Beyond Surface Grandiloquence: The Inaugural Addresses of Presidents J. F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon
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1.0 Introduction
This paper attempts a comparative analysis of the inaugural addresses of two former presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy (1961) and Richard M. Nixon (1969). The choice of American presidents is deliberate because the USA is arguably the most developed democracy in the world. In such a democracy, the citizens are mainly carried along when they are presented with good reasons as to why certain courses of action are/have to be taken. It is worth mentioning that the choice of Kennedy and Nixon is intended to provide a balance because the former is a Democrat and the latter, a Republican: whether or not their styles and messages would differ is to be seen at the end of the paper.

Language is used among other things, “make requests, give directives, express feelings, make promises and declarations”, etc. (Austin 1976:28). This means therefore that language is used for different purposes and as such there is variation in its use. This variation could be occasioned by the occasion, speaker, audience, etc.

Presidential inaugurals fall under what Aristotle, in Corbett (1990:24) describes as special topics (idioi topoi or eidoë) and are therefore more likely to employ the grand style of language use although Cockcroft and Cockcroft (2005:162) believes that texts are written in combination of the three styles (i.e. high, middle and low) but it could again be argued that one of these would predominate and in this case, the grand (high) style.

The paper examines the use of figurative language in the two inaugurals particularly with respect to their appeals to ethos, logos and pathos as well as the resort to epideictic, judicial and deliberative oratory. The analyses follow closely, unless otherwise stated, the resources on Silva Rhetoricae. The rest of the paper is divided into four parts: Section 2 which follows analyses Kennedy’s inaugural address. Section 3 discusses Nixon’s address. Section four compares and contrasts the two addresses while section five concludes the essay.

2.0 President J.F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address (1961)
John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born on 29th May, 1917. He became the President of the United States at the age of 43 (Simkin, 1997). His address seems to dwell more on the foreign policy direction of his government than on domestic issues because at that time, the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union was an issue of great concern to America. Though the war did not start during his time, Kennedy seems to favour the use of more aggressive and far-reaching means not only to contain the threat of the Soviet Union but also to “liberate” those nations under the dominance of communism. He seems not to be happy with the previous efforts made to respond to the communists’ threats such as the economic programme “the Marshall Plan” (Hindle, n.d) and the military “Containment Policy” (Mintz, 2007).

Kennedy’s speech opens with a strong appeal to ethos, first by impersonalising his electoral victory; naming it “not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom”. The deliberate use of the inclusive “we” further brings together the citizens of America irrespective of political party affiliation. The introductory paragraphs which are largely epideictic, try to link the present to the past because he swore “the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed …” (1) He uses the temporal deictic “now” to indicate a change from what obtained during the revolutionary years and the present, though still emphasising the relevance of the revolutionary struggle: “We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution” (3) he says, appealing to the emotions of his audience.

His addressee changes immediately as he focuses on the international community using symbolism to pass the message that a transfer of power has taken place: “the torch has been passed …” In a parallel construction, he warns that the new leadership would be strong and proactive against any aggression: “Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by
war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage — and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed . . .” (3)

This threat continues by resort to *Euche*: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival of success and liberty” (4). The repeated use of “any” in this paragraph, in addition to achieving a rhetorical effect, suggests that Kennedy is not happy with the previous governments’ handling of external threats.

Kennedy soon shifts the focus of his address to the “friends” of America, in a milder tone, asking them to remain united through the use of *Enthymeme* to show the futility of their disunity in an apparent appeal to logos. He is of course quick to give a subtle warning even to the allies by means of *Apagoresis*: “… those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside” (7) He then gives hope to the third world countries coming out of the shackles of colonialism using metaphorical language to “help them help themselves” in breaking “the bonds of mass misery” and “casting off the chains of poverty” (8, 9). Kennedy is specifically concerned about South Vietnam becoming a communist state (Simkin, 1997) and that is why in his address he pledges: “To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge . . .” (9). The subsequent failed invasion of Cuba (Bay of Pigs) lends credence to this.

Turning again to the perceived enemies of America, Kennedy now sounds conciliatory, calling on “both sides” to “begin anew the quest for peace” Employing *Ominatio* to make a logical appeal, he warns of the consequences of the use of modern weapons “before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction” (11). However, in a paradoxical statement he indicates his intention to pool sufficient arms because “only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed” (12). He all the same, still extends the olive branch by maintaining that although America cannot be cowed, it is favourably disposed to negotiation as “civility is not a sign of weakness” (14). He therefore asks “both sides” to exploit the positive aspects of science in order to make the world a better place; using *Epicrosis* to canvass freedom and liberty in all parts of the world by undoing “the heavy burdens . . .” and letting “the oppressed go free” (18).

We see a combined appeal to ethos and pathos in Kennedy’s humility to acknowledge the enormity of the task ahead which is not achievable in any predictable length of time, but optimistic all the same that it is not insurmountable: “All this will not be finished in the first 100 days . . . But let us begin” (20). He at the same time defers to the people by recognising his limitations and conceding to the people, the ultimate power for the realisation of his dreams: “In your hands, fellow citizens more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course” And in a judicial oratory, he reminds Americans that it is their duty to defend freedom and liberty as “The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe” (21).

Kennedy equally emphasises in an appeal to logos that even though there are reasons to justify the US going to war, he remains committed not only to peace but to making life better for the people: “Now the trumpet summons us again — not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are — but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle . . . — a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself” (22).

He urges Americans in a rhetorical question to “join in that historic effort” to “assure a more fruitful life for all mankind”. In an epideictic oratory that appeals both to ethos and pathos, he says he welcomes the responsibility of “defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger” — a role he believes “only a few generations have been granted in the long history of the world” (24).

The concluding part of Kennedy’s address is deliberative. He urges Americans to make personal sacrifices and to be the architects of their own future by asking “not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country” (25) while asking the citizens of the world to join hands with the US in the fight for freedom.

2.1 Structural techniques

*Antithesis*: “We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom” (p.1 and 8, 10, 11, 15, 17, 25, 26).

*Alliteration*: “to friend and foe alike” (p.2 and 4, 10, 13).

*Anaphora*: “both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror . . .” (p.13 and 2, 4, 8, 22).

*Anastrophe* (Corbett, 1990): “United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do . . .” (p.6).

*Asyndeton*: “— born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage . . .” (p.3 and 21).


*Isocolon*: “Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap ocean depths . . .” (p.17 and 4).

*Mesodiplos*: “Let every nation know, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe . . .” (p.4 also *Isocolonic*).

*Polyptoton*: “. . . not as a call to battle, though embattled we are (p.22)

*Polysyndeton*: “. . . where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved” (19).

*Adhortatio*: “So let us begin anew . . .” (p.14 and 4, 15, 16, 18, 25, 26).

*Apagoresis*: “. . . those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside (7).

*Apostrophe*: “To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual heritage . . .” (p.3 and 2).

*Enthymeme*: “United, there is little we cannot do . . . Divided, there is little we can do” (p.6).

*Epicrosis*: “Let all sides unite to heed the command of Isaiah – to undo the heavy burdens . . . and let the oppressed go free” (p.18 and 22).

*Euche*: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price . . . to assure the survival and success of liberty” (p.4 and 9, 24).

*Metaphor* (Grady, 2007): “And if the beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion” (p.19 and 7, 8, 9, 11).
Metonymy: “In your hands fellow citizens more than in mine...” (p.21) This could also be a synecdoche in view of the difficulty of dividing between the two (Panther and Thornburg 2007:238).

Ominatio: “...that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction” (p.11).

Paradox: “For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed” (p.12).

Personification: “Now the trumpet summons us again” (p.22 and 27).

Rhetorical question: “Will you join in that historic effort?” (p.23).

The address, though with a clear military undertone, could still be considered apt in terms of kairos because of the situation prevailing at the time (i.e. the Cold War). As a persuasive discourse, it was successful first because of the cheers it elicited from the audience: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI.miiOEk59n8&feature=BFa&list=SPB247883C1EB850D1&hl=list_related and second because the Soviet Union responded by stationing some missiles in Cuba (Simkin, 1997) possibly in self-defence. The Vietnam War aimed at helping “those people in huts and villages across the globe...to break the bonds of mass misery” (8) also showed that Kennedy meant what he said. This makes the contention of van Noppen (2002) that presidential inaugurals are no more than epideictic rhetoric which only aim to “strengthen links within and with the audience” untenable.

3.0 President Richard M. Nixon’s Inaugural Address (1969)

President Nixon was born on June 19, 1913 and was Vice-President to Dwight Eisenhower – Kennedy’s predecessor. (Simkin, 1997). Nixon ran for President in the 1960 election but lost to Kennedy. However, in 1968 following the assassination of Robert Kennedy – John Kennedy’s younger brother – who was the favoured Democrats candidate, coupled with Nixon’s opposition of the Vietnam War, he was victorious at the polls. Schultz (n.d.) says Nixon had a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam – a proposition which Nixon denied in his Memoirs, but again which, if considered from his inaugural address, could still be true: “We shall plan now for the day when our wealth can be transferred from the destruction of war abroad to the urgent needs of our people at home” (36). President Nixon, whose political life was enmeshed in controversy like the allegation of collecting $18,000 while running for Vice President (Cuming, 2011) was to later resign from office following the Watergate scandal (Simkin, ibid).

He begins his address with an appeal to ethos; describing his victory as a celebration of unity and freedom. In an epideictic introductory part of the speech, he combines the appeals to logos and ethos first by employing the oppositional model of argument in the second paragraph to compare “moments in history” and describe the ‘current’ moment as “precious and unique”, and then draws attention to the fact that he is going to chart a course that would “shape decades and centuries” (2).

Nixon leaves no one in doubt as to his dislike of war: “For the first time, because the people of the world want peace, and the leaders of the world are afraid of war, the times are on the side of peace” he says (6). He further pledges: “I shall consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon, to the cause of peace among nations” (67). However, rather than end the Vietnam War, Nixon “escalated it” (Simkin, 1997).

Nixon’s speech focuses on domestic issues. In a deliberative oratory, he speaks of the upcoming celebration of the 200th anniversary of the American nation and the beginning of the third millennium. He speaks of the future being in the hands of the people and portrays America in a way that arrogates to it the monopoly of the responsibility to provide peace to the world: “The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America” (9) In an appeal to logos using the cause and effect model of argument he says: “If we succeed, generations to come will say of us now living that we mastered our moment, that we helped make the world safe for mankind” (10).

Nixon turns to judicial oratory to mention the achievements America made in “science, industry and agriculture” as well as in the distribution of wealth. Freedom, which is a recurring theme throughout the speech, is mentioned again: “We have given freedom a new reach, and we have begun to make its promise real for black as well as for white” (14). And in an appeal to pathos, he appeals to the strength and sacrifice of the youth through the use of Antisagoge, concluding: “Because our strengths are so great, we can afford to appraise our weaknesses with candor and to approach them with hope” (16).

Addressing the problems of the Nation in a predominant appeal to logos, he uses Epicrisis and the opposition model of argument to compare the problems of America during Roosevelt’s presidency and ‘today’ imploiring Americans to do the “simple things” so as “to surmount what divides us, and cement what unites us” adding that “To lower our voices is a simple thing” (26). This statement is however a harbinger of sorts to the epideictic oratory that follows in which he apparently lays blame on the past administration: “In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading” (27).

Nixon does not subscribe to discarding the old ideas in spite of his stance: “Our task is to build on what has gone before – not turning away from the old, but turning towards the new” (33). This statement implicitly acknowledges the importance of old ideas which should not be thrown away but turned into new.

Also, his disenchantment with the past administration and his plans to make the future better did not make him oblivious of the limitations of the executive office. He concedes: “But we are approaching the limits of what the government alone can do” and therefore invites the contributions of the “concerned and the committed” (39). With an ethical appeal in paragraph 43, he turns to a largely logical appeal from paragraph 44 through 58, calling for cooperation not only of the citizens of America, but all the citizens of the world to “enrich the life of man” and “reduce the burden of arms”. He however at the same time, by means of Euche warns “those who will be tempted by weakness... that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be” (59).

The concluding part of the address is deliberative, resorting first to Epicrisis by quoting from MacLeish’s poem on man’s technological advancement of going to call
for concerted efforts by all (“riders on the earth together”) (76) towards making a better future.

3.1 Structural techniques

Anadiplosis: “We seek an open world – open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people” (p.54).

Anaphora: “... from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontent into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading” (p.27 and 8, 15, 43, 58, 69, 76).

Anastrophe: “Until he has been part of a cause larger than himself, no man is truly whole” (p.45).

Antithesis: “We have found ourselves rich in goods, but raged in spirit...” (p.19 and 16, 25, 30, 33, 41, 49, 52, 55, 57, 68, 69, 74, 76).

Asyndeton: “We find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things – such as goodness, decency, love, kindness” (p.23 and 42, 64).

Epimene: “... to the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart – to the injured voices, the anxious voices, the voices that have despair of being heard” (p.29).

Epistrophic: “To a crisis of spirit, we need an answer of the spirit” (p.21 and 6, 28, 59).

Mesodiplosis: “... government has passed more laws, spent more money, initiated more programs...” (p.24).

Traductio: “What has to be done, has to be done by government and people together or it will not be done at all” (40).

Sylprome: “We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity” (p.20 and 51).

Adhortatio: “I ask you to share with me...” (p.1 and 51, 53).

Antisagmae: “We see the hope of tomorrow in the youth of today. I know America’s youth. I believe in them” (p.15).

Epictria: “Standing in this same place a third of a century ago, Franklin Delano Roosevelt...” (p.17).

Enthymeme: “No man can be fully free while his neighbor is not. To go forward at all is to go forward together” (p.48).

Euche: “... let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be...” (p.59).

Metaphor: “valley of turmoil” (p.9 and 2, 17, 25, 39, 47, 75).

Metonymy: “the voices of anguish, the voices that speak without words...” (p.29 and 20).

Paradoxe: “the voices that speak without words” (p.29 and 28, 33, 37).

Personification: “the injured voices, the anxious voices...” (p.29 and 27, 66, 69).

The delivery of this speech was also punctuated at various intervals by rounds of applause: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjFZlFXNrnNs and could therefore be said to have been successful as a persuasive oratory. One may however be tempted to invoke the position of van Noppen above that this speech is “basically an epideictic rhetoric” because Nixon did all that he vowed not to do such as “escalating” the Vietnam War and even plotting the overthrow of the Chilean government (Simkin, 1997).

4.0 Comparison and Contrast

This section compares and contrasts the two inaugural addresses.

4.1 Similarities

The two inaugural addresses are similar in a number of ways: In their opening, both recognise the important dignitaries present; both make reference to the oaths they swore to. Both equally allude to former presidents: Kennedy implicitly to Washington and Nixon explicitly to Roosevelt. They both call for sacrifice from the citizens and defer to the people by acknowledging the limitations of the executive office. Recurrent mention of peace, freedom and liberty in the spirit of the American dream is also another area of similarity in the two addresses. Similarly, both addressed foreign policy though more noticeable in Kennedy’s address. The use of “we” both inclusive and exclusive is noticed, particularly with Kennedy. The inclusive “we” according to van Noppen (2002) is used to “turn a personal commitment into a collective commitment or responsibility” In terms of structure, both used many rhetorical devices (mostly similar, though with difference in frequency) as well as abstract and concrete imagery with varying sentence types.

4.2 Dissimilarities

Nixon’s address (76 paragraphs) is about three times the length of Kennedy’s (27 paragraphs). Apart from the tone of the addresses that is clearly different, Kennedy dwells more on foreign policy whereas Nixon’s major concern is domestic problems. Nixon also unlike Kennedy makes a particular appeal to the youth. Kennedy’s address, unlike Nixon’s, contains threats and pledges clearly directed at specific audience.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has examined the inaugural addresses of Presidents Kennedy and Nixon, exploring the dominant themes of their messages and their figurative use of language. Both speeches have at various times resorted to the three means of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos in addition to the three branches of oratory: epideictic, judicial and deliberative. The two inaugurals exhibit a similar pattern of appeal to ethos in the exordium and pathos in the peroratio with alternating intervening appeals. The essay concurs with the observation of van Noppen (2002) that presidential inaugurals give the audience “a sense of pride and patriotism, a sense of involvement and a sense of commitment to a common cause”.

References


www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjFZlFXnrNs retrieved on 16/04/2012.