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Teaching Audience Analysis With Presidential “Victory” Speeches

Courses: Public Speaking, Advanced Public Speaking

Objective: To demonstrate for students how effective audience analysis contributes to writing a great speech by comparing two presidential speeches on a similar topic. One speech illustrates excellent audience analysis, and the second speech illustrates less effective audience analysis.

Time Required: Single class: 40-50 minutes (or longer depending on instructors lecture time and unit goals)

Introduction and Rationale

Psychologists have written about audience motivation for decades (Hollingsworth, 1935), and audience analysis remains one of the most important elements of public speaking preparation. Textbook authors generally identify audience analysis as a first step to take when preparing a presentation (Jaffe, 2013, Lucas, 1992); Holman (1970) and Beebe and Beebe (2014) instruct students to analyze their audience before, during, and after a presentation. Garrett and Xiao (1993) evaluate audience analysis as part of a rhetorical situation that identifies the audience’s motivation, the situation, and the audience’s perception of the speaker. Regardless of when the analysis takes place, identifying audiences’ demographics and psychological profiles (Jaffe 2013) allow a speaker to develop a common ground with the audience as well as address the audiences’ egocentrism.

Jaffe (2013) further explains, “A good speech is prepared for a particular group at a particular time” (p. 88), and Lucas (1992) adds, “The primary purpose of speechmaking is to gain a desired response from listeners” (p. 70). When a speaker is targeting a particular audience with a specific response in mind, audience analysis not only dictates the content of the speech, but also can (and should) dictate even the thesis of the speech. By framing audience analysis

through these filters, these authors note that a speaker can better motivate an audience, and engaging these strategies, enables a speaker to connect more effectively with an audience.

Teaching students to understand the importance of audience analysis can be challenging. In fact, many public speaking texts suggest methods for engaging audience analysis that is not always practical or possible (for example, polling audiences before you speak to them). One practical way of understanding audience analysis is to see it at work in the text of a speech. This exercise is designed to demonstrate effective audience analysis through the evaluation of two speeches, both addressing presidential “victories.”

The Activity and Debriefing

Prepping the Class

To prepare the class for this exercise, require students to read the assigned audience analysis material such as the textbook chapter, a handout, websites, and do on. Add to this a brief lecture or discussion on basic concepts such as egocentrism, demographics, and psychological profiles (sometimes referred to as attitudinal analysis). Once the foundational material has been established, the class can begin the exercise.

The Exercise

The goal of this exercise is to compare a speech that engages effective audience analysis with a speech that does not. The selected speeches are two different presidential “victory” speeches. The example of effective audience analysis is Barack Obama’s 2008 remarks on election night. The second less effective victory speech is George Bush’s May 2003 “Mission Accomplished” speech declaring an end to major conflict in the war in Iraq.

Begin with the better speech. Distribute a copy of Barack Obama's victory speech,¹ using the most appropriate method for the class. This may be a handout of hard copies, PowerPoint slides, an electronic blackboard system, and so on. However, having a hard copy of the speech in their hands during the discussion allows students to circle key words and/or phrases, note specific passages, and quickly skim a particular paragraph that is being analyzed. Encourage students to identify words or phrases that capture their attention while reviewing the speech using audience analysis tools.

Because Obama's speech was to acknowledge his victory in the 2008 Presidential election, and his audience was the American public—both his supporters and those who did not vote for him, his audience analysis should be evident in his thesis and throughout his speech. After reading the text, ask the class to identify any words, concepts, or ideas that they feel might reflect this audience analysis. If there is enough time, the class can form into small groups to discuss the speech, followed by a debriefing with the class as a whole.

Several key words and terms used in the speech are important to identify as part of the audience analysis. Obama's repeated themes of "Yes We Can," "Change," and "Hope," (Obama, 2008) plus the focus of his victory being all about "you" – the audience that voted him into office – are easily identified. Coe and Reitzes (2010) note how these themes reflect the entirety of the president-elect's 2008 rhetorical campaign strategies. In addition, ask students to identify how he recognized his opponents and focused on common American values.

Obama's victory speech received a great deal of acclaim for many reasons. Xue and Wei (2009) show how the construction of the president-elect's social identity, interpersonal relationships, and ideology can all be identified in the language of the speech. Here's just one

¹ Easily accessed at www.americanthetoric.com.

example: The theme of the speech, as well as Obama's 2008 campaign, focused on change, which led Clayton Jones, Chairman, president and Chief Executive Office of Rockwell Collins, Inc., an avionics corporation, to write an open letter to the incoming president, calling for his support for the needed changes in air transportation systems (Jones, 2008).

After reviewing Obama's victory speech, have students read George W. Bush's 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech.² Before reading the speech, explain some of its context. The invasion in Iraq officially began on March 20, 2003. This speech came just a few weeks later on May 1, 2003. President Bush delivered it on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, anchored in a San Diego harbor to announce the end of major combat operations and the beginning of securing and reconstructing Iraq (Bush, 2003). Bush arrived at the carrier with a great deal of pomp and fanfare, wore a very Presidential suit, and stood in front of a large banner that proclaimed "Mission Accomplished."

President Bush's speech appears to be targeted to the military personnel on the carrier, and he often refers to "you" – his immediate audience. However, he also addresses the American public as well as the broader international community. Because the analyses for these audiences differ, the thesis and content of the speech may be confused. Trying to speak to two or more audiences in the same speech can prove problematic for any speaker. This potential duality can create a great discussion with the class to, first, see if it exists and, second, see if it is done well.

Additionally, the class can look at some potentially problematic content based on poor analysis. For example, the third paragraph of the speech implies that Operation Iraqi Freedom is done; yet there is never any mention of what exactly was accomplished let alone whether and

² Also easily accessed at www.americanrhetoric.com.

when troops would withdraw. The speech is titled “Mission Accomplished,” and if Bush’s desired response from the audience was to believe that “victory” had been accomplished, this content does not achieve that goal.

Furthermore, in paragraph six, President Bush compares the Iraqi theater with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. These analogies create a good point for discussion—the class can evaluate whether or not these events are similar and whether either target audience would make that connection? In paragraph nine, President Bush claims there is much more work to do. If the mission is truly accomplished, as the banner claims, the audiences might ask why more work is needed. In the nineteenth paragraph, President Bush states, “Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed.” Again, this can create confusion with the audiences regarding what exactly has been accomplished. The discussion can go in many directions.

Throughout the course of the discussion, students generally begin to see how George Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech employs poor audience analysis when compared to President Obama’s victory speech. The uncertainty of what was accomplished would haunt Bush for several years. For example, immediately after delivering the speech, Cooney (2003) questioned how the war could be over but military death tolls continued to rise. A year after giving the speech, Bush’s thesis statement was still questioned. In an interview, Bush defended his speech without clearly explaining any accomplishments (Coorey, 2004). Still unable to provide a clear explanation of accomplishments two years later, the media continued to press for answers (Jaber, 2005; Block, 2005). Three years later, the Democrats used the speech as an example of Bush’s “dangerous incompetence” in Iraq (Wodele, 2006). John Kerry took advantage of the alleged rhetorical blunder and used the speech and the alleged victory against Bush in the 2004 Presidential campaign (Carlisle & Moore 2004).

If Bush's attempt with his "victory" speech was to connect better with the American public, then the audience analysis driving his thesis and speech content failed. Gallup polls (2003) noted that in January 2003, Bush had a 96% approval rating. On March 22, 2003, two days after the invasion of Iraq, Bush still maintained a 94% approval rating. However, by the time he delivered his May 1, 2003, speech, he had slipped to a 69% approval rating. His rating scores would continue to decline over the next several months dropping to 62% in July, 60% in August, and 52% by September, 2003. Effective audience analysis would have translated into a better thesis and speech content convincing the American public of real "victory" in Iraq.

Appraisal

The discussion of these two speeches may continue based upon time and how well the students are equipped with effective tools for good audience analysis. It is also helpful to preface the conversation with a qualifier that this activity is NOT a political critique or discussion of either President's policies or political careers. Some students feel compelled to argue for or against a particular President. Students need to be reminded that they are only evaluating and comparing two speeches. Non-partisanship needs to remain a central focus of the discussion.

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