the circumstance where the U.S. has to pursue its efforts to be the world leading country.

2. Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method of analysis that focuses on text and believes the language is a social practice; According to one of the prominent founding authors of CDA - Prof. Norman Fairclough, through this method of research one can lead to change and social actions. It is an interdisciplinary approach that provides platform for various disciplines' interaction. „Methodologically, this approach entails working in a ‘transdisciplinary’ way through dialogue with other disciplines and theories which are addressing contemporary processes of social change” (Fairclough N. 2001).

CDA directs its attention to problem(s) in the society, these might be various forms of social inequality, excessive power in certain social circles: „Critical Discourse Analysis" (CDA) has become the general label for a special approach to the study of text and talk, emerging from critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse and communication... CDA is essentially dealing with an oppositional study of the structures and strategies of elite discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and consequences, as well as with the discourse of resistance against such domination” (T. Van Dijk, 1995).

In this article I focus on practical reasoning in identified arguments, I attempt to study explanations, means-goals and values of the speaker in favour of suggested actions, policies, decision. The structure I apply is that of the practical argument structure developed by Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough in their work „Political Discourse Analysis – Method for Advanced Students”: „Where the hypothesis that action A might enable the agent to reach his goals (G), starting from his

circumstances (C), and in accordance with certain values (V), leads to the presumptive claim that he ought to do A. It is often the case that the context of action is seen as a ‘problem’ (and is negatively evaluated in view of the agent’s existing values or concerns) and the action is seen as the solution that will solve the problem.” (Fairclough I., Fairclough N. 2012:47).

2.1 Data collection procedures

I have considered State of the Union Addresses delivered By President Obama in the United States Congress (2009-2012) for analysis. Thanks to open data and digital technologies, all major speeches and addresses by international politicians are available online (both scripts and videos) enabling any researcher to proceed with the analysis smoothly and without limitations. The reason behind selecting this particular type of address is that these are institutional speeches, well prepared and crafted in advance with participation of relevant professionals. Main messages of the addresses are widely acknowledged, discussed and in some way, they declare the policy of the speaker. It’s noteworthy that the delivery of the State of the Union Addresses is envisaged by the constitution of the United States. Therefore, there is a special responsibility, meaning and implication between the lines of the address.

3. Analysis

In the address of 2010 the problem-solution context of the speech is that of employment and economic recovery of the country. The speaker identifies the goal of taking the country from the current circumstance into the one that has better economic conditions, offers more opportunities to its citizens and has more jobs. In this analysis I want to look at the *argument in support of the announced new job bill*.

Expression of gratitude and deep respect towards the American nation, as well as reference to the historical events is a common component of the addresses by the President. In the first part of the speech (2010), the speaker **acknowledges difficulties** and shares the concerns of the wider society, especially those who are in need:

„So, I know the anxieties that are out there right now. They're not new. These struggles are the reason I ran for President.”

But he also gives account to what has been already done to tackle the issue of unemployment, in this case - recovery act.

Considering the practical argumentation scheme, the goal premise is to „**Put more Americans to work**’. Circumstance premises are represented with the strong rhetoric of encouragement. The means-goals are elaborated so, that they require immediate reaction, the president calls for prompt acknowledgement of the identified challenge:

„True engine of job creation in this country will always be America's businesses. But government can create the conditions necessary for businesses to expand and hire more workers. Now, the House has passed a jobs bill that includes some of these steps. As the first order of business this year, I urge the Senate to do the same, and I know they will. They will. People are out of work. They're hurting. They need our help. And I want a jobs bill on my desk without delay. “

So, in terms of planning the recovery and development process, the president sets immediate and long term goals. The same statement is pronounced several times in different parts of the text. According to the address of 2010, the immediate goal is to pass a job bill, long-term goal is – to „lay a new foundation for long-term economic growth and finally address the problems that America's families have confronted for years.” Long-term goals are formulated as larger challenges. The main value that the president appeals to is justice, fairness, unity. The speaker chooses words expressing **action**, problem-solving initiative, creates context of action and makes his address a persuasive communication. Action is a background context of the 2010 speech text and appears in different parts of the narrative:

„So tonight, I'm proposing that we take \$30 billion of the money Wall Street banks have repaid and use it to help community banks give small businesses the credit they need to stay afloat... To recover the rest, I have proposed a fee on the biggest banks. I am also proposing a new small business tax credit . As temperatures cool, I want everyone to take another look at the plan we've proposed. So tonight, I'm proposing specific steps to pay for the \$1 trillion that it took to rescue the economy last year.”

Argument reconstruction

Goal

We should put more Americans to work

Claim for action

Jobs must be our number-one focus in 2010 and that's why I'm calling for a new jobs bill tonight.

Circumstance

So we face big and difficult challenges.
Despite our hardships, our union is strong. We do not give up. We do not quit. We do not allow fear or division to break our spirit

Means- goal

The government can create the conditions necessary for businesses to expand and hire more workers.

Counter-claim

But the truth is, these steps won't make up for the seven million jobs that we've lost over the last two years workers.

Argument from authority

Previous similar effort was successful as the economists claim -
„Economists on the left and the right say this bill (the Recovery Act) has helped save jobs and avert disaster”

As the above given table shows, the claim for action and the means-goal arguments are strongly related to each other, they are supported by motivational description of state of the art and argument from authority. However, if the suggested plan is **enough and sufficient** to deliver medium and long-term goals remains open to disagreement.

Another issue that I want to draw the attention on is the instance of the President's practical argument on **Research and Innovation**. It is addressing the question of what to do in response to challenging circumstance – how to put more Americans to work. Research and innovation is represented not only in the text of 2010, but also in all other texts of the SoU.

It's worth mentioning, that the understanding of the way research and innovation should be advanced can be considered as unique in the US-it is very strongly connected to economy and market oriented research. In the address of the president, research and innovation is presented in the context where it is **inseparable with the economic** development of the country. Moreover, it is highlighted as an absolutely necessary premise and basics for progress and world leadership. It's widely acknowledged that the problem and challenge-oriented attitude towards planning research and innovation policy is a common practice in the U.S. Intensive cooperation with business, private sector investment in research and innovation activities are high. During the presidency of Barack Obama, National investment in science was strongⁱⁱⁱ, promotion of science, technology in particular environment, energy, climate and space related topics were in the agenda of administration. Quite recently, the European Commission has published a new strategic approach towards the research and innovation policy in the forthcoming framework programme putting more emphasis to the role of the research activities in the economic development of the countries. Dr. Mariana Mazzucato highlights in her report on „Mission-Oriented Research & Innovation in the European Union” a new approach of the EU research and innovation policy: „Europe has been thinking about and tackling such challenges for a long time, including through Horizon 2020... Finding ways to steer economic growth, and the European policy agenda, is difficult but necessary. Missions are a powerful tool to do this. They can provide the means to focus our research, innovation and investments on solving critical problems, while also spurring growth, jobs and resulting in positive spillovers across many sectors.^{iv}”.

In the addresses of President Obama, science and innovation policy related narrative follows the employment and economic development topics. Science and business connection is explicit in the text, so is the **tough competition** among world leading countries in technologies and development through innovation. The global leadership role of the U.S. is highlighted by the speaker in this context as well. Circumstances that hamper growth of the U.S. Should be addressed by science and technology projects. The same argument on supporting research and innovation is formulated in several parts of the text.

3.1 Practical argument on encouraging American innovation

Goal: We should put more Americans to work

Claim for action: we need to encourage American innovation. We need passing a comprehensive energy and climate bill with incentives that will finally make clean energy the profitable kind of energy in America.

Circumstance: Last year, we made the largest investment in basic research funding in history – an investment that could lead to the world's cheapest solar cells or treatment that kills cancer cells but leaves healthy ones untouched. And no area is more ripe for such innovation than energy.

Means-goal: To create more of these clean energy jobs, we need more production, more efficiency, more incentives. That means building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country. It means making tough decisions about opening new offshore areas for oil and gas development. It means continued investment in advanced biofuels and clean coal technologies. And yes, it means passing a comprehensive energy and climate bill with incentives that will finally make clean energy the profitable kind of energy in America.

Means-goal: But even if you doubt the evidence, providing incentives for energy efficiency and clean energy are the right thing to do for our future – because the nation that leads the clean energy economy will be the nation that leads the global economy. And America must be that nation.

Means-goal: Fourth, we need to invest in the skills and education of our people.

Means-goal: When we renew the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we will work with Congress to expand these reforms to all fifty states.

Argument from authority 1: You can see the results of last year's investment in clean energy – in the North Carolina company that will create 1200 jobs nationwide helping to make advanced batteries; or in the California business that will put 1,000 people to work making solar panels.

Argument from authority 2: You see, Washington has been telling us to wait for decades, even as the problems have grown worse. Meanwhile, China is not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany is not waiting. India is not waiting. These nations — they're not standing still. These nations aren't playing for second place. They're putting more emphasis on math and science. They're rebuilding their infrastructure. They're making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs. Well, I do not accept second place for the United States of America.

Given argument justifies need for new actions – efforts related to science & innovation should be translated into legislative actions and profitable steps forward. Energy is highlighted field of science due to its potential of contributing to the country's economic development. The speaker claims that supporting (and investing in) energy related research will lead to the better economy and more jobs. Besides, investing in education is presented as another means of reaching the goal. Overall, to my mind, the means-goals presented in the practical argument are reasonable.

4. Findings and discussion

As mentioned above, SoU addresses are highly characterised by competition discourse. Almost in all paragraphs supporting the claim for action, the president highlights the superpower status of the United States, an indispensable nation solving the challenges of global concern. This status has been achieved in competition with nations that „are not standing still”. And the speaker presents himself as a leader who „does not accept second place for the United States of America.” The text of 2010, similarly to other State of the Union Addresses by President Obama is rich in stylistic and rhetorical devices. Competition and action are the leading representations of the text of 2010.

Highlighting competition

- These nations aren't playing for second place... Well, I do not accept second place for the United States of America.
- From the first railroads to the Interstate Highway System, our nation has always been built to compete. There's no reason Europe or China should have the fastest trains, or the new factories that manufacture clean energy products.
- We have to seek new markets aggressively, just as our competitors are. If America sits on the sidelines while other nations sign trade deals, we will lose the chance to create jobs on our shores.
- I didn't choose to tackle this issue to get some legislative victory under my belt.

Highlighting the need to take action

- So we acted — immediately and aggressively. And one year later, the worst of the storm has passed.
- I'm calling for a new jobs bill tonight.
- Tomorrow, I'll visit Tampa, Florida, where workers will soon break ground on a new high-speed railroad funded by the Recovery Act.
- it's time to get serious about fixing the problems that are hampering our growth.
- That's why I urge the Senate to follow the House and pass a bill that will revitalize our community colleges.
- Let us find a way to come together and finish the job for the American people.
- Tonight, I'm proposing specific steps

- It's time to require lobbyists to disclose each contact they make on behalf of a client with my administration or with Congress. It's time to put strict limits on the contributions that lobbyists give to candidates for federal office.

Highlighting the US superpower and Evocation of history

(Both addressed and elaborated in the beginning and final parts of the speech)

- Our Constitution declares that from time to time, the President shall give to Congress information about the state of our union. For 220 years, our leaders have fulfilled this duty. They've done so during periods of prosperity and tranquility. And they've done so in the midst of war and depression; at moments of great strife and great struggle.
- America takes these actions because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores.
- For America must always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity.
- Abroad, America's greatest source of strength has always been our ideals. The same is true at home. We find unity in our incredible diversity, drawing on the promise enshrined in our Constitution: the notion that we're all created equal; that no matter who you are or what you look like, if you abide by the law you should be protected by it; if you adhere to our common values you should be treated no different than anyone else.
- In the end, it's our ideals, our values that built America — values that allowed us to forge a nation made up of immigrants from every corner of the globe; values that drive our citizens still.

Repetition, anaphora to emphasise accomplishments:

- Now, let me repeat: We cut taxes. We cut taxes for 95 percent of working families. We cut taxes for small businesses. We cut taxes for first-time homebuyers. We cut taxes for parents trying to care for their children. We cut taxes for 8 million Americans paying for college;
- Let us find a way to come together and finish the job for the American people. Let's get it done. Let's get it done.

Contrast / antithesis:

- But when I ran for President, I promised I wouldn't just do what was popular – I would do what was necessary;
- burdens that America's families have been dealing with for decades — the burden of working harder and longer for less;
- Next, we can put Americans to work today building the infrastructure of tomorrow.

Expressive metaphors:

- Again, we are tested. And again, we must answer history's call;
- How long should America put its future on hold?
- The worst of the storm has passed;
- Our most urgent task upon taking office was to shore up the same banks that helped cause this crisis.

Metonymy:

- Washington has been telling us to wait for decades.

Summing up, in this paper I have discussed two arguments a) in support of the announced new job bill and b) in support of the current Research and innovation policy referring to the Critical Discourse Analysis perspective and focusing on practical argumentation scheme. The two arguments have been highlighted because the same statements are pronounced several times in the text of 2010 as well as other State of the Union addresses. In terms of structure, both practical arguments are strong and reasonable – *Claims for Action*, Goals and *Means-goals*' relations are in related to each other, although weakly, but *Counter-claim* is also present in the text. The guiding values of both arguments are unity, fairness, responsibility. While describing state of the arts, the speaker applies metaphors that are related to contest, examination, overcoming challenges and thus, highlights the circumstance where the U.S. has to pursue its efforts to be the world leading country.

5. Conclusion

State of the Union Addresses, text of 2010 provides another good example of how President Barack Obama acknowledges and addresses all potential and power of language. The text is rich with rhetorical devices. Values shared by the whole nation are highlighted and presented as the basis of policy, fundamentals of further actions. Throughout his speech, President hardly ever separates himself from the American people and society, expressing deep gratitude, respect and emphasizing the need for joint efforts and common agenda. Indeed, if we invite relevant experts of the fields to scrutinize the arguments provided by the president, it is most probable that the provided premises will become subject to criticism and review. However, Claims for Action and Means-goals' relations to the identified Goal in President's practical argumentation are strong and reasonable.

Deeper and more comprehensive CDA analysis of each identified argument could become the subject of further analysis.

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ⁱ "President George Washington Delivered His First Regular Annual Message to a Joint Session of Congress," History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives.

ⁱⁱ History, Arts and Architecture is a collaborative project between the Office of the Historian and the [Clerk of the House's](#) Office of Art and Archives.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) [info brief by Mark Boroush](#), „research and experimental development (R&D) performed in the United States totaled \$495.1 billion in 2015 (table 1). The estimated total for 2016, based on performer-reported expectations, is \$510.0 billion. These numbers compare to U.S. R&D totals of \$454.0 billion in 2013 and \$475.4 billion in 2014”. R&D expenditures, by performing sector and source of funding: 2008–16 are [available on NSF website](#).

^{iv} Mission-Oriented Research & Innovation in the European Union by Dr. Mariana MAZZUCATO is [available on the EC website](#)

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Mariam Keburia is a PhD student at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Humanities. Her interests are related to Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and argumentation in the contexts of PDA. Mariam is particularly interested in research that uses text as a basis for analysis and identifies values behind declared policies. During her PhD fellowship, Mariam has delivered several courses at TSU (department of English Philology) enabling her to enrich language teaching experience and develop research capacities.