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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Study on Michelle Obama's Speech at Stanford Center at Peking University from the Perspective of Burke's New Rhetoric

Wenjing Ding

*Postgraduate Student, School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Gansu, China*

**Corresponding Author:** Wenjing Ding, **E-mail:** 359602839@qq.com

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## ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke is the founder of the new rhetoric. Dramatism is one of the important contents of Burke's rhetoric theory. It is a way for Burke to analyze and study the relationship and motivation of human behavior through drama. Dramatism can be used as a practical tool in discourse analysis, especially in advertisements and speeches. Michelle Obama, the wife of 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President Barack Obama, is the first African-American first lady in U.S. history. She has been a powerful force behind Barack Obama's political career. Michelle Obama's regular speeches not only raised her public profile but also built support for her husband, which had a huge impact on politics, education, and culture. The research mainly adopts a descriptive method to analyze Michelle Obama's speech at Peking University in 2014 from the perspective of Burke's dramatism. This paper tries to find out the characteristics of Michelle Obama's speech and reveals the deep meaning of her speech, that is, to promote cultural exchanges between China and the United States.

## KEYWORDS

Michelle Obama; Burke's new rhetoric; speech

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## 1. Introduction

In the political arena of the world, the figure of the "first lady" has attracted more and more attention. They are no longer limited to accompanying their husbands to visit other countries or performing basic functions such as social etiquette. Instead, they begin to stand in their own way or even visit other countries alone, opening up a new path for the country's diplomacy. The "first lady" is not only regarded as the representative of a country's image but also the representative of all women of a country.

This article mainly studies Michelle Obama's speech at Stanford Center at Peking university from the perspective of Burke's dramatism. From this perspective, we can appreciate the characteristics of the first lady's speech and American foreign policy. Previous research on Burke's new rhetoric is usually confined to presidential inaugural speeches. Few people have used his theory to analyze the first lady's campus speeches, especially from the perspective of the fusion of his two most important theories. Through the tentative analysis of this paper, the author hopes to provide a new perspective for future research about the "first lady".

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Dramatism

Dramatism is a method to study humans' actions, relations, and motives through dramatistic. (Ju, 2017). As a method, dramatism addresses the empirical questions of how persons explain their actions to themselves and others, what the cultural and social structural influences on these explanations might be, and what effect connotational links among the explanatory (motivational) terms might have on these explanations, and hence, on the action itself. Dramatic pentad includes five elements, namely, act,

scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Every two elements can form a ratio, and different ratio conveys different rhetorical motives. Burke's description of dramatic pentad is as follows: "In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose. Men may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or how he did it, or in what kind of situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it may, any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)". (Burke, 1969 a: xv)

In order to reveal the hidden motive and have a better understanding of dramatism, Kenneth Burke uses ratios to indicate the relation of dramatic pentad. And every two elements can form a ratio, so there are ten basic ratios, namely, scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent-purpose, agent-agency, and agency-purpose. They can form another ten ratios by reversing the order of the elements, and they coexist with each other, which reflects the rhetors' choices and attitudes.

## **2.2 Identification Theory**

Burke's Identification is rooted in "substantiality". "A is not identical to his colleague B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B, or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (Burke, 1969:20-21).

The purpose of "identification" and "persuasion" is the same. "A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests, and the speaker draws on the identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience (ibid:46).

## **2.3 Identification Strategies**

### **2.3.1 Identification via rhetorical content**

#### **(1) Identification by sympathy**

Identification by sympathy emphasizes developing the same interests, sensations, and attitudes with the audiences.

Burke gives an example to illustrate what identification is by sympathy. "the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says, 'I was a farm boy myself'" (Burke, 1969:xiv). Thus, he might get more votes and more support.

#### **(2) Identification by antithesis**

Identification by antithesis means that the speaker is identical to the audience by sharing a common enemy, even though they are rivals in some way. The common enemy can be a substance, a person, or even an event. For example, during the Gulf War, Iraq's president called on Iran and other Arab countries to unite against the United States. It is well known that there have been many wars between Iraq and Iran. But for Iran, they have a common enemy-the United States.

By using this strategy, the speaker and the audience can seek the common so as to gain their identification.

#### **(3) Identification by inaccuracy**

Unlike identification by sympathy and by antithesis, identification by inaccuracy is unconscious. It refers to the rhetor using the first person, non-verbal means, or pictures. The listener can't help imagining himself or herself as a figure who is described by the rhetor. Many commercial advertisements employ this kind of identification to attract potential consumers. A woman who buys the luxuries such as CHANEL and LV may be identifying with the image of the star in the advertisements unconsciously. Thus, identification is achieved subtly and unconsciously.

### **2.3.2 Identification via rhetorical forms**

#### **(1) Identification via conventional form**

A conventional form is an idiomatic form, such as Shakespeare's sonnets which should be in iambic pentameter. "Conventional form is the expectation of a particular form prior to encountering a work. It involves the expectations that audiences bring with them to the form" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002:196).

#### **(2) Identification via repetitive form**

The repetitive form is the restatement of the same thing in different ways. This type of form involves the ways in which a work embodies a fixed character or identity and manifests internal consistency. (ibid:196)

(3) Identification via progressive form

Progressive form involves the use of situations that lead the audience to anticipate or desire certain developments. One type of progressive form is syllogistic progression. Another type is qualitative progression.

### **3. Analysis of the Motives in Michelle's Speech from the Perspective of Dramatism**

Burke defines dramatism as "a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions" (Overington, 1977: 132). Burke argued that motives resided in various terminologies or vocabularies. In his opinion, "To explain one's conduct by the vocabulary of motives current among one's group is as self-deceptive as giving the area of a field in the accepted terms of measurement. One is simply interpreting with the only vocabulary that he knows" (Burke, 1969b: 21).

The author believes that the motivation of Michelle Obama's speech is to strengthen cultural exchanges between China and the United States and promote friendly cooperation between the two countries. Through the analysis of the whole speech, the author found four kinds of ratios, which are the "scene-act" ratio, the "purpose-act" ratio, the "purpose-agency" ratio, and the "agent-act" ratio.

#### **3.1 The "Scene-Act" Ratio**

Example 1: " And before I get started today, on behalf of myself and my husband, I just want to say a few very brief words about Malaysian(sic) Airline Flight 370. As my husband has said, the United States is offering as many resources as possible to assist in the search. And please know that we are keeping all the families and loved ones of those on this flight in our thoughts and prayers at this very difficult time."

Scene: It's been two weeks since Malaysia Airlines disappeared, and Chinese people are anxious.

Act: She spoke briefly about flight MH370, showing her concern for the families of those on board.

Agent: Michelle Obama

It is obvious that the dominant element in this paragraph is the scene, and the prominent ratio is the scene-act. We all know that Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 lost contact en route to Beijing on March 8, 2014. Of the 227 passengers on board, 154 were Chinese, which accounts for more than half of the total passenger population. By the time Michele Obama delivered a speech at Peking University on March 22, it had been two weeks since the flight had disappeared. No progress had been made in search and rescue efforts. The families of the passengers were extremely anxious, and people all over the country were also worried about the safety of the passengers on the flight. It was such a scene that Obama made a few brief remarks about flight MH370 before she began her speech. Of course, this act is necessary. Because by mentioning flight MH370 and the assistance the United States has provided in the search for that flight, it shows the concern that she and the United States have for the Chinese people. The purpose of mentioning MH370 is to win the goodwill of the audience so that the speech can proceed smoothly. At the same time, it also lays a strong foundation for strengthening the cultural exchanges between China and the United States and promoting friendly cooperation between China and the United States, as mentioned in the following speech. The fact that the United States was providing resources to assist in the search for Flight MH370 was a manifestation of the friendship and cooperation between China and the United States.

#### **3.2 The "Purpose-Act" Ratio**

Example 2: "Because when it comes to the defining challenges of our time—whether it's climate change, or economic opportunity, or the spread of nuclear weapons...these are shared challenges. No one country can confront them alone...the only way forward is together".

Purpose: to win the shared challenges, such as climate change, economic opportunity, or the spread of nuclear weapons.

Act: the only way forward is together.

Agent: The Chinese and American people.

The dominant element in this paragraph is the purpose, and the prominent ratio is the purpose-act. Michelle Obama mentioned that China and the United States face many common challenges, such as climate change, economic opportunity, and nuclear weapons, which cannot be met by any one country alone. She believes that the only way to meet these challenges is for China and the United States to work together in friendly cooperation for a better future. At this point, the speaker's motivation to promote friendly cooperation between China and the United States is clearly reflected through the purpose-behavior ratio.

### 3.3 The "Agency-Purpose" Ratio

Example 3: "Because that's how you develop that habit of cooperation —you do it by improving yourself in someone's culture...by learning each other's stories...and by getting past the stereotypes and misconceptions that too often divide us. And that's how you realize that we all have a stake in each other's success—that cures discovered here in Beijing could save lives in America...the clean energy technologies from Silicon Valley in California could improve the environment here in China...that the architecture of an ancient temple in Xi'an could inspire the design of new buildings in Dallas or Detroit."

Purpose: that's how you develop that habit of cooperation; that's how you realize that we all have a stake in each other's success.

Agency: you do it by improving yourself in someone's culture, by learning each other's stories, and by getting past the stereotypes and misconceptions that often divide us.

Agent: The youth in China and the United States.

Through analysis, it can be found that the dominant element in this paragraph is the purpose, and the prominent ratio is the agency-purpose. In her speech, Michele said, "we believe that relationships between nations are not just about relationships between governments or leaders. They're about relationships between people, particularly our young people." Therefore, to promote friendly cooperation between China and the United States, we should first strengthen the cultural exchanges between China and the United States, especially the exchanges between the young people of the two countries. The young people of the two countries should be able to study and live in each other's country so as to cultivate the habit of cooperation. She believes that the best way to develop these young people's cooperative habits is to allow them to assimilate into each other's cultures, learn each other's stories, and learn to transcend the stereotypes and misconceptions that often divide them. By highlighting the relationship between purpose and agency, the speaker's motivation to strengthen the cultural exchange between China and the United States is reflected.

### 4. Conclusion

This paper attempts to study Michelle Obama's speech at Stanford Center at Peking university from the perspective of Burke's dramatism. The purpose of this paper is to prove that motivation is implicit in any speech, and the relationship between behavior and motivation can be well explained through Burke's dramatism. The author analyzes Michelle's rhetorical motivation behind her speech by using dramatism. Through analysis of the four kinds of ratios in whole speech, the findings are as follows:

The ratio of "purposive-act" is a sign of Obama's desire to promote friendship between the United States and China; the ratio of "scene-act" shows how much Michelle Obama and the U.S. government care for the Chinese people. The ratio of "purpose-agency" illustrates Michelle Obama's desire to strengthen cultural exchanges between China and the United States. At the same time, this paper analyzes how Michelle achieves identification with the audience and realizes persuasion by using Burke's identification theory.

This attempt can lead to a further understanding of Burke's new rhetoric theory. Besides, This analysis will help people understand the rhetorical art of this first lady. Just as Burke said, "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is meaning, there is persuasion".

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