

## A Stylistic Analysis on “I Have A Dream”

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**Abstract.** Based on the theories and approaches typified by Leech and Short, this paper makes a comprehensive stylistic analysis of the speech “I Have a Dream” made by Martin Luther King with an attempt to find out how King makes his speech a remarkable delivery and how the style of the speech addresses his tone, attitude and intention, which can provide some implications for pedagogical application and enrich the techniques in English writing and making speeches.

**Keywords:** style, speech, feature, effect.

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## **1. Introduction**

Martin Luther King, JR., who won the Noble Peace Prize in 1964, was an important political leader fighting for political rights for black people in the USA. The speech “I Have a Dream” was made on August 28, 1963 when King was leading the “March on Washington” before the Lincoln Memorial. Some 250.000 Americans of all faiths, races and creeds joined him and other civil rights leaders in this demonstration of solidarity. By making this speech, King tried to persuade the blacks to carry on their struggle by non-violent means for the justice and freedom promised to them by the Emancipation Proclamation. King’s speech has been extensively studied in different perspectives and most of the studies concerned about its rhetorical devices, biblical background, translation, his concepts towards laws, his logic and philosophy of life, etc. This paper, based on the theories and approaches typified by Leech and Short (1981), will make a comprehensive stylistic analysis of this speech with an attempt to find out how King makes his speech a remarkable delivery and how the style of the speech addresses his intention, which can thus improve the level in appreciating English works and to enrich the techniques in English writing and making speeches.

## **2. Stylistics and Style**

Different claims have been made with regard to the definition of stylistics. According to stylistic pluralism, “language performs a number of different functions and any piece of language is likely to be the result of choices made on different functional levels.”(Leech, 1981) That is to say an author makes his linguistic choices according to the particular functions he intends to fulfill, which are closely related to his purposes of writing and speaking. Leech proposes that “The style proclaims the man” i.e. there is an intimate connection between style

and the author's personality (1981) While approaching literary texts, according to Janna Thornborrow (2000), it involves the use of linguistics. Therefore, the following part will be devoted to analyzing the linguistic features of Martin Luther King's speech "I Have A Dream", which is chosen from the book *A New English Course 5*. (Li, 2003)

### **3. Linguistic analysis of "I Have A Dream"**

#### **3.1. Lexical features:**

##### **3.1.1 Common words and literary words**

The English vocabulary consists of different kinds of words, which may be classified by different criteria. By level of usage, words can be divided into common words, literary words, colloquial words, slang words and technical words. (Zhang, 2004) In King's speech, many common or popular words, which are connected with the ordinary things or activities necessary to everyday life, can be found. Examples of this are: "promise, fatal, equality, soul, victim, freedom, hope, daybreak, chain, capital, symphony, brotherhood", etc. These words are quite familiar to the audiences from different classes with different backgrounds, helping them easily understand King's speech. They can also create an atmosphere of friendliness and closeness. Literary words chiefly used in writings, especially in books written in a more elevated style, in official documents, or in formal speeches also abound in this speech, such as "segregation, unalienable, insofar, obligation, vault, hallow, engulf, emancipation, proclamation, decree, captivity, languishing, exile", etc. These words are exploited to create a solemn atmosphere, showing that the blacks' urges and their fighting for equal rights must be taken seriously and the non-violent movement will be ended until they are granted equal rights.

### **3.1.2 Words in complete form and shortened form**

In King's speech, many words of complete form instead of shortened form can be found to reinforce the effect of the speech. Examples of this are "I am, It is, We have, It would, There is, We must not, We can not, I have, Let us", etc. Pronunciation is crucial in a speech and such words of full form are pronounced much more clearly with greater emphatic effect than those of shortened form, which always appear in daily life. By exploiting these words, King tends to emphasize the urgency of fighting for the civil rights for the blacks and meanwhile shows his seriousness.

### **3.1.3 Pronouns**

Pronouns such as "I, we, our, you" are largely exploited in King's speech. For example, the word "I" has been used for 14 times, "our" 15 times, "you" 7 times and "we" 31 times. By using these words, King brings himself closer to the audiences, making them have more empathy with him.

## **3.2. Syntactic features**

### **3.2.1 Repetition and parallelism**

One distinctive feature of King's sentence structure is the abound use of repetition and parallelism, two devices widely employed to create more emphatic and emotional effect. In particular, the number of times of using repetition is so large that few of other famous speeches could match it. More than 200 words that are involved in repetition account for more than one tenth of the total vocabulary. The repetition helps to push the speech to the climax, creating a strong rhythm and makes this speech and their movement more memorable. For instance, the sentences "I have a dream" and "let freedom ring" have appeared respectively 9

and 12 times, making the speech more emphatic and thus strengthen King's dream that the blacks would one day enjoy equal rights with the whites and they both could live in perfect harmony.

Parallelism consists of phrases, sentences or paragraphs of similar or the same structure, making comparisons or contrasts between them so as to point out their differences and similarities. The use of parallelism could produce a strong sense of power of the rhythm and thus easily attracts audience's attention. In King's speech, parallelism is widely exploited, such as "to work, pray, struggle, go to jail together and to stand up for freedom together". Besides, parallelism of sentences abounds, such as "We can never be satisfied as long as..." and "With this faith we will be able to....", etc.

### **3.2.2 Periodic sentence structure**

In periodic sentences, audience's comprehension of a sentence is delayed till they come to the end of the sentence. For example: "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." This periodic sentence brings us an element of suspense. The more anticipatory constituents there are, the greater the suspense and the greater the burden on the audience's mind and memory. In this way, audience can easily remember what the speaker wants to emphasize. Besides, if used judiciously and in the right context, the periodic sentence can be rhetorically effective. There is no doubt that King has done a good job in making use of this sentence structure, which easily arrests listeners' attention. It emphasizes the current status of the blacks and demonstrates King's strong desire to change this condition for the blacks.

### **3.3. Semantic features**

#### **3.3.1 Euphemism:**

Euphemism is substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. Actually in our life there are some things that should not be stated bluntly or truthfully—that there are times when it is necessary, even wise, not to “call a spade a spade” but to use some better-sounding name. (Feng, 1996) For example, “It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.” Here “captivity” is a kind of euphemism. As we know, many black people’s (now we call American African) ancestors were captured to be slaves and lead a harsh life. Much to our surprise, never has King mentioned “slavery” in the whole speech. “Slavery” as a system would bring to minds the sad and humiliating picture of the past. To some extent, it reflects King’s as well as the blacks’ desire to change the current situation. The “captivity” here means more than it is suggested. For another example, “those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual”. Here “a rude awakening” is also a kind of euphemism. By making this statement, King warns those who discriminate the black that if they continue doing what has been doing from now on, they will surely have bad and unpleasant experience, for the black will no longer stay calm but resort to violence. By using such euphemism, a pleasant way to comfort the blacks and soften the shock of the reality, King succeeded in earning audience’s respects and thus arousing their feeling, for euphemism, as a figure of speech, is more than saying something unpleasant in a pleasant way. (Li, 2003)

#### **3.3.2 Simile**

Simile is an expression that describes something by comparing it with

something else, using the word “as” or “like”. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995) In this speech the use of simile can be found. For example, King compares Emancipation Proclamation to the beacon light in the black’s heart, for it will bring them hope. Likewise, he wants “a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity”. However, the light of beacon begins to wither away. “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” By using vivid simile, King succeeds in leaving us deep impression.

### **3.3.3 Metaphor**

In King’s speech, one of the notable features is that metaphors abound. For instance, having a great beacon light of hope, the blacks are said to have been “seared in the flames of withering injustice”. They are “crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” and they live “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity”. King also compares the blacks’ going to the ‘capital’ for equal civil rights to cashing a check. All these metaphors bring striking images to the audience’s minds and leave a powerful impression on them. King does not use many similes but metaphors which are a higher form requiring greater ability on the part of the audience to perceive the hidden association, the insight into persons, things or ideas that is implied. (Feng, 1996) King’s metaphors, which serve to animate and humanize what is inanimate, do give us more space for our imagination and make his speech more magnificent and impressive and thus greatly inspire the listeners!

### **3.3.4 Pun**

To pun is to play on words, or rather to play with the form and meaning of words, for a witty or humorous effect. For example, “In a sense we have come to

our nation's Capital to cash a check". Here "capital" literally means "town or city that is the centre of government of a country, state or province". However, it means more than this. "Capital" can also mean "wealth or property that may be used to produce more wealth" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995). Here we can refer "capital" to those who own much capital, mostly those who are against equal civil rights for the black. In addition, literally "check" means "cheque", but it can also mean 'examination to make sure that something is correct, safe, satisfactory or in good condition', which shows that the black are now being checked and treated badly. King says the architects are signing a promissory note when they write words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and he compares the black's going to the "capital" for equal civil rights to cashing a check. However, it is a bad check and the black long for the "capital" to keep their promises. The deep meaning of punning and its powerful effect employed here are sure to be felt and this effect is even stronger when metaphor is used together.

### **3.3.5 Paradox and irony**

Paradox is a statement that seems impossible because it contains two opposing ideas that are both true. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995) For example, "One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land." When audiences first heard of it, they might think "exile in his own land" seems self-contradictory to the established fact. However, after further thinking it proved to be true. The blacks had no civil rights at all. They were always driven out their homeland by the whites. Using paradox here is more effective in presenting a sadly ironic picture of living conditions of the Negro to earn audiences' empathy.



### 3.3.6 Antithesis

In this speech, there are a large number of symmetrical sentences making the speech more rhythmic. E.g. “One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” Here “a lonely island” contrasts with “a vast ocean” while “poverty” functions as the opposite of “material prosperity”. Other examples are: “Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.... Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.” Here “the dark and desolate valley” contrasts sharply with “the sunlit path” while “segregation” serves just as the opposite of ‘racial justice’. The same goes with ‘the quicksands’ versus “the solid rock” and “racial injustice” versus “brotherhood”. By using such antithesis, which evokes a vivid image of the blacks’ harsh conditions during that time, King makes his speech more persuasive.

## 3.4. Phonological features

### 3.4.1 Rhythm of sentences

As is accepted by all, the rhythm of a poem is a critical element. There is no exception to a speech. In King’s speech, we can easily feel his inspiring voice while reading the melodious and rhythmic speech. Examples below can just demonstrate this point quite well.

- 1) “In a ` sense we have ` come to our nation’s ` Capital to ` cash a ` check”
- 2) “So we have ` come to ` cash this ` check--a ` check that will ` give us the ` riches of ` freedom and the ` security of ` justice.

From above, we can see that the distance between each two stressed words is almost the same, and thus giving us a strong sense of rhythm, which can quickly

arouse our attention. The emphasis of the impressiveness of the sound is created here. Besides, many monosyllabic words and those with two syllables are largely used in the parallel sentences of this speech, such as “Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the Slums and ghettos of our northern cities....” By using such kind of words, King seems to urge the people to go back quickly and thereby strengthening the contents of what he is stating about.

### **3.4.2 Alliteration**

Alliteration is extremely popular with both poets and writers. In this device the same consonant sound is repeated at interval in the initial position of words. (Feng, 1996) King also explores such device in his speech to impress the present situation on the black’s memory. Take “the unalienable rights of life and liberty” and “the dark and desolate valley” for example, King makes use of this aspect of alliteration quite frequently making readers and listeners easy to remember, which can quickly capture their attention. Besides, “dignity and discipline” can not only emphasize the sacredness of “dignity”, but also makes clear the necessity of discipline. Other examples can also demonstrate King’s skillful use of languages to produce vivid images, making audiences more involved with his speech.

## **4. Conclusion**

King enlivens the speech by the skillful use of words in lexicology, semantics, syntax and phonetics, which add much interest and beauty to his speech. He achieves his purpose of persuading and calling on the people to fight for equal rights for the blacks through the artful employment of stylistic means, which helps to create the atmosphere he intends, produce a profound effect on audience’s

minds and simultaneously raise the public's attention to the current status of the blacks. It is hoped that the detailed stylistic analysis of King's speech can provide some implications for pedagogical application and be helpful for those who want to improve their speaking and writing skills.

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