Linguistic Choices in Election Speeches: Obama, Romney, and Harris

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Political speeches, especially those tied to presidential elections, are important linguistic pieces often shaped by a speaker's purpose, audience, and context. The victory speech of Barack Obama (2012) and concession speeches of Mitt Romney (2012) and Kamala Harris (2024) not only highlight linguistic factors in triumph and defeat but also reflect personal and political standpoints. The digital linguistic tools Voyant Tools and Analyze My Writing take a text and provide data on the linguistic features inside. While these tools will produce many different outputs, this analysis focuses on pronoun usage, sentence length, word choice, and religious language. By analyzing these linguistic choices in Obama, Romney, and Harris's speeches, it becomes clear that their differences in pronoun usage, sentence structure, and overall focus reflect the purposes of victory and concession speeches but stand out in how they are shaped by their political contexts and intended audiences.

One similarity between Romney and Obama's speeches is their shared focus on gratitude and national unity. Despite their political differences, both Romney and Obama consistently thanked their supporters, family, and the American people. However, what was surprising was how it was conveyed and the clear different linguistic choices behind it. Obama used collective pronouns like "we" more frequently than Romney. Obama used "I" in his speech a total of 29 times and "we" 48 times. On the other hand, Romney used "I" more than "we," using the personal pronoun 18 times and the collective pronoun 11 times. This suggests that Obama is signaling a call for shared responsibility in the nation's future, as his job will continue to be with the American people. He directly connects himself with Americans in statements like "That's the future we hope for. That's the vision we share. That's where we need to go – forward. That's where we need to go" (Obama).

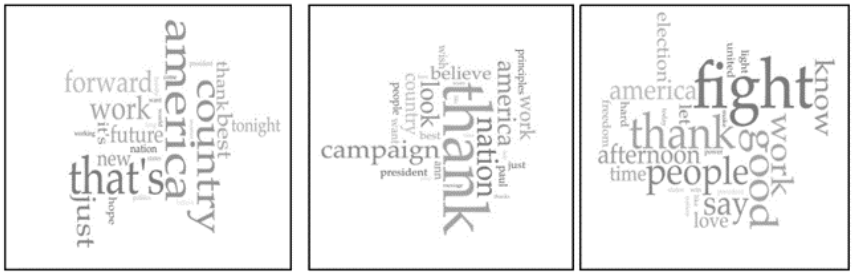
Romney's greater use of personal pronouns may be connected to the more personal, reflective nature of concession speeches themselves. Romney thanks his family, campaign team, and the American people who supported him, but he also signals the end of his personal journey in the election by stating, "I so wish — I so wish that I had been able to fulfill your hopes to lead the country in a different direction. But the nation chose another leader." (Romney). This means the idea of "we," the general American people, is not the primary focus or concern, but instead, bidding his farewell takes the front seat. In comparison, Kamala Harris's speech uses "we" 31 times and "I" 26 times, with considerably closer numbers than the other candidates. This could

suggest a balance between personal reflection and collective responsibility without being as polar as the other two speeches. For example, Romney seems to be looking for personal closure, but Harris's use of "we" signals that her journey is ongoing and that she is not stepping away from the political fight, and this can be seen through the use of the collective pronoun in contexts like "America's promise will always burn bright as long as we never give up and as long as we keep fighting" (Harris).

Another surprising factor relates to how Obama's speech had longer sentences, with Analyze My Writing putting his average sentence length at 20.17 words. Contrarily, Romney had shorter sentences, with the average length being 13.0. Obama's speech is longer, with a considerable 1,511 words over his opponent, which could account for the longer sentences. The length of sentences relating to the length of the piece is a hypothesis Harris' speech seems to support, with her speech coming in at 1,044 words less than Obama's and having a very similar average sentence length to Romney's, 14.7 words. However, Romney, Obama, and Harris have an average word length of ~ 4, meaning that, on average, their words contain four letters. The data pertaining to average word length is the only data with similar results in all the speeches, suggesting this is standard for these types of addresses.

In addition, Voyant creates a word cloud to showcase the top-frequency words in a text, as seen in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3. Obama had words such as "forward," "future," and "new" appear frequently (see Figure 1), reflecting his ongoing position in office. While Romney had words such as "wish," "believe," and "want" (see Figure 2), with personal reflections and acknowledgments of defeat being more prevalent in these words. For example, when he used the word "want," it was always when thanking someone, such as "I want to thank Paul Ryan" (Romney).

Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech, though addressing her personal defeat, still showcases an interesting linguistic focus, different from Romney's. Her most used words included "fight," "thank," and "work," with "fight" appearing prominently at 18 usages (see Figure 3). This suggests a strong emphasis on determination and resilience, even in the face of defeat, which connects within the contexts these words appear: "And we will also wage it in quieter ways: [...] by always using our strength to lift people up, to fight for the dignity that all people deserve. The fight for our freedom will take hard work" (Harris). The use of "work," which is paired with the word "hard" five times throughout her speech, and "people" reflects her ongoing commitment to America, showing that, in this case, the purpose of her speech, which is to accept defeat, did not stop her from calling for change.



1 2 3

Fig 1: Obama's 25 Highest Words
Fig 2: Romney's 25 Highest Words
Fig. 3: Harris's 25 Highest Words

The word cloud also showed how Romney frequently uses exact names, such as "Paul," his running mate, or "Ann," his wife (see Figure 2), focusing to focus on individuals and thanking them for their sacrifices despite the defeat. While Obama does reference his vice president, wife, and two children during his speech, the vital difference is the lack of frequency, as his new concern becomes America as a whole. Harris's speech, while acknowledging her personal loss, strikes a balance between expressing gratitude with words like "thank" and trying to inspire her supporters through terms like "fight" and "work" (see Figure 3). This linguistic choice does not fully align with Obama's or Romney's because it both reflects personal gratitude in defeat and a continued commitment to the American people.

Additionally, one factor not anticipated was the difference in religious language between the candidates. In Obama's speech, no religious comments were present until his closing statements, where he thanked God's grace and stated, "God bless you. God bless these United States," a common saying in American politics and beyond. His lack of religious affiliation in his victory speech could be for a broader, more inclusive appeal. The bipartisan tone may have served to address Americans across different backgrounds, beliefs, and identities, a common goal in the Democratic Party. However, Romney frequently used words such as "pray" (see Figure 2) and emphasized religious values for a considerable portion of his speech, saying, "We look to our pastors and priests and rabbis and counselors of all kinds to testify of the enduring principles upon which our society is built—honesty, charity, integrity and family." (Romney). These aspects align with his Republican demographic, often built on traditional religious values. Once again, Harris's speech finds a middle ground between the other two, this time regarding

religious affiliation. It has a similar ending to Obama's, where she states, "May God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America," but this is not the first appearance of God in her speech, with her addressing the importance of America's "loyalty to our conscience and to our God" in the middle of her speech as well (Harris).

However, in analyzing these three speeches, there is a similarity in tone that goes beyond religious beliefs: their clear use of Standard American English (SAE) and formal style reflect their attention to the occasion's formality. This comparison shows how linguistics allows us to examine the relationship between language and context, which is a key theme of this term. By examining Romney, Obama, and Kamala's speaking, I can see how linguistic choices are shaped by social situations, audience expectations, and the speaker's purpose. An Introduction to Language notes how social contexts shape language usage: "Social situations affect the details of language usage, but the core grammar remains intact, with a few superficial variations that lend a particular flavor to the speech" (Fromkin et al. 309). Their language's formality matches the event's gravity, a presidential concession and victory, where precision, respect, and eloquence are key. All three speakers maintain SAE with minimal regional or informal variations, which supports the idea that formal contexts preserve core grammatical standards.

Findings such as these lead to the key significance of these differences and similarities, which, when strictly looking at Obama and Romney's speeches, relate to the recurring idea of the contrasting purposes of the two speeches. Obama's speech, as a victory speech, was intended to inspire and unite the nation. In contrast, Romney's concession speech was meant to accept defeat while showing respect for the Democratic process gracefully. The linguistic construction of Obama's speech was full of optimism, unity, and aspirational goals, ultimately aligning with the typical goals of a victory speech. Romney's speech, in contrast, was more personal, focusing on gratitude and respect for his supporters, family, and campaign members, but still subtly acknowledged the importance of the future. Even though the length of speech and sentences, along with the pronoun usage, is affirmed, this notion constantly relates to the primary purpose of the speech, and with that, the audience being addressed. Surprisingly, Harris's speech was a middle ground between the two, carrying characteristics similar to those of both Obama and Romney's speeches. This approach is neither purely aspirational like Obama's nor entirely personal like Romney's. Still, it reflects a balancing act between acknowledging personal disappointment and empowering supporters to continue working toward shared goals.

My original hypothesis was similar to these ideas, believing that Obama's victory speech would use more optimistic and aspirational language, focusing on plans for the future. Conversely, I assumed that the concession

speeches by Romney and Harris would likely center around respectful but still more toned-down language, with an acknowledgment of the winner, lacking the topics of policy specifics or personal future aspirations as we might find in Obama's. As reflected in my findings, some of the data reaffirmed this expectation. Obama's speech did feature inclusive language with frequent uses of "we" and "America," reflecting that message of unity and optimism for the future. However, I was surprised to find that Romney's speech, while simpler and shorter, still carried a forward-looking view through his acknowledgment of the nation's challenges and the work of his supporters. Although he didn't discuss policy specifics or his personal future as Obama did, there was still an underlying tone of unity. Still, it was structured in a way that brought respect to the new president and encouraged his supporters to do the same. Harris's speech is where my hypothesis was incorrect, with her frequently speaking about the future of America through her constant use of words like "fight" and inspirational tone throughout; she even directly states "I will never give up the fight for a future where Americans can pursue their dreams, ambitions, and aspirations."

During my analysis process, I used the linguistic tools Voyant Tools and Analyze My Writing. While the linguistic data provided by the tools is valuable and addresses an abundance of linguistic factors, it cannot account for the tone of voice, pacing, or phonetic elements that also stand prevalent in the study. In this sense, the data-driven approach of the linguistic tools offers a foundation for understanding word choice and structural composition. Still, it lacks the analysis of how these words are delivered in real-time, meaning it falls short when looking at spoken texts. While this kind of data analysis complements the close reading I have learned in English studies, particularly in terms of focusing on word choice, meaning, and the subtext of a text, it can't capture the depth of the interpretive understanding. For example, the context of its delivery would be an especially prevalent factor when looking at texts intertwined with the political climate of the time. The linguistic data suggests patterns and tendencies but still leaves out personal delivery, pronunciation, context, or even something like audience reaction that one might find in close readings.

I believe the digital linguistic tools used, particularly Voyant Tools and Analyze My Writing, were very accurate in measuring the features of each speech I addressed, such as sentence length and frequency of specific words. These tools allowed me to notice patterns and compare them in each text, which would be challenging and time-consuming to do manually. They created a strong foundation for understanding the texts on a structural level. For instance, they helped me pinpoint Romney's focus on words like "thank"

and “nation” versus Obama’s use of “we” and “America.” While they could not draw exact conclusions for me, they still provided clear insights into each speaker’s priorities, strategies, and audience-driven language.

The linguistic analysis of Obama and Romney’s speeches reveals how their language is tailored to the unique demands of victory and concession speeches. Digital tools like Voyant Tools and Analyze My Writing provided valuable insights into patterns of pronoun usage, sentence length, and word choice, reflecting the speaker's priorities. However, the data on Harris’s speech shows how she takes the middle ground, further demonstrating how concession speeches can blend personal reflection with plans for the future, proving part of my hypothesis incorrect. Ultimately, the findings show the role of language in political spaces and the complexity of how speeches are crafted to align with the speaker's position and goals.

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