

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN BARACK OBAMA'S SPEECH AT THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.24843/STIL.2022.v02.i01.p10>

Artikel dikirim: 25 Juli 2022; diterima: 24 Agustus 2022

### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN BARACK OBAMA'S SPEECH AT THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

**Abstract.** Figurative language is a part of semantics study. Through studying semantics, meanings of words can be learnt. This study entitled "*Figurative Language in Barack Obama's Speech at The United Nations General Assembly*" is aimed at identifying the types and analyzing the meanings of Figurative Language used by Barack Obama in his first speech at The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The theory stated by Wren & Martin (2000) and Leech (1981) were used in analyzing the data. The data was presented and explained descriptively in the third chapter of this research. Any sentences containing figurative language were differentiated by a code created by the researcher. A speech delivered by Barack Obama at United Nations General Assembly was used as the data source of this research. As a result, there are seventeen data were found containing seven types of figurative language, one data contains a metaphor, three data contain personification, two data contain a symbol, four data contain an apostrophe, four data contain verbal irony, one data contains antithesis, one data contain euphemism, and one data contains epigram. There were five theories of meaning by Leech (1981) implied in the speech, including conceptual, connotative, social, affective, and reflected meaning. As this study is focusing on the theory of figurative language, it is expected that the results will be valuable to students of English Literature or others. The figurative language and meanings applied in this research can be used to provide a clearer and better understanding of the meanings of figurative language.

*Keywords: semantics, types, meanings, speech.*

### INTRODUCTION

The study of meaning can come in many different forms. Linguistic semantics is an attempt to explain the knowledge that a speaker of a language understands that they can convey facts, feelings, intentions, and creations of the imagination to other speakers and comprehend what they express to the hearer. Semantics is about how the language system works, people have in common that makes them able to communicate with each other (Kreidler, 2022). According to Löbner (2013), semantics is the study of the meanings of individual linguistic utterances, whether simple or complicated. It also explains how utterance meaning, or the meaning of an expression

used in a specific speech context, is related to expression meaning. Many words have several meanings, and even complete sentences might have multiple interpretations. According to Ritchie (2013), the semantic relationship may be less critical than the perceptual simulations produced by a word or phrase when processing metaphors and other figurative languages, such as wordplay and irony. People who communicate more than they say in social situations utilize language that indicates meanings more than the language itself, it is called figurative language. In the wide range of studies, figurative language can also be classified to show something different. Harya (2017), argued that some words in the figurative language have meanings that are not literal, it involves using the reader's imagination to comprehend the author's meaning. It makes figurative meaning harder to understand because the meaning of figurative language cannot be found in a dictionary like the meanings of other vocabulary words that we commonly use in our daily conversation. This statement is related to Rohani & Arsyad (2018) who stated that both figurative meaning and language have a strong reciprocal relationship.

According to Abrams & Harpham (2011), figurative language detracts from what users of a language know as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard arrangement of words to produce special meaning or effect. These days, linguists have focused their attention on figurative language in literature because it is associated with the beauty and grace of a language itself. Learning figurative language can help us improve our vocabulary, or learning vocabulary can also help us learn the figurative language. On delivering or producing an utterance, the speakers tend to use figurative language to make their statement more unique to express excitement or affect the hearer, for example, like a president or important people delivering a speech in front of their audience.

Speech is the act of public speaking or giving a speech to express a thought or convey an idea. According to Gardiner (1932), words in speech have no meaning, but when combined with figures of speech, gestures, or prior experience on the part of the listener and speaker, they can become sentences. Related to this research, the focus of this research is taken from a speech delivered by the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama, at the United Nations General Assembly. Barack Obama get a chance to deliver his speech at United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the General Assembly is the United Nations' main deliberative, policymaking, and representative institution. It is a unique platform for multilateral discussion of international topics such as peace and stability, as it includes all 193 UN Member States. On this special occasion, the use of language also plays an essential role in

delivering the speech. Still, there is always a possibility that if the message is undelivered, by studying figurative language, we can reduce the chances of misunderstanding. The use of figurative language may significantly affect the audience in numerous ways of style in meaning, making the content appear elegant, aesthetic, exciting, and powerful.

This study used the theory stated by Wren & Martin (2000) and Leech (1981) to analyze the types and meaning implied in the speech given by Barack Obama at The United Nations General Assembly. According to Wren & Martin's (2000) theory, there are twenty different types of figures of speech. Those are simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, euphemism, antithesis, oxymoron, epigram, irony, pun, metonymy, synecdoche, transferred epithet, litotes, interrogation, exclamation, climax, anti-climax, and symbol. Linguistic semantics is an attempt to explain a speaker's understanding in such a way that they can convey facts, emotions, intentions, and imaginative products to other speakers while also understanding what they communicate to their audience or listener. Leech (1981) stated that semantics is a center for the study of the human mind, as well as the study of communication, and as communication becomes an increasingly important factor in society, the need to fully comprehend it becomes essential. There are seven types of meaning stated by Leech (1981), those are conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collated, and thematic meaning.

The analysis in this study focused on finding the types and meanings of figurative language found in the data source of this research which is a speech video on YouTube as the primary data and the secondary data is the transcription of the video that is found on the AmericanRhetoric.com website. The research method is very important to make the research work feasible. The qualitative method is used to answer the research question in this study, which was often performed with the use of interpretation and explanation as to the media. Qualitative research is a type of study in which people's behaviors are observed and descriptive data is produced in the form of speech or writing. It was done with the understanding that this study aims to discover different types of figurative language and the meaning of figurative language that is used by the speaker on the data source.

There are some relevant theories reviewed which related to this study. An undergraduate thesis entitled "*Figurative Language in Football Chants Created by Chelsea and Manchester United Fans*" written by Nugroho (2019), is relevant to be reviewed since the writer also analyzed the forms and meanings of figurative language. The focus of this research is to show that there is a variation in how the two supporters use

language in the stadium, as well as to compare their verbal behavior but this research has not yet discussed other types of meaning stated by Leech (1981) besides conceptual and connotative meaning. The theory by McArthur (1996) is used to analyze the forms of figurative language and the theory of semantics is the main approach to analyzing the meaning. The author argued that because figurative language has a unique meaning and effect, it can assist people in discovering a hidden meaning of a word or phrase while also adding to the beauty of the language. As a result, the author found that Chelsea and Manchester United fans have their character and their style using figurative language as the ingredients of their chants.

The article entitled "*Assessing the Uniqueness of Indigenous Language in Advertising: Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Selected Telecommunication Yoruba Advertisement in Nigeria*" written by Oyesomi & Salawu (2019), is aimed to find the figurative language in an advertisement used to communicate meaning in the telecommunication of Yoruba advertisement in South Africa. The result of this study is that they found twelve kinds of figurative language in the advertisement. The authors argued that using figurative language in an advertisement can be beneficial to the advertisers to achieve the goals of persuading the customer to buy their product. Using indigenous language in an advertisement is a method of encrypting a message that will stay in the minds of those who listen or watch, even if they are undecided about whether or not to buy because the message has been passed on to them in a language they understand. This study was analyzed by using theory by many experts, one of them is Morris (2011), who that stated metaphors are common in language, and we use them to comprehend and express ourselves in a variety of ways, from describing feelings to naming objects.

Based on the explanation above, literary works consist of grammatical rules, strong diction, and figurative language, which have a significant impact and deep meaning. From that point, the goal of this study is to find out the figurative language used in Barack Obama's speech.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses different types of figurative language and the meaning of figurative language found in Barack Obama's speech. As the data source, a speech titled *President Obama Addresses the United Nations General Assembly* was used. The data were analyzed based on the theory proposed by Wren & Martin (2000) and supported by the theory of Leech (1981).

Types and meanings of figurative language found in Barack Obama's Speech at The United Nations General Assembly.

### 1. Simile

- **and prevent a crisis like this from ever happening again. (SIM/29:24)**

This sentence contains a simile because the word "like" shows that the prevention of the next crisis can be implemented similarly to the one mentioned recently to avoid the same occasion. The prevention mentioned before is believed to be effective and good to solve another crisis. If something has to be implemented the same as before, the word "like" could be used to indicate the same thing. The affective meaning implied in this sentence, the speaker shows his anger feeling towards the crisis that happen to America, the phrase "ever happening again" was chosen to express or reflect his personal feelings to tell the audience that he is done with that crisis and want to make a change so it won't happen again.

### 2. Metaphor

- **For the most powerful weapon in our arsenal is the hope of human beings. (M/19:53)**

The words powerful weapon and hope are believed to be the same thing in this statement, even though they are two separate things. Based on the definition of metaphor stated by Wren & Martin (2000), metaphor is a form of speech that conveys the idea that one thing means another. In metaphor, a comparison is inferred, but without the use of comparison words such as like, as, etc. The word "weapon" in this sentence does not have the same literal meaning as "weapon for killing people." Instead, it is a term that, like weapons, may solve the problem by putting an end to something. The meaning of the figurative language in this sentence is connotative since it's not using the real meaning of weapon, the connotative meaning is also often found in metaphor. Connotative meaning is conveyed by the language's references, offers, and purely conceptual context.

### 3. Personification

- I have carried this message from London to Ankara; from Port of Spain to Moscow; from Accra to Cairo; and it is what I will speak about today – **because the time has come for the world to move in a new direction. (P/3:33)**

Similar to a metaphor, personification is a subcategory of metaphor in which inanimate objects are imagined to act, speak, or speak like humans (Perrine, 1969). Through this sentence, it uses the personification figure of speech because the sentence is intended to affect the listener, with the longer time passes, the more obvious how countries are now moving and who is supporting them. It refers to an instance in which a non-human being performs a human-like action. As a result, the word reflects how a human's actual body functions. The affected meanings are used in this sentence, it can be seen when the speaker intended to mention some city in his speech, it may be giving an emotional effect to the audience.

- **The religious convictions** that we hold in our hearts can **forge new bonds** among people, or they can tear us apart. **(P/2:46)**

This sentence uses the figure of speech of personification, in which religion is represented as a living thing that may connect one human being to another, even though religion is a deeply held belief that usually generates conflict. Religion is revealed as a binder by Obama, demonstrating how religion, in his opinion, is a bond that permits humans to live and get to know one another. This sentence indicates the social meaning, it showed when the speaker tends to talk about religion and starts to link to the society.

- And that is why the days when **America dragged its feet** on this issue are over. **(P/26:11)**

The sentence "America dragged its feet" serves as a figure of speech so that it shows that America wants to run away from responsibility by describing America's actions as human physical movements. Obama's intention in saying this is to show that as long as he becomes president, he will continue to advance America and make America more responsible than ever before, both in handling national and international cases. The connotative meaning is used in this sentence, the speaker chooses the word "feet" to represent the body movement which means the responsibility as an additional meaning that gives something a different meaning beyond its conceptual or literal meaning.

#### 4. Apostrophe

- **Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen**, it is my honor to address you for the first time as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. **(AP/0:07)**

An apostrophe is used to address someone's absence or something inhuman as if it were alive and present, able to respond to what is being said (Wren & Martin, 2000). The sentence above contains a conceptual meaning by addressing the important people who attend the occasion, it is included in the type of figurative language apostrophe because the sentence serves to explain and give an allusion that many people attend and listen to what he will read during his speech. This conceptual meaning contains the understanding component of meaning, which is communicated through the literal use of the word.

## 5. Hyperbole

- **To overcome an economic crisis that touches every corner of the world**, we worked with the G20 nations to forge a coordinated international response of over \$2 trillion in stimulus **to bring the global economy back from the brink. (H/7:12)**

Hyperbole is a type of figurative language where an exaggeration is used on the statement to give a strong effect and emphasize the point (Wren & Martin, 2000). This statement is classified as hyperbole, it can be seen when the speaker said "every corner of the world" and "to the global economy back from the brink". The "every corner of the world" means too much because the speaker adds an exaggeration to make it more powerful and explained that every country in the world is facing an economic crisis. The word "brink" which means a "ravine/cliff" is used to express the worst situation of the global economy that currently happens in the world. The collated meaning is used in this statement, the speaker chooses a word that can give an exaggeration to make the audience more aware of the situation that happens in every country in the world. The word chosen is also defined as a good combination that tends to accurst the context of the speech.

- And that guides my belief that **no matter how dark the day may seem**, transformative change can be forged by those who choose to side with justice. **(H/34:05)**

The statement "no matter how dark the day may seem" can be classified as hyperbole/overstatement and the collated meaning is used in this statement. The word "dark" in this statement explains the situation in which the day seems sad, unhappy, worst situation, or without hope. The speaker used "dark" as an exaggeration of every situation that looks horrible.

## 6. Euphemism

- The world must stand together to demonstrate that international law is not an **empty promise**, and that treaties will be enforced. (EU/18:00)

Wren & Martin (2000) describe euphemism as "the use of an acceptable term to express a disagreeable thing.", it is a term that refers to the process of replacing a harsh or unpleasant word for a more explicit, offensive one, so hiding the truth through the use of polite language. The sentence above is classified as a euphemism, "empty promise" is used by the speaker to demonstrate the international law condition which the American citizen thinks about. That term was used to point out that international law is not bullshit, but to say it with a more acceptable word the speaker tends to use "empty promise" and delivered it to the audience.

The purpose of using this type of figurative language during his speech is to give more assertiveness to his speech but still in an acceptable word. The meaning that is used in this type of figurative language is the reflected meaning, as we can see in the "empty promise" that also can be said as "bullshit", it is also referred to as the meaning that emerges in the existence of numerous conceptual meanings when one sense of a word becomes a part of our response to another sense; in other words, the reflected meaning is the meaning that is expressed through the use of something other than conceptual meaning.

#### 7. Antithesis

- **I have been in office for just nine months though some days it seems a lot longer.** (A/0:54)

Antithesis is used to create a strong difference or opposition between two words or sentiments inside the same sentence. It is used to underline the point of the sentence (Perrine, 1969). From the speech, the sentence above has antithesis and it is included in connotative meaning. The form of antithesis is shown from the comparison between the time of nine months and some days. Obama compared the whole period of his duty and each day of it. As a result, he stated that some days, shorter than the whole period, still seemed a lot longer. This sentence can infer that Obama might feel that nine months was away longer than its literal meaning.

#### 8. Epigram

- **Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect.** (E/34:37)

According to Leech (1981), an epigram is a quick pointed statement that commonly introduces opposite ideas to provoke surprise and capture attention. The



sentence above is an epigram. The social meaning is used in this sentence, the contradictory and shocking statement demonstrates the epigram's characteristics. The first statement is a command to the listener which is the society to look for each nation's path. The opposite statement, on the other hand, stated that no path is perfect. It may be contradictory because he advises nations to discover a way in the same statement.

9. Irony

**- I took office at a time when many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and distrust. (VI/1:42)**

The irony is a figure of speech in which the true meaning is the polar opposite of what the language conveys literally. Through this sentence, the social meaning is included and the verbal irony is used to describe how America is so that many other countries in the world look down on America. This is included in the irony because as is well known that America is not that bad because America belongs to one of the superpowers that have a stable economy so what Obama said is an allusion to what is not happening. The social circumstances are easily seen in the speaker-listener interaction, which is frequently expressed in the use of words based on social status.

10. Symbol

**- As an African American, I will never forget that I would not be here today without the steady pursuit of a more perfect union in my country. (S/33:48)**

A symbol is any form of sign (a word or thing) that implies something outside and beyond itself. The statement "As an African American" is a symbol that President Barack Obama, who is presently serving as President of the United States of America, is very happy to be a human of African origin who serves as President of the United States of America for the first time. That is why he also stated that he would do everything in his power to improve America's performance as long as he was president of the United States because his pride is a symbol of his origin. The affective meaning is used in this sentence, it can be seen from the sentence that Barack Obama is proud and express his feelings or emotions by stating as an African American who can be the president of the United States. Symbols quickly direct and organize, record, and communicate large amounts of information. Cultures rely on them to keep order, discipline, and moral ethics in place.

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing and discussing the types and meanings of figurative language used by Barack Obama in delivering his speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in total there are ten types of figurative language found in the speech, those are simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, euphemism, antithesis, epigram, irony, and symbol. The qualitative method is used in this research, and to support this research seven literatures are being reviewed. The data were presented descriptively. The researcher created a code containing the types of figurative language and the minutes where the data was uttered on the speech video, it purposed to differentiate each type of figurative language in the discussion, for example, Metaphor (M/19:53). Based on the result and discussion, there are thirteen data in total were found using figurative language. One data contain a simile, one data contain metaphor, three data contains personification, one data contains an apostrophe, two data contain hyperbole, one data contain euphemism, one data contains antithesis, and one data contain epigram, one data contains irony, and one data contains the symbol.

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