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A Systemic Functional Analysis of Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream': Exploring Rhetorical Devices and the Variable of Tenor for a Better Understanding of King's Context

Abstract:

Having Systemic Functional Linguistics as a framework, I will pay attention to the different rhetorical devices (repetitions, exclamations, enumerations, etc.) in the speech 'I have a dream', of the great pacifist, Martin Luther King. This analysis will show how these resources allow the author to contribute to the vividness of the speech, and to build the social reality of the historical moment that the speech shows. Special attention will be paid to the situational variable of tenor because I am interested in describing the relationship that King establishes with the audience through the different rhetorical devices. This study will be helpful to understand King's human activity in his cultural context: the historical period of exploitation of the black population in the United States. My intention is to concentrate on discourse analysis in order to observe the ways in which language is productive to describe a social reality. From this analysis I will conclude that there is a clear relationship between language and meaning, i.e., the different rhetorical devices are not chosen random, on the contrary, they have a clear purpose that contributes to the way the meaning of the text is expressed by the author and perceived by the reader.

Zusammenfassung:

Ausgehend von der systemfunktionalen linguistischen Zugangsweise werden im Beitrag die in Martin Luther Kings Rede 'I have a dream' verwendeten unterschiedlichen rhetorischen Verfahren (Wiederholung, Ausrufezeichen, Aufzählung usw.) analysiert. Im Rahmen dessen wird gezeigt, wie diese Verfahren dem Autor dazu dienen, Lebhaftigkeit der Rede zu steigern und die gesellschaftliche Realität des in der Rede beschriebenen geschichtlichen Augenblicks wiederzugeben. Insbesondere wird die Situationsvariable des Tenors hervorgehoben, wodurch versucht wird, Kings Verhältnis zum Publikum zu beschreiben, das er durch Anwendung unterschiedlicher rhetorischer Verfahren herstellt. Im Beitrag wird eine noch tiefere Verständnis von Kings Aktivitäten innerhalb seines Kontextes vermittelt, der durch die Ausbeutung der schwarzen Bevölkerung Amerikas bestimmt war. Das Ziel des Beitrags ist, an Hand der Analyse des Diskurses auf die Produktivität der Sprache bei der Beschreibung der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit hinzuweisen. Dabei wird die Schlussfolgerung gezogen, dass ein klarer Zusammenhang zwischen Sprache und Bedeutung besteht, das heißt, dass man unterschiedliche rhetorische Verfahren nicht zufällig wählt, sondern diese zu bestimmten Zwecken einsetzt, die die Weise unterschützen, auf die die Bedeutung des Textes seitens des Autors sowie der Zuhörer/Leser en- und decodiert wird.

1. Introduction

This study intends to explain how the speech 'I have a dream', of the great pacifist, Martin Luther King creates meaning with different linguistic resources. At the same time, this paper tries to highlight the potential of language to make of 'I have a dream' a discourse of hope. For this reason, I will pay attention to the different rhetorical devices (repetitions, exclamations, enumerations, etc.) in the speech. These resources allow the author to create a social reality through language, to contribute to the vividness of the speech, and to build the reality of the historical moment that the speech shows: the historical period of exploitation of the black population in the United States. This analysis will show how these resources allow the author: (1) to contribute to the vividness of the speech, and (2) to build the social reality of the historical moment that the speech shows. This paper will analyse the reasons that motivate the different choices at the grammatical level.

The linguistic framework of this paper is Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) because in this linguistic school language is determined by society. Halliday (1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) highlight the main reasons why speakers choose certain linguistic forms instead of others, which is always determined by the function that those linguistic forms have in context. This is related to the idea of meaning potential, which is essential in SFL since out of all the possible things we can mean, we choose from the range of potential meanings according to our communicative purpose.

As a systemic linguist, I believe that any variation in language, or the recurrence of patterns make some difference in the construction of meanings, i.e. patterns of language are not used freely since they always have an effect in semantics. In Hasan's words (1989: 96): 'We pay attention to the patterning of patterns when it is significant; and in order to be significant the foregrounding must have a semantic consequence.'

2. The interpersonal metafunction: exploring King's relationship with the audience

In the analysis, special attention will be paid to the situational variable of tenor because I am interested in describing the relationship that King establishes with the audience through the different rhetorical devices. When analysing the notion of tenor, the social relations between the participants in the linguistic exchange must be taken into consideration. This kind of social relation affects the use that is made of language: the sender is the author, and the receiver is the black population who had to

fight for their rights. The receiver is also anybody reading the speech in Martin Luther King's historical moment, or in any other moment.

In this sense, 'I have a dream' constructs an intended audience, and the author has a very clear position with respect to that audience. Consequently, the text is ideologically charged since it is a site of an interaction between the writer and the reader. In 'I have a dream', there are different voices, i.e., it is dialogic because Martin Luther King wants to highlight that he understands the feelings of black population. Those voices are 'I', 'the Negro', 'we', 'America', 'you', and 'my friends'. The following statement points out some of the different voices. This example shows that the reader becomes part of the discourse because King's 'rhetoric of engagement makes us feel included rather than instructed' (Martin 1999: 47):

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. (King 1997: 48)

Poynton (1985) points out that we find three dimensions inside the notion of tenor, to which I shall refer briefly:

The power dimension has to do with whether the relations between the participants are equal or not. In the case of this speech, Martin Luther King has power on the people who were listening to him, and he tries to make them aware of the cruel situation black people lived in the period of fight for Civil Rights.

The contact dimension makes reference to the existence or not of a contact relation between the participants. In this case, there is no contact between the author and the readers. When reading the speech, it is established a relationship with the author that allows to be conscious of his thoughts and his ideology, but we are not in contact with him.

The affective involvement dimension refers to the extent to which the participants are emotionally involved in, or committed to a situation. Martin Luther King tries to involve the readers in the speech so that they feel the tension of the situations he describes.

King establishes an interpersonal relationship with his listeners by using different resources that contribute to the rhetoric of the speech, and to the expression of feelings, as Martin (2004: 337) declares:

But we have to keep in mind that feelings are always about something- they are always interpersonal attitudes to ideational experience. And the investment of attitude in experience has to be stage-managed – by textual resources – because negotiating community is a dynamic process, played

out as texts unfold in the myriad of discourses materializing the communion of everyday and institutional life.

3. The relationship between grammar and meaning in 'I have a dream': an approximation to the main rhetorical devices and vocabulary

The following paragraphs pay attention to the main rhetorical devices (repetitions, exclamations, enumerations, etc.), and to the main characteristics of vocabulary in 'I have a dream' in order to show that all these devices help Martin Luther King to represent his social reality. The analysis will point out that there is a relationship between the use of rhetorical devices, and the author's world view. As it will be seen, there is also a clear correlation between the different words chosen by the author, and the context in which they are used.

This article intends to concentrate on discourse analysis in order to observe the ways in which language is productive to describe a social reality. The motivation of analysing discourse is very often a concern about the opaque patterns of social inequality, and the perpetuation of power relationships, either between individuals or between social groups, impossible through it is to pre-judge moral correctness in many cases (Fairclough 1995). In this sense, discourse is considered as language-in-use and language shaping social order. Consequently, the analysis of language in context allows to observe the interaction between discourse and society, and also to observe the relationship between language, and cultural or political formations as a way of reflecting the way society is organised.

From what it has been said in the previous paragraph, 'I have a dream' can be considered as an example of 'emancipatory discourse' because King's intention is to highlight the importance of freedom to contribute to a better situation for black people. As Janks and Ivanič (1992: 305) put it:

'Emancipatory discourse' is an integral part of emancipatory practice. It means using language, along with other aspects of social practice, in a way which works towards greater freedom and respect for all people, including ourselves. The term 'emancipatory discourse' implies that there are people or groups of people who need emancipation from someone or something.

The next paragraphs will refer to several rhetorical devices that characterize 'I have a dream', and make of it a persuasive speech. The character of Martin Luther King (*ethos* in Greek) as a speaker is the most important type of persuasive proof. The correctness of King's ideas and his ability to express his opinions and feelings is essential for this speech to be effective and persuasive because the way he communicates as a speaker

in a given situation affects his rhetorical status, or the perception of the persuader by the audience member. He establishes an interpersonal relationship with his listeners by using different resources that contribute to the rhetoric of the speech, and to the expression of feelings, as Martin (2004: 337) declares:

But we have to keep in mind that feelings are always about something- they are always interpersonal attitudes to ideational experience. And the investment of attitude in experience has to be stage-managed -- by textual resources -- because negotiating community is a dynamic process, played out as texts unfold in the myriad of discourses materializing the communion of everyday and institutional life.

In this sense, it should be remembered that Aristotle identified three reasons why some speakers were believed more readily than others: practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill, in Aristotle's words (trans. 1991): "Wisdom concerned the ability of the speaker to form valid judgements. Virtue was an 'ability for doing good' and included the characteristics of justice, courage, and self control Goodwill was seen as the speaker's having the best interests of the audience in mind. The speaker should not serve only personal interests".

King establishes an author-reader relationship by an excellent use of the pronouns 'we', 'I' and 'you', which points out the interaction between speaker and hearer. In this way, he establishes a dialogic relationship because there are several voices in the text, through which King builds a clear relationship with his hearers.

As regards the rhetorical devices, it is very common the use of repetitions, parallel clauses, and enumerations in the speech. Repetition involves restating a key word or phrase to reinforce the point being made. This is perhaps the most well recognized characteristic of this speech. The repetition of the word 'Negro', and the repetition of the circumstantial of time in the following paragraph is used many times to underline and to be rhetorical:

But one hundred years later, the Negro is still not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the masacres of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. (King 1997: 42)

The repetition of another circumstantial of time in the following paragraph 'now is the time' emphasizes the importance of the present to change the

bad social situation that surrounds black population during this historical period. Apart from the repetitions, there are some contrasts between the negative facts that are taking place now, and the positive things that King wants to take place in America from now on: *the sunlit path of racial justice, the solid rock of brotherhood and make justice a reality to all God's children*. In this paragraph there are some echoes from the Bible. Consequently, we can talk about intertextuality in 'I have a dream'. In this case, King seems to have in mind Isaiah 49, 8: 'In an acceptable time I have heard You, and in the day of salvation I have helped You; I will preserve You and give you as a covenant to the people, to restore the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages.'

Now is the time to make real the promises of Democracy; 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; now is the time to make justice a reality to all God's children. (King 1997: 44)

King is aware that not all white people are against the black population of the time because some of them go to listen to him speaking, and they believe that it is essential that black and white people live in peace for the development of the country, and for the development of every human being, which is realized by the repetition of 'they have come to realize':

For many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom (King 1997: 44)

The repetitions, and the parallel clauses in the following paragraph ('*We can never be satisfied as long as...*'), are another example of how Martin Luther King portrays a strong feeling. Parallel clauses are a ready means of controlling the sentence, and guiding the reader by sharing with him/her the different facts that create dissatisfaction in black population. The paragraph is full of expression due to the use of vocabulary with very clear negative connotations. It is also necessary to refer to the repetition of the modal verb 'can', which can be considered epistemic modality because it expresses a judgement about the impossibility of being satisfied if the situation for black people continues being so hard and negative. The exclamation and repetition of 'no', and the modal verb 'will', also with epistemic value at the end of the paragraph highlight even more the judgement of the situation made by King. He makes clear that if things continue in the same way black people will not be satisfied in the future, i.e., he is trying to persuade the audience.

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality; we can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities; we cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one; we can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For White Only"; we cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No! no, we are not satisfied, and will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." (King 1997: 46)

The repetition of 'no' and 'we are not satisfied' underlines the importance of these lines for the whole speech. These repetition, the comparison, and the exclamation at the beginning of the paragraph highlight the expression of feelings, and the sentimentality and idealism of the speech.

No! no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." (King 1997: 46)

In the next paragraph, the repetition of *some of you* highlights the interaction of Martin Luther King with his hearers and readers because King makes clear that he knows the difficulties that many of the people that are listening to him on that day are going through, in other words, he sympathizes with them. Imperatives are used to express commands, and to encourage the reader or listener to go to different places in America with faith, being sure that the present situation is going to change. The two central modals 'can' and 'will' at the end of the paragraph show a clear judgement of King's opinion about the necessity and the possibility of a social change, which makes of 'I have a dream' a discourse of hope because he is convinced that a better future is possible:

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. 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, knowing that somehow this situation can be and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. (King 1997: 46)

The repetitions, the parallel clauses, and the exclamations found in the following paragraph are another example of how the author portrays a

strong feeling: he believes that his dream of a change in America for the benefit of black people will take place. This is the climax of the speech since the author lets us know openly what his dream is: he dreams with a change of the social situation for black people in such a way that justice and equal rights are a reality; he also dreams with a society in which black people are free at last.

[...] I still have a dream. It is a dream [...] I have a dream that one day [...] I have a dream that one day on the red hills [...]. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day [...] the words of imposition and nullification – one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream that one day “Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together”. (King 1997: 48)

There is another example of intertextuality in the previous paragraph because there is a quotation from the Bible in ‘I have a dream’, exactly from the book of Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 4–5. In this sense, the form and function of the discourse under analysis is influenced by what other texts are like, and what their purpose is. At the same time, this example shows that King is a very religious person who knows the Bible very well. He believes that brotherhood can become a reality on earth, and the fact that there are white and black people is not a barrier at all. On the contrary, he sees blacks and whites as God’s children, as one family in Christ.

In the following paragraph, repetitions, metaphors and enumeration highlight the importance of faith in God, and in a better future as one of the basic ideas of King’s ideology, which is characterized by Christianity, as it has been mentioned before. In King’s opinion, faith is able to transform the negative facts that are present in his society into a new society in which the main rule is love. Here there is another example of intertextuality since Jesus said to his disciples that faith could move mountains (Mark 11, 23): ‘For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.’

The repetition of the modal verb ‘will’ with epistemic value emphasizes King’s judgement about the truth of the proposition he is presenting, i.e., he assumes that with this faith, in God’s name, this new society is possible:

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning. (King 1997: 48)

The last two paragraphs of 'I have a dream' are very expressive, and full of meaning. In the first one of those, there are repetitions, imperatives, and enumerations that highlight not only the expression of Martin Luther King's feelings, but also his hopeful and sentimental world-view. There is no doubt that King's world view is clearly reflected in the sentimentality and idealism of this speech. Apart from the importance of repetitions, this paragraph is also relevant because it starts and finishes with the same words as a way of being cohesive, rhetorical, and underlining the importance of freedom for human beings:

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire; let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York; let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania; let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado; let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia; let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee; let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. (King 1997: 50)

The last paragraph of the speech is also full of enumerations, and parallel clauses. The fact that this paragraph finishes with two exclamations is important because exclamative sentences are one of the most common devices to show up a feeling, and to emphasise emotions. Exclamations are used at the end of the speech to emphasize the point being made by King, his dream: the fact that black people are free. Exclamations are also a very good way to interact interpersonally with the reader so that he/she really sees the importance of freedom for a change in society, in ideology, and also for a change of heart.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free, at last! free at last! thank God almighty, we are free at last!" (King 1997: 50)

The aforementioned rhetorical devices point out that King is sharing his feelings throughout the whole speech, which adds rhetorical expression and sentimentality to 'I have a dream'. Therefore, the rhetorical devices are not chosen random, but with the purpose of establishing a relationship between the patterns chosen in language, and the reality that King is trying to describe. Hence, the linguistic patterns chosen give Martin Luther King the power of talking about the world in a particular way.

In addition, the previous examples show how the language of 'I have a dream' has certain characteristics of the language of sermons, which is quite evocative. Consequently, there is intertextuality between the genre of the speech, and the genre of the sermon because in both there are repetitions, parallelisms, vocatives, enumerations, rhetorical questions, imperatives, etc. These rhetorical devices fulfil the purpose of developing the interaction between the speaker and the listener.

In King's sermons and speeches there are quotations from the Bible as a way of pointing out God's authority, and the importance of the Bible as a source for inspiration in religious and social issues. There are also references to his historical moment and to his personal life, which is one of the characteristics of expository preaching. As Robinson (1980: 77-78) declares:

Expository sermons consist of ideas drawn from the Scriptures and related to life. To preach effectively, therefore, an expositor must be involved in three different worlds. In his study he gathers knowledge about the Bible.[...] The expositor must also be aware of the current swirling across his own times, for each generation develops out of its own history and culture and speaks its own language. [...]

A third sphere in which a preacher must participate is his own particular world.

Apart from the linguistic characteristics, when King uses both genres, he makes reference to the audience's experience. In both genres there is emphasis through language, and perhaps in the raise of the voice when the speeches and sermons are delivered (King is well known for his passion and fervor as a speaker). The purpose of both genres is to inform, to persuade the listener (or reader). In both cases King uses quotations from the Bible as a way of showing that King, as a speaker, is being inspired by God, and is trying to give a response to God because "the purpose of preaching is to inform, persuade, and call forth an appropriate response to the God whose message and instruction are being delivered." (Packer 1986: 9)

4. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper points out that there is a clear relationship between language and meaning, i.e., the different rhetorical devices are not chosen random, on the contrary, they have a clear purpose that contributes to the way the meaning of the text is expressed by the author and perceived by the reader. Hence, language has rhetorical power in the speech because profound feelings and emotions are attempted throughout it with the appropriate use of persuasive resources, and marked syntactic structures.

There is always a motivation behind the different choices in lexicogrammar. Consequently, King makes his selection of lexicogrammar according to the social circumstances surrounding the text, which implies that the lexicogrammatical choices analyzed are meaningful. In other words, 'I have a dream' is shaped into predictable stages by its cultural purpose. King describes the social situation, and at the next stage he shares his dream of a better future.

All the rhetorical devices that he uses in 'I have a dream' are appropriate to highlight a certain part of the information, to emphasize feelings, and to create an expressive discourse. In this sense, King's use of language appears connected with a marked social reality. Furthermore, the language used by Martin Luther King is interconnected with the context in which he writes. Language is a resource for making meaning, it is a social system that builds a social meaning. All the examples analysed are examples of language in use. King makes his selection of lexicogrammar according to the social circumstances surrounding the text, which implies that the lexicogrammatical choices analyzed are meaningful. After the previous statement, it is clear that the language of 'I have a dream' serves to construct particular ideological positions that entail unequal relations of power.

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