

## Promising in American Presidential Discourse

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### Abstract

*The speech act of promising is considered as the most influential strategic device to sway the hearers to the speaker's point of view, and it represents a prerequisite to a successful interaction among individuals. It is studied to investigate how people use it as a functional unit in communication. In other words, to understand how promising is produced by the speaker and conceived by the hearer, it is essential to identify the linguistic function of the act when it is used in a clause within a context, more specifically, political context. Besides, promising is classified within the tact maxim and generosity maxim by Leech (1983). The present study is intended to analyze the speeches of two politicians; namely, President Barack Obama and his Opponent Mitt Romney in their presidential elections in 2012. Halliday's transitivity theory is used as a model of analysis not only to examine the speaker's sincerity, but also to show the linguistic options available for the speaker to express commitment. It is concluded that President Obama and the politician Mitt Romney tend to be not involved in promises that they cannot keep. Even when making promises, they prefer to make them implicit rather than explicit. Consequently, the two politicians' conventional practice of promising does not necessarily indicate the use of the word 'promise', but they bind themselves to future actions.*

**Keywords:** Promising, linguistic function, context, commitment, political discourse

### Introduction

The word "promise" is originally derived from the Latin *pro*, which means forth, and *mittere* (to send) – referring to future. Promising is called 'double-tensed indexicality' in the sense that the speakers express their intention in the present time to perform an action in the future. Because of being double-tensed, it is possible that promises are not kept along the duration of time due to the sudden and dramatic change of events (Vetik, 1993:21). Searle (1979: 2) points out that "the purpose of a promise is that it is an undertaking of an obligation by the speaker to do something", a feature which distinguishes promising from other kinds of speech acts – promising is the paradigm of obligation. According to Finnis (1980:300), the word

'obligation' etymologically refers to the 'binding force' of promissory or quasi- promissory commitments. Hogg (2011: 6) defines a promise as "a statement by which one person commits to some future beneficial performance or the beneficial withholding of a performance, in favor of another person". In the same vein, Fried (1981:9) defines promising as "a verbal communication that says something to arouse trust among the members of a community. While Ardal (1968: 225) states that 'promising' is "a statement, which is unnecessary for the practice of promises .i.e., the performative utterance "I promise" is unnecessary for the practicing of the promissory obligation". In the following two examples:

- I will teach you English tomorrow morning.
- I promise to teach you English tomorrow morning.

the same promise is uttered in two alternative ways. The first example is used when the hearer is confident that the speaker is going to perform his promise in contrary to the second utterance where the hearer is uncertain of the speaker's intention to keep the promise. Hogg (2011: 7) supports the idea that there is no need to make a performative utterance such as 'I promise...' or 'I hereby promise...' in order to give rise to promising. Subsequently, there are other ways to express promising involving: shaking hands, giving money or giving a key to a safe containing money, or any other indirect expressions of promising. When the utterance 'I promise that...' is used, there are two meanings expressed on the part of the promisor: first, this utterance makes the hearers understand that the speakers are undertaking a commitment to a future action, and second, the speaker may intend to describe the act of promising when using the utterance 'I promise that...' to mean "I imagine that I were to promise that...".

### **Function and Construction of Promising**

Habib (2014:2) shows that the act of promising and the related phenomena, such as vows, oaths, pledges, contracts, treaties, and agreements are of importance since they are commonly used in fields like justice, law and in politics as well. The function of promising is to bring about trust to facilitate social coordination and cooperation among interactants. Therefore, the act of promising is made to satisfy the needs of humans. This need is attributed to the elements of "information interest" and "authority interest". The former implies the interactants' desire to know what is going to happen in the future, and how others are going to behave; they have an interest to clarify the truth about a future action to plan their activities according to that truth. The latter implies that the addressees have the power over the speakers, and this authority is

represented in the addressees' desire to have the ability to impose obligations on others (Owens, 2006: 51-55).

Whether the production of promising is connected to information interest or authority interest, the act of promising is made in accordance with the circumstances and the context in which it is produced. For example, the obligation and willingness that the promisor feels relies greatly on the rational and relational circumstances available at the time of uttering the promise. The promise may be used to express thanks when the speaker is grateful, or it may be used when the speaker is enraged. Regardless of the reasons of making a promise or breaking it, promising is believed to be a social reality which lies within accepted public manners and is explained in terms of institutional rules. Promising is said to have a social function, and humans deal with it as a social reality. Consequently, promising has the function of influencing the social setting: it is used to convince others of the speaker's good intention, to soften the incensement of the addressee, to give satisfaction and pleasure to others, and to express someone's approval or rejection.

In relation to the construction of the act of promising, Hogg (2011: 8) considers that this act is either a human construction or an objectively existing phenomenon. One opinion implies that promising is a human construction. It means that the nature and the boundaries of the act of promising are determined in relation to human societies. Promising is also dealt with as a legal institution of human origins. Vetik (1993: 3) expresses the fact that part of the social construction of promising is to be of paradoxical nature, and the act of promising has this characteristic due to the following reasons:

- 1- It is performed in a social community and it is forceful expression of self at the same time.
- 2- It embodies the symbiotic and interdependent comprehensive relationship between self and community.
- 3- It causes to produce a self – in – community, who is responsible for producing and performing the act of promising.

The other opinion implies the idea that promising is of a determined and firm nature that humans have to find out rather than considering it as a social agreement. This firm nature is introduced by humans in the form of norms that are organized to be involved as “If A makes a promise in favor of B in the correct form, then that promise must be kept”.

### **Conventional Accounts of Promising**

Promising is best understood as a social practice, or a human activity, which represents a conventional behaviour by two or more parties in a community. Promises are actions that take their shape from life. Making a promise influences the social act where children, adults, and other institutional units (a company, government, schools, etc...) can perform the act of promising. Vetik (1993: 3) infers that promising is “A fundamental human experience... it shows us our talents and frailty, our very existence as social, self – conscious, creative, and productive human beings”.

Within the conventional account lies the metaphorical meaning of promising as a game for having a rule-governed nature. Vetik (1993:36) mentions that philosophers consider the act of promising as an institution governed by constitutive rules. Searle (1969:7-36) supports the idea that the act of promising is governed by rules. He says that “speaking a language is performing acts according to rules”, and a distinction is produced between two kinds of rules which are the ‘regulative rules’ and ‘constitutive rules’. The former refers to rules which govern a preexisting practice, or a form of activity; for example, the rules of etiquette. The latter refers to the fact that new forms of behaviour are created. The regulative rules take the form “X counts as Y in context C”. For Searle, the act of promising is produced according to these constitutive rules, which are also considered to be conventional rules. i.e., the speaker’s giving of a promise is part of a conventional behaviour of a society.

### **Persuasion in Promising**

Promising is considered as a persuasive strategy that speakers use in their communication with the hearers. It goes in conformity with Mohammed's (2005:29) definition of persuasive communication as "the communication process where the communicator uses the tactics to affect a group of target audience’s attitudes and their behavior". Besides, Hickey considers promising as a perlocutionary act and justifies as follows:

When looking at acts of commitment, one sees that the consent of the hearer, which is the integral part of them, is important so that the speaker may achieve his purpose...the reason why it can be seen in the motivation for performing a speech act of commitment. One can ascertain that such speech acts have a perlocutionary effect on the hearer and reflexively the recognition of success for the speaker on receiving this effect (ibid: 70).

Basically, Hickey's view (1986:69-72) that promises are designed to persuade or convince the hearer, comes from his categorization of promising as a perlocutionary act rather than an illocutionary speech act. The act of promising is a perlocutionary speech act in terms of being used to persuade or convince others. The agent X (the speaker, promisor) has the intention to perform the action ax, and this action is to the interest of the addressee Y (the hearer, promisee). Sometimes, the promise is performed in the presence of a witness Q. These elements are set under the notion of 'social commitment' where the speaker X is committed to perform ax because the hearer Y wants the action ax to be performed. This process can be abbreviated as: S – committed (X Y ax Q).

In political speeches, the president or any other responsible person intends to make his/her speeches persuasive by means of informing others (citizens, voters) of their future actions. Speeches are produced in accordance with accepted social rules, norms, and procedures, i.e., they are influenced by social context where individuals' goals are revealed.

### **Political discourse and politics**

Political discourse is defined as “a discourse identified by the text, and talk of professional politicians or political institutions at all levels (local, national, and international levels)” (Van Dijk, 1997: 12). Politicians are not the only participants in the political processes and activities, but there are recipients in the political communicative events involving the public, the citizens, and the “masses”. Politics is defined as “the total complex relations between people living in society”, and more specifically as “the art of science of government” or “competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership” (Merriam Webster on – line dictionary). The definitions of 'politics' suggest the existence of power between those who try to impose their ideologies and others who oppose them, and the existence of cooperative individuals to find solutions for the clashes of interests (Chilton, 2004:

3). Orwell (1968:137 - 138) describes politics as “a mass of lies, avoidances, stupidity, extreme dislike, schizophrenia” and politicians “have nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax”.

### **Halliday’s Transitivity of the Systematic Functional Grammar**

O’Donnell (2011:1) defines the systematic functional grammar as an approach which is developed by Michael Halliday in (1960) to be used in the study of discourse analysis. This theory is based on the speaker’s ability to make a choice between meanings rather than structures. i.e., Halliday promotes an initiative that Semantics must be given priority to syntax. His theory of functional grammar changed the concentration of linguists from what is called “the syntactic age” into the semiotic age (Fawcett, 2000:59). Therefore, language is functional in the sense that the speaker uses language for certain purposes and the speaker’s choice of the utterance depends greatly on the context in which that language is used. The systemic functional grammar theory works as a bridge between meaning and structure. For Halliday, every act of language is expressed as an act of meaning. The meaning of “systemic” and “functional” can be defined in terms of two important kinds of relations: syntagmatic and paradigmatic.

Bustam (2011:12-34) elucidates that the transitivity system can be explained as the following:

- 1- Material processes:** They are the processes of doing where there is an entity that does something to another entity. The participants of this process are known as: *actors and goals*.
- 2- Mental processes:** They are processes of sensing or perception (hearing, seeing, etc); affection (liking, loving, fearing, etc); cognition (thinking, knowing, etc). The participants of the mental processes are: *sensors and phenomena*.
- 3-Relational processes:** They are processes of being. A clause may involve three types of processes, namely: Intensive ‘x is a’, Circumstantial ‘x is at a’ and Possessive ‘x has a’.
- 4- The behavioral processes:** In the behavioral process, the agent who behaves is known as the behavior.
- 5- Verbal processes:** They are processes of saying.
- 6-Existential processes:** These processes suggest that something happens.

## Analysis and discussion of two political speeches by President Obama and Mitt Romney

### *President Barack Obama / Victory Speech*

*Source: NPR news, Federal News Service. (2012, November 6).*

America, **I believe we can build on the progress we've made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunities and new security for the middle class. I believe we can keep the promise of our founding**, the idea that if you're willing to work hard, it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you love. It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, abled, disabled, gay or straight. (Cheers, applause.) You can make it here in America if you're willing to try. **I believe we can seize this future together because we are not as divided as our politics suggests.** We're not as cynical as the pundits believe. We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. **We are, and forever will be, the United States of America.** (Cheers, applause.)

And together, with your help and God's grace, **we will continue our journey forward and remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on earth.** (Cheers, applause.) Thank you, America. (Cheers, applause.) God bless you. God bless these United States. (Cheers, applause.)

### Identification of the Speech Act of Promising

The president wants to evoke unity and equality of rights, which are implied in his expression of promise: “**We are, and forever will be, the United States of America**”. The participant 'we' is 'the identified', 'will be' is the relational process (in the mode of identifying, and within the inclusive type), and 'the United State of America' is the identifier. The speaker's promise indicates the meaning that they all share the same identity. i.e., they are all Americans whose country is the United State of America; therefore, there should be no discrimination among its members.

In the last lines of his speech, another promise is produced by President Obama in his expression ‘**we will continue our journey forward and we will continue our journey forward and remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on earth...**’. This clause contains the *material processes* (continue) and (remind), *the actor* is ‘we’, each of ‘our journey’ and ‘the world’ is *the goal*, and *the circumstantial of purpose* is ‘to

make our journey forward as the greatest nation on earth'. The pronoun 'we' is used to refer to President Obama and to the whole nation in the sense that the speaker wants to continue the journey as a president of America to go on forward side by side with the Americans as a great nation on earth.

### **Function of the Speech Act of Promising**

President Obama's promises evoke his efforts to keep America united, as its name suggests, and this implies the necessity that Americans cooperate and trust each other. The speaker attempts to persuade the public by means of promising togetherness, and unity.

These previously mentioned promises give an insight to the speaker's sincerity to perform future actions. The speaker's attempt to avoid the direct responsibility for the intended future action is manifested in his transitivity from using the pronoun 'I' in the clause 'I believe we can build on the progress...' into the pronoun 'we' in 'we will continue...'. The former clause implies the fact that the speaker is giving his own opinion, and in the latter he makes a commitment and obligation to a future action. The typical form of a promise should be in the form of a performative utterance 'I hereby promise to continue our journey forward so that our America is the greatest nation on earth'.

### **Other strategies to reinforce S's future intentions**

Before making promises, the speaker gives hints to the real content of them by virtue of the other strategies preceding these promises. Within the same context of the speaker's promise "**We are, and forever will be, the United States of America**", other strategies are identified. These strategies are the circumstances of roles: "**We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions**" and "**we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states**". President Obama seeks to make his promise more convincing by means of expressing that the Americans' roles go beyond just thinking of only one's ambition, or being people belonging to different states. The speaker's main goal is to express the ambition of all Americans to be united.

The speaker's other promise is "**we will continue our journey forward and remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on earth**", where President Obama tries to gain the American's acceptance by means of using '**together**' and the expression

'with your help and God's grace ' as circumstances of 'accompany'. These strategies are influencing to make people conceive that the speaker's promise is real since they clarify the meaning that with God's grace, President Obama and his people will move forward and they will actively remind others that they are the greatest nation on earth.

### Other Options to replace the Speech Act of Promising.

The speaker chooses to use the mental verb 'believe' instead of using the verb 'promise':

- I **believe** (*not promise*) we can build on the progress we've made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunities and new security for the middle class.

- I **believe** (*not promise*) we can keep the promise of our founding.

- I **believe** (*not promise*) we can seize this future together because we are not as divided as our politics suggests.

He declares, but not promises, the intention to gradually expand the job opportunities and provide a new security for the middle class. In his declaration, he utters the pronoun "we" as an indication to their unity as a government and a public because they have the same goal to achieve. i.e., it is the desire of the speaker and the whole Americans to build up the progress they have made together when they selected him a president. The speaker reveals that they have common goals to perform, and these goals are the collective intentionality of the whole American people.

The speaker uses of the pronoun *I* in the expression 'I believe we can...' in order to show his authority as a president (a personal statement), and to set his opinion apart from the other members of the government. Karapetjana (2011: 3) explains that the pronoun *I* is used to separate *self* from *other* without positive or negative feeling being conveyed. The speaker's clause 'I believe we can build on the progress...' as: the verb 'believe' is the mental process (affection), 'I' is the sensor, the pronoun 'we' is the *phenomenon*, and the *circumstantial: matter* is about the ability to (build on the progress they have made and to fight for new jobs and new opportunities...). The speaker adheres to the using of the verb 'believe' in order not to bind himself to future actions. He wants to say that the American people are all treated equally without discrimination. i.e., it is not important who they are, where they come from, what they

look like, and when they live. He says **“It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, abled, disabled, gay or straight.**

#### **Mitt Romney's Speech in Chillicothe, Ohio (2012, August 14)**

“All across the country, I've met people who are hurting. Some have lost their jobs; others work two jobs just to get by. Some have fallen out of the middle class and now they're struggling to get back to where they started. The cost of living keeps going up, and they're living paycheck to paycheck.

They are tired of being tired.

And tonight, I'd like to say to each of them: You have not been forgotten. **We will not leave you behind.** This is America. We are Americans. It doesn't have to be this way!

Unemployment has been above 8 percent for 42 straight months. **We will put Americans back to work!**

Half of recent college graduates can't find work or a job that matches their skills. **We'll get good jobs for our kids.**

Nearly one out of six Americans are in poverty today. This is a disgrace **we will end.**

And President Obama has amassed five trillion dollars of debt – nearly as much debt held by the public as all other presidents combined **“We will end this moral failure”.**

#### **Identification of the Speech Act of Promising**

The politician Mitt Romney tries to persuade the hearers to the pointless re-election of President Obama. He intends to smash his opponent by means of presenting the real suffering of most Americans all around the country. The speaker's first promise is "we will not leave you behind", where the pronoun 'we' (refers to Mitt Romney and his party) is the actor; the verb 'leave' is the material process of action, and the pronoun 'you' refers to those people who are suffering. The speaker uses the inclusive 'we' to indicate shared responsibility, and to distinguish themselves from other political parties. The speaker demonstrates that this is the way the politician must deal with Americans in America – they must not be forgotten.

Mitt Romney makes other promises based on real statistics to convince the hearers of the actuality and the honesty of his promises. He promises that **'he will put America back to**

**work'** because the unemployment has been over 8 percent for 42 straight months, and he promises that **"we will get good jobs for our kids"** because half of the recent college graduates cannot find a job appropriate to their skills. Because nearly one out of six Americans are in poverty today, he describes the situation as a disgrace and promises **"we will end poverty in America"**. The speaker promises that **"we will end this moral failure"** with reference to President Obama's a mass of five trillion dollars in debt. According to Halliday's transitivity, the pronoun 'we' which refers to Mitt Romney and his party is the actor, the verbs 'leave', 'end', 'put', 'get' are the material processes of action. The pronoun 'you' (the people who are hurting), 'Americans', 'good jobs', 'poverty', and 'moral failure' are respectively the targets of the material processes.

### **Function of the Speech Act of Promising**

The promises that Romney makes have a persuasive social function. The speaker tries to convince the Americans not to vote again for Obama, and to select the appropriate politician whose goal is to care about his people, to listen to their problems, and to find solutions for them. Romney's promises result from listening to the suffering of real American families. These promises strengthen the politician's relation with the American people because it informs them that Romney is a member of the American people.

By virtue of the participant 'we' that accompany the speaker's promises, it seems that the speaker intends to refer to the existence of a collective intentionality to perform future actions, i.e., Romney and the members of the Republican Party are the performers of these future beneficial actions.

### **Other strategies to reinforce the Speech Act of Promising**

The circumstance of location 'all across the country' shows that people in every part of America are suffering, each with a different problem. Romney touches the feelings of the hearers via informing them of the suffering of the people he has met. When the speaker says "I've met people who are hurting..." he wants people to understand that he is close to them and ready to listen to their demands. The speaker chooses to express the material process in the present perfect tense (have met) to inform the hearers that his meeting is in recent times. i.e., those people are right now hurting, and they need someone to do something for them. The

politician Mitt Romney uses the present perfect and present continues to make the hearers feel that he is concerned with the people who are suffering: "...people who **are hurting**, some who **have lost** their jobs..., some **have fallen** from the middle class and now they **are struggling** to get back to where they started... and **they are living** paycheck to paycheck”.

The circumstance of temporal (time) ‘tonight’ refers to the time of the speaker’s giving a promise. Today and in this evening, the speaker promises that “**we will not leave you behind**”. i.e., the speaker's promise is real, fresh, and vivid.

The speaker's expression “this is America, and we are Americans”, which also affirms the reality of the speaker's promise consists of ‘this’ as a demonstrative pronoun, the pronoun ‘we’ (which refers to the Americans) is the identified, ‘the verb be’ is the inclusive relational process, and ‘Americans’ is the identifier. The speaker wants to say that Americans must not be neglected in their country (America). The following circumstances of reasons explain why the speaker gives the previous four promises:

- 1- Unemployment has been above 8 percent for 42 straight months.
- 2- Half of recent college graduates cannot find work or a job that matches their skills.
- 4- Nearly as much debt held by the public as all other presidents combined.

### **Other Options to Replace the Speech Act of Promising**

The speaker uses implicit promises to express the intention to perform future actions, and the speaker's use of other linguistic options to replace the act is not observed.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that the two politicians belong to the same culture, President Obama and Mitt Romney have different strategies and ideologies in persuading the American people. The former seems to be careful when making promises; therefore, he tends to use the mental verbs (believe, want, know) intensively and he uses the pronoun ‘we’ more than the single pronoun ‘I’. And, may be, this belongs to the fact that President Obama is running for a second – term presidency so that he tries to be honest as much as possible to satisfy the public to vote for him once again. Obama’s use of mental verbs shows that his desire is to be a person who gives advice, rather than undertakes responsibilities. The latter tries hard to make promises whether explicit or implicit more than using the mental verbs, he uses the act ‘offer’ and ‘commit to’ to

replace the promising act, and he uses the pronoun 'I' more frequent than the pronoun 'we' because he believes in the importance of showing his good qualities as a responsible person, thinking that making promises strengthens his relation with the Americans. Both of the politicians, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, belong to the same culture and the context of their speech is the same (politics), yet, their ideologies are different because of the fact that both of them belong to different parties: President Obama belongs to the Democratic Party and Mitt Romney belongs to the Republican Party. Therefore, the use of the speech act of promising varies according to: (a) the culture that the speakers and hearers belong to, and the context in which their language is used; (b) other political factors that may govern the way people use language, the party that the speakers belong to, and whether he has occupied the office (presidency) before or not.

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