



ORIGINAL PAPER

Instruments of Political and Social Transcendence in John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

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Abstract

This paper aims to perform analyses, interpretations and decoding applied at the most profound levels of political discourse, using standards of methodology working in conjunction with intricate linguistic and semantic paradigms set against the backdrop of both social and individual psychological platforms. The objective of this research is to both understand and deconstruct the patterns of connectivity between President J.F. Kennedy as a discourse generator and the social masses of reception, the actual people for whom the message is intended. John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1961 is the most powerful and well-known speech by a statesman in the entire history of political communications. Its capacity for ideological impact, the almost perfect combination of language techniques with the emotional vein of social and spiritual desideratum has generated an address that is still given today as an example as the standard of persuasion and ideological seduction. The real power of the speech resides not only within its own intrinsic mechanisms, but also within its capacity to achieve chronotopic synchronicity. In other words, it actually stood the test of time and it still is, in many respects, highly relevant until this very day.

Keywords: *Kennedy, inaugural address, politics, discourse, ideology.*

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John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961 is the most powerful and well-known speech by a statesman in the entire history of political communications. Its capacity for ideological impact, the almost perfect combination of language techniques with the emotional vein of social and spiritual objectives have generated an address that is still given today as an example as the standard of persuasion and ideological seduction. All these elements fit perfectly with the high level of charisma and honesty of the powerful politician, consolidating the reputation of a man who seemed ahead of his time, offering not just promises, but rather an enlightened vision, meant to bring forth the progress of humanity in the name of peace and understanding.

Noam Chomsky postulated a unique but very solid state of disinformation burdening the general population: "The general population doesn't know what's happening, and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know." (Chomsky, 2013:78). John F. Kennedy is, by all means, a champion of the people and for the people against this apparent status quo. He sought not only to enlighten and inform the American people, but also inspire and empower them towards a greatest sense of progress and real democratic achievement.

This address is a unique blend of kindness, social equity, spiritual harmony, but also strength, both concrete and ideational, generated by the union of all people against the true enemies of humanity, denying gregarious and capricious conflicts based on common zonal interests and temporary interests. His vision is to lead the American people and inspire the entire planet in a veritable crusade against the mechanisms of oppression and poverty, wanting an equitable distribution of wealth, a detachment from the burdens artificially thrown upon our common humanity.

The speech begins with the collective use of the verb form "observe" at the expense of the singular form, thus using a linguistic methodology that affiliates the speech generator to the whole target group, generating a statement that will act as a true generational and social unifier: "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end as well as a beginning--signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago. The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." (Kennedy, 1961). Kennedy stated that the world is indeed "very different", thus, raising a plethora of challenges that can either cripple or uplift the American dream. The idea of new social realities challenging current generations in order to tackle the issues of the times is pertinently ascertained by researcher Barbuceanu who states that: "The world we live today does not resemble the world we grew up in, and the world today is undoubtedly not the world our children will live in." (Barbuceanu, 2021:177)

Although his victory is a personal victory, or at most a success shared with the Democratic Party, he manages to perform a semantic transfer, equating this victory and implicitly himself with the very idea of freedom and everything that concept symbolizes. What follows is the predictable use of words in the semantic sphere of change, such as the word "change" itself, but also the words "beginning" or "renewal". By ticking off these predictable but necessary uses for any valuable political discourse, Kennedy moves on to exploiting the spiritual and religious dimension of the ideology of the American people. Despite the fact that America is a deeply secular state, where state and

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religion are clearly defined, the young president, of Irish descent and Catholic religion, exploits with great conviction and wisdom the vast electoral pool that believes in God's power and guidance. It should be noted that when referring to God, he does not include Christians exclusively, as monotheism can be shared and embraced by other religions such as Judaism and Islam. The transition from the abstract to the concrete desideratum of the discourse has two more short stops, invoking the ancestral heritage or the glorious history that make the listeners responsible to join the fight on the righteous and moral side of destiny. Kennedy portrays the social and political desire to end poverty and oppression between two frames of the resumption of religious issues, not accidentally resuming the duty to the ancestors, but especially to the ecumenical God who is both Jesus, Yahweh and Allah, according to the individual who perceives that message.

In the second paragraph, Kennedy talks to the audience from a place of forgiveness, but under no circumstance can it be allowed to be perceived as a platform of forgetfulness, urging his compatriots to stand ever-vigilant, mindful of their own legacy: "We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. 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, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world." (Kennedy, 1961). The President confirms to the audience his affiliation with the primordial legacy of the American people, with an ideological mission of being the bearer and guarantor of freedom. Kennedy's motivational statement to "let the world go forth" possesses a dual layer of signification relating to the divine power of the biblical meaning of the word, but also to the importance of the word of communication in uplifting an entire civilisation: "Communication is a key element in the development of every society" (Stoian, 2019: 134). He connects to his contemporaries via the example of his predecessors, promising his friends, but especially his enemies, who, being enemies of America, become by semantic cunning enemies of freedom, that America is ready to play a vital role in the world. He promises to fight for the fundamental rights of human beings and to support them in the name of his nation and with the strength of his people, both in America and everywhere in the world, thus making a strong political statement that America is not a simple national player, not even a regional one, but one that can act globally, without reservations and with maximum consequence.

In the following part of the speech, Kennedy clearly builds the image of a strong country, but also reveals himself as a determined and decisive leader: "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 to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge--and more." (Kennedy, 1961). His strength and that of the state he leads lies in supporting an ideological platform based on confronting evil, regardless of consequences or context. Compromise is, in his opinion, something unacceptable and he considers himself, along with his people, a fighter in the name of freedom and the survival of human dignity. It is to be appreciated that he manages to generate an extremely categorical and harsh statement, without mentioning the political and ideological enemy of the times (USSR), thus maintaining a discursive, diplomatic flexibility and the potential for dialogue. Through his statements, he wants to warn the enemy from the east harshly, but without activating it nominally, without

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backing it against a wall, without forcing The USSR to retaliate or react somehow impulsively in the name of a misunderstood national pride.

Kennedy was aware that no matter how strong his country might be or might eventually become, it would always need to rely on honest and dependable allies and the legacy of past friendships that had brought his country prosperity and glory: “To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.” (Kennedy, 1961). In this part of his speech, the President strengthened his image as a strong leader, a binder and enforcer of a guaranteed alliance of common cultural and spiritual values. He then resorts to the easily predictable cliché of invoking the virtues of teamwork, but does so under the emotional spectrum of a potential failure if older alliances are unable to function at their maximum.

In paragraph five, JFK reveals himself as a fine geopolitical psychologist, but also a strong pragmatic strategist: “To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom--and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.” (Kennedy, 1961). He addresses the former colonies of South America and Africa, promising them that an alliance with America, to the detriment of the USSR, is synonymous with a guarantee of freedom and a path to progress and prosperity. Aware of potential hesitation or fear, he assumes the right to promise that America will never use its immense power for colonial domination, and that the Eastern alternative will have detrimental effects on those who choose it.

Aware of the susceptibility of the poor to a determined message to fight poverty, in paragraph six, the American president uses a whole emotional arsenal, aiming not necessarily at ideological manipulation, but rather at guiding the less fortunate: “To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.” (Kennedy, 1961). The president categorically denies that he would do so because of a geopolitical competition with the communist block, but this very denial reveals that this is in fact his goal, to make new friends for the capitalist world and remove those state elements from under the red grasp of Soviet Russia. The last sentence, in which he challenges the rich to help the poor, derives from an indisputable honesty of both the politician and the left-wing party of which he is a part, providing an exploration of enlightened social solidarity in order to counteract exacerbated communism.

The following fragment is a clear proof that JFK was more than a charismatic idealist, also proving he possessed an extremely developed geostrategic sense: “To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge--to convert our good words into good deeds--in a new alliance for progress--to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every

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other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.” (Kennedy, 1961). Aware of the USSR's inferences in Central and South America, the vulnerability of countries such as Cuba, he called for solidarity and progress, emphasizing, through the double linguistic occurrence of the word freedom, that America is the supporter of prosperity and the engine behind the functional future of the transition from emerging democracy to a prosperous and consolidated state. He guarantees the unconditional support on the American continent of all those who oppose oppression and "subversion.". In the end, a new veiled warning to the USSR follows, which he calls, in a euphemistic and reductive way: “every other power”, demonstrating both strength and communicational prowess.

This excerpt reveals the political will of the leader of Washington for unconditional support of the United Nations (UN), which he calls, poetically and emotionally, "the shield of the new and the weak" (Kennedy, 1961), wanting a global consolidation of the UN, a more important a role in the international apparatus of conflict management: “To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective--to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.” (Kennedy, 1961). From a linguistic point of view, the extremely innovative use of the term "instrument" to refer to peace or the potential for war, while sounding the alarm that the current trajectory of humanity serves as a dire warning to the planet that a new conflagration could be the end of us as a species if swift and decisive measures are not implemented.

In his address, Kennedy also boldly envisions the role of enemies in the pursuit of peace. He believes that, through cooperation and dialogue, old enemies can be turned into new friends: “Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: 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.” (Kennedy, 1961). The phrase in this paragraph reveals a clever communicator who creates a descriptive framework in which America is an innocent participant in the global conflict, cleverly blaming those “nations who would make themselves our adversary.” Based on this paradigm, he does not come with a threat, but with a request to seduce the ideological affinities of the listeners and challenge Moscow's belligerent foreign policy, calling for peace and the elimination of nuclear weapons.

This next iconic excerpt unveils a deeply pragmatic, cunning communicator who seeks to justify his nation's desire to gain advantage in the arms race: “We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.” (Kennedy, 1961). As a communicator, Kennedy is almost perfect. He mimics a profoundly positive and ideologically resonant discourse. Politically, he has a number of goals that are presented in the most seductive way that people can easily empathize with, but the solutions to achieve those goals are almost non-existent. In this paragraph, he even proposes a counter-solution, revealing that America needs to arm itself substantially and only through that armament can peace be achieved. Although it is nonsense from a logical point of view, from a geopolitical point of view and from the perspective of the need to manipulate the masses, we are dealing with a perfect contextual-ideological adaptation.

He convinces his listeners that peace is closer with every weapon America builds, but those very weapons are evil and dangerous in the hands of everyone else.

The transition of meaning in relation to the previous paragraph is extremely consistent but also skilful. If in that paragraph Kennedy campaigned for a strong arming of his country as the only way to achieve peace, in this paragraph, the American president states that the current national trajectories are incompatible with life on our planet, given the nuclear proliferation called in the text “the deadly atom”: “But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course--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 that stays the hand of mankind's final war.” (Kennedy, 1961). Linguistically, the tone becomes softer, generating a conceptuality of cooperation by emphasizing that we can have either a dualism of peace or a dualism of war by referring to the potentially belligerent parties as “two great and powerful groups of nations” while further underscoring this conflictual dualism through the triple occurrence of the determinant “both”.

The assertions in this part of the speech are a mixture of the conative functionality of language and the emotional one: “So let us begin anew--remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.” (Kennedy, 1961). A sincere and clear call for peace is made in the name of the idea that being reasonable or gentle does not mean “weakness” or vulnerability. Moreover, in the president's opinion, the real strength lies not in just having power, but mainly in being willing to give it up in the name of a higher ideal. The inability or outright refusal to negotiate stems from what Burtea-Cioroianu called a “lack of coherence” (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2020: 143). All international parties and politicians claim they seek the same universal human objectives: peace, prosperity, democracy, and yet the absence of negotiation does indeed demonstrate a severe lack of coherence between what is predicated and what is actually achieved.

This fragment reveals to a very large extent the clear image of a man who truly wanted to lead both nations on the path of peace and understanding. However, his approach is not naive, specifying that “sincerity” should not be accepted a priori, but needs to always be “subject to proof.” The skilful proliferation of the meanings of the word “negotiate” proves a very clear submission of linguistic mechanisms adapted in context to ideological desideratum. The last part of the fragment is under the sign of an emotional expression based on some referential trajectories that remain at the discretion of the listeners. Certain objectives are deliberately omitted to allow the listener to decide priorities and ideological structures of meaning.

The next part of the communication states the desire to build a strong nuclear non-proliferation strategy, emotionally exploiting the collective phobia of listeners to see how weapons of mass destruction could escape the control and interest of humanity: “Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms--and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.” (Kennedy, 1961). Linguistically, there is a dislocation of the term “absolute” similar to the term “negotiate” in order to attract a fatigue capacity of the main audience (the American people), but also of the secondary

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audience (from the communist space), emphasizing the imperative desire to not accept any form of corruptive compromise in the righteous fight for peace.

The speech also endorses the visionary dimension of the former White House leader: "Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce. Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free." (Kennedy, 1961). We notice again the occurrence of the term "both", being invoked the need for cooperation and teamwork to achieve enlightened goals, perhaps even the transcendence of humanity. JFK doubles down on the emotional function of addressing by emphasizing, if necessary, the term "together", underscoring the duty and mission of all humanity to fulfil a visionary feeling that is difficult to achieve but impossible to ignore. Towards the end, he activates a religious dimension, but also an ideological one, through which the audience can connect, on a deeply emotional background towards ideological fulfilment as a prophetic legacy of the divine.

This particular part of the communication is harmoniously constituted through a balanced agglutination of linguistic relevance and ideological approach: "And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved." (Kennedy, 1961). Built on a strong conative vein, the president's desire is doubled by the threefold occurrence of the term "new", thus managing a discursive trajectory that seeks to leave behind old habits and rivalries, to build the foundations "a new world" that can function properly for everyone, not just the rich. From an ideological point of view, the president chooses his side, if not as a socialist, at least from a social perspective, based on the leftist doctrine of the Democratic Party.

The temporal considerations enunciated in this paragraph generate a subtle metalinguistic impulse that confers a decoding of JFK's political image as one of the ideological leader who does not think only in the short term based on a strictly electoral pragmatism: "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin." (Kennedy, 1961). His remarks show that any small step, any essential transformation of the global society, may or may not be very difficult. The listener is urged to join a vision that goes beyond the individual and relies on the material and spiritual propensity of a strategy that may involve generations, the progress of the species. Duration or intensity are not and cannot be a pretext for inaction, it is our duty, of all of us to "begin".

The president demonstrates substantial managerial skills, using a series of psychosocial methods to elicit ideological responsibility, and empower those who receive his speech with strong patriotic emotional undertones: "In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe. 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, year in and year out, 'rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation' -- a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself." (Kennedy, 1961). Patriotic rhetoric is once again

accessed, which together with the assumption of a conscience of sacrifice can lead to a solid victory in front of the only opponent that really matters. The next battle of his generation and the generations to come must not be fought by "bearing arms but by being eager and patient to build a new future where a united humanity will defeat "tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself".

The call towards a global alliance marks a challenge launched by the US President in his Inaugural Address: "Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?" (Kennedy, 1961). Based on a referential rhetoric that enables a mass of universal addressing, extended beyond the direct listener, Kennedy indirectly invites even his geopolitical enemies to join an action aimed at changing the course of history in the name, but especially for the benefit of humanity.

Any act of political communication must strongly exploit the emotional side of the listeners, at the same time holding them accountable via the virtue of personal example: "In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world." (Kennedy, 1961). A clear mission is also set, that of "defending freedom", and this time Kennedy no longer spreads the burden of this debt to several generations, mentioning the privilege of those who live in that particular period of time to defend and consolidate an ideal of freedom metaphorically discerned by the discourse generator as nothing more and nothing less than "light." His ability to inspire, empower and motivate, to make people accept a difficult responsibility as the privilege of a generation, attests once again to the art of the leader emerging from Kennedy's discursive-ideological abilities.

This fragment represents the quintessence of the discursive genius generously offered by US President John F. Kennedy. Its ideological volubility, propensity for higher ideals that transcend selfish desires, pursuing the fulfilment of higher ideals of the human species based on belief in active forces beyond the individual are meant to transform patriotism into a concept of true and pristine altruism: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man." (Kennedy, 1961). From a linguistic point of view, we observe a proliferation of communicative functionalities in order to generate a robust ideology. Through a seemingly simple reversal of logical transference, the speaker generates an ideology that still dominates the sphere of political discourse today through its relevance, namely that in order for the country to be able to help us, it is our duty to help the country first. Discursive force continues through the unprecedented " fellow citizens of the world ", thus generating, for the first time, the innovative concept of global citizenship, belonging to the same ideals and desires for peace and prosperity for the entire planet in the name of freedom for all.

The issue of global citizenship is being revived through a substantial conative impact. There is some content of clichés or elements of predictability at the level of language, but these are cleverly hidden under the umbrella of innovation and the relevance of a political ideology that must, first of all, be honest and moral: "Finally,

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whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.” (Kennedy, 1961). Kennedy was a complex visionary but we need not forget that his profession was that of a politician. He did indeed seek to motivate and seduce the masses, but in doing so he always took into account the diplomatic, pragmatic prerequisites required of a statesman especially if that particular politician happens to be the president of the United States. Therefore: “Political discourse should be both diplomatic and motivational. In order to truly attract political followers and sympathizers, politicians should be motivated by high levels of aspirations and ideals, such as the harsh desire to work for the benefit of their own people.” (Paunescu & Chiritescu, 2019: 13)

The end of the speech activates a strong metalinguistic generation by using utterances with a strong social and religious impact. From an ideological point of view, but also discursively, Kennedy performs an almost perfect manoeuvre, managing the decisive involvement of the divine factor, but as a simple facilitator of the importance and the noble human destiny. God is meant to provide humanity with guidance and “help,” but the actual “work” and social duty remain strictly human prerogatives. As a species we are compelled to retrieve and harness the cooperative qualities bestowed unto us by the divine, being fully aware that there are no shortcuts to the collective destiny we all long for, regardless of our of the competing ideas and ideals for freedom, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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