



## A Pragmatic Analysis of Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" in the Context of Relevance Theory

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Haroon Jakhriani, <sup>2</sup>Naomi Justin, <sup>3</sup>Muhammad Hassan Shaikh

<sup>1</sup>M. Phil English, Institute of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University)

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Institute of English Language and Literature, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Mir's, Sindh, Pakistan

### Article Info

Article History:

Received 3 March 2024

Revised 9 March 2024

Accepted 13 March 2024

\*Corresponding author: (M. Jakhriani)

[muhammadharoonmh22@gmail.com](mailto:muhammadharoonmh22@gmail.com)

### Keywords:

Pragmatic analysis,

Relevance Theory,

Barack Obama,

Speech

### Abstract

This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the 'A More Perfect Union' speech by Barack Obama using a pragmatic approach. The paper is qualitative and descriptive and uses textual analysis for interpretation. This study utilizes the principles of relevance theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson to unlock the intricate ways through which Obama powerfully crafted his message to connect, persuade and resonate with his audience. Through a careful and purposeful examination of the context, implication and cognitive effects, the paper intends to make known the cognitive mechanisms that Obama employs to establish relevance and get his message across effectively. The presented research work contributes to a deeper knowledge of the pragmatic aspects of political rhetoric and offers insights into the impact of linguistic strategies on the formation of public opinion and debates nowadays.

### Introduction

Samuel B. Obama's speech 'A More Perfect Union,' dated March 18, 2008, has become a ground landmark in American political history. By pursuing the race, identity, and national unity issues in his well-known speech, then Senator Obama was trying to reveal the complex and deeply nested problems. The speech was associated with the issue concerning Pastor Jeremiah Wright, the matter being about his relationship with Obama.

In 'A More Perfect Union,' Obama effectively spoke about his ideal "America-nation"—one that was rich both in diversity and unity. Still, in order to achieve this progress, he had to the challenges of racism and to work together to overcome the differences between the Americans. He did that by engaging the audience's mind with the history of America and its founding fathers. In that context, national issues like racial gaps fall as the continuation of this journey to a "more perfect union". Because of this, the appeal of the speech was felt to be comprehensive and able to compete with the barriers of American social classes. It gave the audience the chance to witness the powerful and spellbinding qualities of his speech delivery and to contemplate what had been spoken. 'A More Perfect Union' did not just mark the important stage of the 2008 presidential campaign; its message is still very current, and it gives a ton of insight into racial divisions and political, and current national identity in the United States.

The branch in linguistics under the umbrella of pragmatics is the study of how context determines communication beyond a lexical definition of text. This concept specifically centres on language as an intermediary and considers how a speaker's intent, hearing person's thoughts, and circumstances influence their communication. Pragmatics is a study of how people's language hinges on their intentions of what they want to achieve, the implied meaning, implications, and speech acts.

The contribution of pragmatics to speech analysis consists of its effectiveness in the exposure of minor messages and the complexity of communication. It enables researchers to delve into how speakers use a set of several language strategies to make their audience agreeable and informed about some specific topic so that it could be easily influenced. Semantic components like tone, implicature and the narrative speech acts would help analysts to figure out the intentions as well as persuasive techniques in a speech. Pragmatics gains attention for it is a backbone of the

discourse constitution, which is also responsible for the maintenance of the information-exchange between people and that allows speakers to influence the audience's reactions during speeches.

One cognitive theory that places a high emphasis on communication and understanding is the Relevance Theory, which Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson originally proposed. This theory is built upon the principle that humans, in their communication, do not only search for means of making themselves relevant but they also, and at times, seek to establish who is more irrelevant. Similarly, Sperber and Wilson point out that speakers have a goal of being relevant and listeners who keep on processing this information throughout discovering the most relevant information. The main function of relevance theory in the explanation of the speech '*A More Perfect Union*' by Barack Obama is its capacity to provide a framework within which justification and implication of the speech are presented. The speech is language-rich and full of devices of rhetoric or persuasion, and applying any theory we employ, the framework called Relevance Theory helps to analyze how every stylistic element contributes both to the personal perception of the meaning as well as the effect.

By relying on the tenets of relevance theory when analyzing the speech, scholars can consistently explore how Barack Obama utilized his language words in a tactical way that ensured his message was sufficiently relevant to the audience. Provision of these processes of cognitive effects, contextual effects, and cognitive environments made by the speech attend to the persuasive and communicative techniques that are generated. Basically, it is "*relevance theory*" that can highly likely be regarded as a complex method for determining and analyzing the given speech so that we could realize how the speaker made these certain rhetorical and linguistic choices that turned out to be very meaningful and implied within a certain political context. It demonstrates the essential use of speech analysis for tracing the pragmatics applied to language and representing the various ways in which race, national identity, and unity were put under review in the United States.

Lastly, the article is going to critique the speech by Obama using the relevance theory, which is a linguistic and cognitive theory that studies how effective communication brings about relevance and complexity.

### **Scope**

This research paper mainly deals with the analysis of the "*A More Perfect Union*" speech of Barack Obama, which he delivered on March 18, 2008. It particularly focuses on the words that the speaker uses and how they are arranged to create a specific feel in the speech. The paper invokes the appliance of relevance as the main paradigm of its pragmatic analysis. It is also one of the theories that explain the concept of cooperation and reciprocity in language usage as well as that of implication in utterances. The speech is explored in different aspects, which entail pragmatic like linguistic and rhetorical strategies, cognitive lines, and context that take place in public dialogue, relations and unity of the nation. Besides that, the paper looks into the socio-political implication of the founder's choices in the speech and how the choices may contribute to or compromise the message of unity and reconciliation and the overall intended message.

### **Limitation**

The scope of this study is limited to an analysis of merely a single speech which is titled '*A More Perfect Union*.' Even though Barack Obama used this speech very effectively, perhaps it might not capture all the rhetorical tools that he used within his oratory skills or the multiple dimensions of the central topic that this speech addresses. Trade denominator consists of a relative role, which means the translations do not always coincide, and some researchers may convey different interpretations of the same speech. The article seeks objectivity, but it acknowledges that there are possibly several valid (views, explanations) for such people of history and still, one's existence contributes equally to human development. Another aspect that the research paper highlights is the historical background of the speech and its early influence. It shall probably not explore the main themes in depth and may not deal with the effects during the long term, also, it is likely not to take the later influence of events into account. The evidence might not be generally applicable to any other speech made or to other cases, as the analysis undertaken is based on the specific speech within its peculiarities. From an ethical perspective, the article has several guidelines that can deny access to specific data or request the reason for secret topics since the content of the speech is about race and identity. Moreover, though the paper captures the essence of the language Anglo-emotions speech has not been fully analyzed with respect to language and cultural subtleties and the way this interferes with the speech understanding for non-English-speaking audiences. In brief, the study might be falling short in the research excellence deepness, and he

cannot explore all aspects of the relevancy theory completely.

### **Significance of Research**

The present study evaluates the relevance theory as it relates to the interpretation of a crucial political speech. This, therefore, bolsters the field of pragmatics by showing how the theory is applicable to the analysis of communication that occurs in a sophisticated real-life setting. Political speeches, like Barack Obama's '*A More Perfect Union*,' are crucial as they determine public debate and opinion. This study underlines the advantage of pragmatic analysis in uncovering the persuasive techniques used in such speeches, the implication of which is undoubtedly pivotal for the discipline of political discourse analysis. The speech focuses on the hard-hitting race topic in the US. Relevance theory can be used in the research and, therefore, help provide a deeper understanding of racial discourse in politics. This kind of research can become an invaluable tool for those working in the fields of linguistics, political studies, and communication studies. Besides this, linguistic theory can be demonstrated in practice through this example, and consequently, educational materials and curricula can be improved. This study, being an interdisciplinary nature, is a gap filler between linguistic and political science the subject. It reflects the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration in order to comprehend the whole political discourse.

In fact, this study's significance transcends the borders of only linguistic studies. It provides an understanding of the political communication environment, provides solutions for societal problems, is both educational and practical. In the view of Relevance Theory, '*A More Perfect Union*' by Barack Obama is used to explain the role of pragmatics in our comprehension of politics.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the linguistic and rhetorical tools that Obama's '*A More Perfect Union*' uses to manipulate Conducive Implicature within the Relevance Theory framework?
2. What are the situation-based and comprehension effects of the pragmatic selections made by Obama in his speech, and how are the effects an integral part of the speech message and effect?
3. How do the pragmatic aspects of the speech impact the discussion on topics of race, identity, and national unity and what are the social-political coulds of these effects?

### **Research Objectives**

- To find out both the linguistic and rhetorical methods of the '*A More Perfect Union*' speech by Barack Obama and to estimate which of those create Implicature and relevance within the context of Relevance Theory.
- To analyze the nuances and cognitive factors involved in the pragmatic decisions made by Obama in his speech and to determine how these factors affect the delivery of the message and the impact of the speech.
- The socio-political effects of the pragmatic materials in the speech, including their impact on rhetoric regarding race, identity, and national unity, will be examined. To provide a comprehensive understanding of these socio-political effects.

### **Literature Review**

Pragmatics is a very important subfield of linguistics that provides a necessary component for the comprehensive analysis of speeches. It provides the platform to comprehend the intricacies of communication, such as the commune's intentions, context, and pragmatic tools.

According to Yule (1996), context plays a critical role in pragmatics. Context is crucial to speech analysis because it helps in grasping the utterances' meaning and the speaker's intention. Pragmatics treats both the context of language and extra language context thus a deeper understanding of speeches and their consequences is achieved. Sperber and Wilson (1986) introduced relevance as an elementary cognitive principle that provides a framework for human communication. Following the relevance rule, this speech invites us to look at how the president was able to balance his message to the specific needs and worries of different segments of the US citizens, mainly the whites and the blacks. First of all, the Charteris-Black's (2009) approach to metaphor analysis in political discourse has shed light on persuasive methods used by politicians. In his speech, terms like "a more perfect union" play the role

of the cognitive tools that reduce the gap between different audiences, uniting them into one community able to share a common view. Van Dijk (2006) emphasized the need to consider context when analyzing discourse. In the case of Obama's speech, the social-political situation of the 2008 presidential campaign, which was saturated with racial antagonism, is why a contextual analysis that focuses on both linguistic choices and the wider context in which the speech was delivered becomes crucial.

Grice (1975) proposed the Cooperative Principle and the Maxims of Communication, the underlying ideas of pragmatics. The Cooperative Principle underscores the importance of speakers to provide pertinent and well-organized information. These principles are used in the context of speeches to ensure that the speaker leads the audience effectively and accomplishes their goals. Taking a step ahead Grice, Levinson (1983) enriched his work with the notion of Implicature. Implicatures are particularly useful in deciphering the unexpressed messages that are carried by a speech. Through pragmatic analysis, we find that politicians can use Implicature as a means of indirect communication, which is a great way to address sensitive topics without the risk of being blamed for saying them. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued politeness in communication. In political speeches, politeness strategies evaluation can shed light on how politicians handle personal interrelationships and public image. The interpretations of speeches related to politeness theory are done in relation to face-threatening acts and politeness strategies.

Carston (2002) argued that Relevance Theory offers a complete conceptual system for understanding how speakers, with the help of context and cognitive principles, make their messages relevant. In this speech, this word connotes an in-depth assessment of how he yells language and discourse to have his listeners join a dialogue on race relations. Chilton (2004) additionally enhanced this view, expressing a pragmatic analysis to be a powerful instrument for revealing the political implications and rhetoric devices in speeches. He maintained that a Relevance Theory-based model could give us a glimpse of how Obama uses his discourse to reach out to diverse groups of people.

Crowley (2009) asserted that '*A More Perfect Union*' was the start of a new phase in American political rhetoric. It not only dealt with a complicated race issue, but through empathy, logic and reasonable speech, Obama also showed his ability to connect with different audiences. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center (2008) performed a thorough analysis of the content of the speech and the wave that it created within the media. The investigation revealed that the speech received major media coverage, and in effect, it sparked a national discussion about race, thus indicating its additional impact besides the election. Zarefsky (2012) also analyzed the rhetorical techniques that Obama used. Through his use of historical references and the '*American story*,' he strove to weave his speech into the American historical narrative thus emphasizing the values and sense of community so critical at these moments. This literature review serves as a basis for grasping the role of pragmatics in linguistics and relevance theory that was used in the speech analysis, especially from Barack Obama's "*A More Perfect Union*". Through additional research and investigation of these ideas, a better comprehension of the subject can be obtained.

### Research Methodology

The study aims at endorsing a qualitative research design. In qualitative analysis, one can see how language and rhetoric are applied in the text to highlight its certain meanings, as well as how the speech is pragmatically relevant. The paper mainly employs Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's Relevance Theory as a theoretical model that shows how Understanding through relevance and implicature occurs in Obama's speech. This study indeed looks at the public moments of Barack Obama's speech in the 2008 '*A More Perfect Union*'. The use of this tool enables to perform an in-depth investigation of the speech characteristics related to pragmatics from the perspective of relevance theory. The main data adumbration is the speech to be investigated, and the secondary sources are favourable scholarly articles, books and other literature on Relevance Theory, pragmatics and political discourse. The main focus of my research will be on the pragmatic side of the speech, such as Indirectness (Implicature), Implicature cancellation and contextual incidence. The subject of the content of the speech is analyzed to take stock of the key ideas of race, identity and national unity. The ideas are then scrutinized from the point of view of how these two concepts have been interpreted and promoted by the speaker. This process is thus undertaking the entire purpose of the speech under different pragmatic points. The result is achieved by way of assembling textual evidence, thematic categorization, and exemplification of the speech while backing up the findings.

### Discussion and Analysis

Relevance Theory proposes that communication is a shared task between the speaker and the audience members who strive to understand and appreciate the contained content in the best possible way.

#### Cognitive Principle of Relevance

Obama makes the audience use their cognitive ability by starting the discussion from a historical background of racial struggle in the US. For instance, he admits that he is a child of a black man from Kenya coupled with the fact that his mother comes from Kansas where most white people originate from. Therefore, he makes the knowledge personally experienced both by the African American and white audiences. This orientates us towards the speaker and provokes active processing. It facilitates identification with the speaker's message.

#### Contextual Effects

The speech creates a mutual basis with the audience by pointing out the US history and values of those who were the founders of the country. Obama declares, *'We the people, in order to form a more perfect union...'* This statement opens the U.S. Constitution, refuting racism and establishing a place where the conversation about race and unity can take place. It stimulates the audience to relate the speech to the content of the matter being presented here and also to grasp the overarching relevance of the issues addressed in the context of American values and history.

#### Pragmatic Enrichment

In accordance with the speech pragmatic context, the speaker employs metaphors and stories. For example, President Obama uses the image of *"the more perfect union"* and illustrates America as a country undergoing continual improvement. He remarked, *"The same thought has been behind generations of Americans who carried over a notion that the United States is in constant motion."* This figurative language embellishes the pragmatic context by hammering on the fact that the concept of advancement is ongoing, and at the same time it celebrates a movement of unity and improvement.

#### Implicature

The speech aims to employ Implicature creatively and indirectly to send hidden messages that promote thinking and identification with the condition of the homeless. While Obama talks about the African Americans and white Americans, he expects the audience to have a multi-sided view on these matters. *"I can no more disown him or his crowd than I can disown the black community"*, he said here as he responded to a controversial statement made by one of his pastors. This sentence points out that when the protagonist leaves his pastor, it means he disconnects himself from the black people and creates a perception about racial issues in the audience so that they can think more about the issue in the wider context.

'A More Perfect Union' speech by Barack Obama demonstrates how Relevance Theory can be applied successfully. It achieves this by paying attention to cognitive relevance, providing a common ground, deepening the pragmatic context and creating Implicature. Such components as personal experiences, conversational tone, urging people toward unity, compassion, and dealing with racial challenges are propagated by the whole speech's content in such a way that the overall message will be personal and moving. In this speech, Obama entails linguistic and rhetorical strategies to raise the significant issue of race- his biggest challenge. In fact, *'I am experiencing a strong conviction, which I feel is based on my faith in God and my faith of the American people, that, working together, we can get beyond our old grievances'*. Here, he is implying that, faith in God and the American people can lead to the healing of old wounds, thus creating an Implicature that faith and unity can work alongside each other to make progress.

Furthermore, the President echoes the idea of a universal context by referring to the sacrifices made within the civil rights movement and slavery. This exposes racial issues as the topic of the discussion and allows the audience to exercise cognitive functions. Take, for illustration, he said, *"We the people, for the purpose of establishing a more perfect union, should make sure that everybody is entitled to it."* It is an illustration of how the Constitution and the quest for a perfect union is considered an indispensable part of American history and emphasizes how significant his message is. Furthermore, the speech is not limited to idealistic generalities; rather, the speaker calls for a dialogue that addresses differences constructively, one that reaffirms the fact that America is a work in progress and that unity is indeed achievable. This influence can shape a more productive talk about race and a more tolerant attitude. Through a socio-political dimension, it began a national dialogue to address these issues and actually be part of the bigger



movement for change. Take a look, for instance, at Obama's statement that follows: *"I believe that we can not deal with the issues of our day unless we solve them jointly and this, of course, includes those problems involving race."* To conclude, Obama makes Relevance Theory salient with language and rhetorical strategies to lead to relevance and Implicature. Such choices render the speech multilayered, adding contextual and cognitive dimensions that profoundly influence the message and enhance its effectiveness. They raise a debate on race, identity, and national unity, with the drawn-out socio-political implications.

### Conclusion

This paper describes the main idea, which presents the detailed and thoughtful analysis of Barack Obama's famous *"A More Perfect Union"* speech through the lens of the Relevance Theory, and it displays the language used as a political discourse. By studying separately, the pragmatic elements and factors of the context, we can explain in detail the rhetorical strategies of the speech and the influence they have on the audience. This element is crucial to the development of political communication and discourse analysis because it provides a viable methodology that future researchers and debates can use. One of the key findings of this analysis is how Obama struck the right chord with the voters using linguistic and pragmatic means of connecting, reinforcing himself, and delivering his ideas properly. This implies that his abilities to deal with difficult topics like race, history, and the American Identity at the same time show his eloquence. The more precise sentence building, the intelligent use of personal stories, and the heartfelt connection that the candidate brings about through the speech are all examples. Here, Obama made use of rhetorical devices, along with background knowledge, to express the role pragmatics plays in the analysis of the impact of political rhetoric. By applying the Relevance Theory, we have managed to reveal this speech's linguistic devices in that cognitive processes and the audience's perspective were taken into consideration. Besides that, it should be mentioned the cognitive strain associated with processing the speech's complex content the expert focuses on the message relevance principles. The Obama message was not only heard but also reverberated among the majority of people. This illustrates that the message must be linked to the audience's cognitive relevance to enhance the fitness of political communication. Besides, 'A More Perfect Union' illustrates the value of context in political discourse. The speech was a campaign speech held in 2008 when the country was facing these challenges of race and identity. Obama did this by describing it vividly and letting the people know exactly what the problem is. This skill provides a central element of political communication, which is context and situation capturing. The conclusion only highlights that the 'A More Perfect Union' speech has a lasting effect. The speech had not only an immediate political relevance but also became the basis for evaluations of race, national unity and American identity today. It eternalizes the essence of communication that continues and leaves with rhetoric that is imprinted on us forever. This way, our research significantly contributes to the knowledge of the effect of political speeches and how they form the national narrative in the long run.

As a result, the exploration will lead us to the intricate mechanism of pragmatic strategies and the contextual aspects that influence the effectiveness of political rhetoric. From this, the speech will remain at the center of political rhetoric and communication as it will always appeal to a large audience, thus setting an example for the students of political communication and rhetoric. Language turns out to be an incredibly effective tool for manifesting the creation of public opinion, the building of common sense, and the quelling of political problems. As the course of our study and analysis proceeds, the role of persuasive communication in politics becomes more and more palpable in terms of its impact on politics.

### References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2009). The use of metaphor in the discourse of vision: A relevance theory approach. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 24(2), 87-109.
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analyzing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

- Crowley, S. (2009). A more perfect union: Barack Obama's race speech at the National Constitution Center. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 95(4), 404-427.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3: *Speech Acts* (pp. 41-58). Academic Press.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2008). *Obama's speech on race, media coverage*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org>
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Harvard University Press.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). *Discourse, context and cognition*. *Discourse Studies*, 8(1), 159-177.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Zarefsky, D. (2012). Rhetorical perspectives on Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 15(4), 601-626.



@ 2024 by the author. Licensee University of Chitral, Journal of Linguistics & Literature, Pakistan. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).