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*Oles Honchar Dnipropetrovsk National University***PUBLIC SPEECH: HUMOUR AS A TOOL IN IMAGE MANAGEMENT**

**Розглядається публічна промова політика в аспекті використання гумору як іміджевого ресурсу.**

*Ключові слова:* гумор, промова, Обама, імідж, політика.

**Рассматривается публичная речь политика в аспекте использования юмора как имиджевого ресурса.**

*Ключевые слова:* юмор, речь, Обама, имидж, политика.

**The paper discusses the usage of humour in a public political speeches as a tool in image management.**

*Key words:* humour, speech, Obama, image, politics.

**Introduction.** Public addresses made by top politicians often acquire great historical significance, and become a subject of a careful analysis. Regardless of being highly individual in terms of the subject, the means of expression, etc., speeches nevertheless use common rhetorical techniques. Humour in this respect is a compulsory element of a public speech. It has individual and contextual features which constitute the recourse for image management so long as connotations humour provides indicate a joker's character with his own personal background, charisma, communication culture, etc.

Since Aristotle, researchers have been considering the persuasive capabilities of humour in political speeches. Some questions have already been clarified, but still it has received insufficient scholarly attention so far.

Most of the works on the usage of humour in politics were written in the forms of anthologies. Some researchers did analyze the use of humour in public addresses, but neither of them examined speeches from the 'Silly Season'. Nevertheless, the study of Michael Andrew Phillips-Anderson – *A Theory of Rhetorical Humor in American Political Discourse* (2007) – gives our work interesting and useful insights about the subject. The scholar based on the theories of humour in philosophy, communication, and psychology developed a theory that could be used in analyzing public speeches that contain humour.

Our paper aims at exploring the ways humour can be used in a speech, specifically humour as a tool in image management. To achieve this goal, we have examined existing theories of humour in classical philosophy, particularly the doctrines of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Sigmund Freud, as well as considered the ideas expressed by presidential speech writers – Landon Parvin and Mark Katz – about the practical application of jokes in public addresses, and applied obtained knowledge to analyze a speech by Barack Obama to the 2009 White House Correspondents' Dinner.

The United States of America has a long history of using humour by the occupants of the White House. And even though the Americans do not want to see a comedian-in-chief in the presidential residence, they want their leader to have a natural sense of humour, and to be able to balance it accordingly with the seriousness of his position. The tendency of using humour by the residents of the West Wing goes as far as Abraham Lincoln. However, the appropriateness of presidential humour has been a subject of discussion throughout the history of the US. Be as it may, but during the so-called 'Silly Season'<sup>1</sup> American presidents are required to become stand-up comedians.

<sup>1</sup>The 'Silly Season' takes place from January to the beginning of May, and is comprised of four annual dinners: the White House Correspondents' Dinner, the Radio and Television Correspondents' Dinner, the Alfalfa Club Dinner, and the Gridiron Club Dinner.

President Barack Obama made his debut as a comedian-in-chief at the 2009 White House Correspondents' Dinner (WHCD), and as it was noted by *The Caucus*, "Washington was eager to see how he [Obama] would fare Saturday" [14] since he skipped the first Gridiron Club dinner held a month earlier.

However, prior to the analysis itself, it is crucial to understand the nature of the venue, in the first place. The White House Correspondents' Dinner takes place every year in the beginning of May. The event has its requirements and constraints for the president's performances: if a president decides to attend the WHCD, he is expected to "deliver a humorous speech which makes fun of himself as well as the other guests", however "the humor should not be taken to a point where it might insult either the target or the audience" [15].

Additionally, the feature that distinguishes the WHCD from other events of the 'Silly Season', and makes it especially valuable for presidential rhetorical humour: it is "on the record", "anything said at the Dinner may be published and since 1993 have also been carried live on C-SPAN cable television" [15]. This means that the WHCD potentially has a much bigger impact on a president's image than other events of the 'Silly Season'.

The White House Correspondents' Dinner is a discourse venue which format gives an American leader a unique opportunity to address the topics that are inconsistent with day-to-day presidential rhetoric as well as to criticize his opponents or reply to their critique while maintaining a positive image.

Starting the analysis of the speech *per se*, let us first consider its structure. The president's address to the 2009 WHCD can be divided for convenience into 4 parts according to their themes and objectives. The first part consisted of nine jokes targeted either at Obama himself and his family, or at his staff. In the next part Barack Obama mainly talked about his accomplishments in the office. In the third part President Obama made jokes about his plans for the next hundred days. The last part, although was non-humorous and dedicated to the hardship journalists were facing, had three jests.

Further, regarding the topics of Obama's humour, there were several major themes: the president's teleprompter 'addiction', his 'oversized' ego, his family, the legacy of the Bush administration, Obama's pre-election promises, especially the ones he had already fulfilled, and the incident with Air Force One. The self-deprecating remarks about teleprompters, his ego and his family were employed as a damage control to his personal image. A self-mocking joke about the "inherited" problems from George W. Bush was used in order to reduce damages in his political image.

Even though the President made overall 33 jokes in his address to the White House Correspondents' Dinner, our analysis focuses only on humorous remarks aimed at managing his personal and political image.

President Obama began the performance at the 2009 WHCD by saying that although he had prepared "an entire speech", he wanted "to speak from the heart", so he was "going to speak off the cuff" [20]. While he was finishing the line, two teleprompters were being raised noisily (the audience in the meantime was applauding and laughing). The President continued pretending to reading from the teleprompters: "Good evening ... Pause for laughter ... Wait a minute, this may not be working as well as I..." [20].

It was a self-deprecating joke which referred to public criticism of Obama's overuse and over-reliance on teleprompters. Peter Baker in the article for *The New York Times* summarized the general opinion: "Presidents have been using teleprompters for more than half a century, but none have relied on them as extensively as Mr. Obama has so far. While presidents typically have used them for their most important speeches ... Mr. Obama uses them for routine announcements and even for the opening statement of his only news conference so far [4].

The situation worsened dramatically after the misreporting of the St. Patrick's Day incident with a malfunctioned teleprompter. On March 17, 2009 "Mr. Obama hosted an evening reception for the visiting Irish premier Brian Cowen and other Emerald Isle and Irish-American dignitaries" [9]. When it was Brian Cowen's turn to speak, he readied himself to read from the teleprompter: "We have had a wonderful day that began by meeting with a strong friend of the United States... that's your speech" [9]. The situation elicited loud laughter from journalists. According to William Englund's report from *National Journal*, after a few moments, the Irish premier pulled himself together and delivered the speech he had given earlier. "When he ended ... Obama stepped to the microphone and said, 'First, I'd like to say thank you to President Obama... Happy Saint Patrick's Day, everybody!'" [9]. It was obviously a joke, however "somehow, somewhere this all got mixed up" [9]; among many, *The Times* and *Associated Press* wrote that Barack Obama had confused the words he was supposed to say. The incorrect reports added to the prevailing criticism that Obama could not speak without a teleprompter.

Numerous media discussed Barack Obama's "teleprompter dependency issue" [6]; it got to the point that he was referred to as the "teleprompter president" [16]. Moreover, reporters started to make jokes about it, for example, a Maureen Down's jest about the president's inability to demonstrate wrath: "Barack Obama even needs a teleprompter to get mad" [6]. Teleprompter jokes got traction with the public at large: "Obama's teleprompter has [got] all the accoutrements of a modern major media celebrity – a blog, a Twitter feed with 3,700+ followers, 882 friends on Facebook" [6].

Apart from all the media coverage, the fact that Obama's teleprompter 'obsession' became a subject of jokes among average US citizens suggested that that kind of perception had embedded into the public's consciousness; therefore, it was important to address the issue urgently so as to avoid image problems that could eventually decrease support for his policies.

By means of the mini-performance with teleprompters Barack Obama was able to confidently demonstrate that that problem was not something which he was especially worried about, as well as to imply that technical problems did pale in comparison to the importance of his presidential duties. Moreover, as Mark Katz, Bill Clinton's humorous speech writer, concluded from his work experience, every time a president makes a joke at his own expense, it is harder to make the same joke for anybody else. Presidential self-deprecation helps to exhaust unwanted topics [12].

What is more, later in the speech Barack Obama made another joke on the same topic, only that time he also mentioned Joe Biden who was widely criticized for his "reputation for loose lips" [1]: "In the next hundred days, I will learn to go off the prompter and Joe Biden will learn to stay on the prompter" [20].

After his mini-number with teleprompters, Barack Obama continued with the sequence of jests, two were created to manage some existing image problems: "I would like to welcome you all to the 10-day anniversary of my first 100 days", "I have to confess I really did not want to be here tonight, but I knew I had to come – just one more problem that I've inherited from George W. Bush" [20].

The first joke was a self-deprecating remark that playfully suggested that President Obama regarded the White House Correspondents' Dinner as an event held in his honour. In this instance, Obama assumed the role of an arrogant man with "an oversized ego" [1] the press was imposing on him, and by taking this perception to a ridiculous extreme, he was able to demonstrate the absurdity of accusations.

The president made another three jokes on the topic: "During the second hundred days, we will design, build and open a library dedicated to my first hundred days. It's going to be big, folks"; "In the next hundred days, I will strongly consider losing my cool"; "I believe that my next hundred days will be so successful I will be able to complete them in 72 days. And on the 73rd day, I will rest" [20].

The first two jests undoubtedly referred once again to his 'oversized' ego; the last one, except for allusions to the ego topic, addressed the enormous expectations from his presidency built up in the USA as well as in the rest of the world; some journalists even claimed that in this joke he "poked fun at his admirers, who have been criticized for expressing an almost God-like devotion to the President" [22]. Still, the primary target was evidently colossal expectations built during the 2008 election campaign. The President needed to belittle them because it was impossible to come up to them, considering deep economic recession. Humour in such an instance was a perfect tool.

Barack Obama resumed the speech with a self-mocking joke about the Bush's legacy which conceded the opposing argument that Barack Obama was blaming the ex-president for every problem he was facing.

The accusations had serious grounds though. Since January when Obama took the office and up to the moment of the WHCD he had been reminding "the public at every turn that he [was] facing problems "inherited" from the Bush administration, using increasingly bracing language to describe the challenges his administration [was] up against" [24]: "my administration has inherited a fiscal disaster", "we've inherited a terrible mess", "we've inherited an economic crisis as deep and dire as any since the Great Depression"[24]. Generally, it is a normal practice in politics to blame predecessors for present problems, but for Barack Obama this technique held heightened risks. On the one hand, during the 2008 election campaign he had built his image "on a promise to rise above Washington's divisive partisan traditions" [24] which helped him to win over "many independent voters and moderate Republicans" [24]. But on the other hand, the dismal situation with economy forced the president to use this method to secure further support for his political initiatives. Be as it may, he was endangering "his image as a politician who [was] above petty partisanship" [24], moreover, the president was risking to lose some important supporters, especially it concerned Republicans who he needed in order to promote his policies through the Congress. Evidently, Obama's communication team had decided to tackle this problem with the help of self-deprecating humour because it allowed President Obama to confess mistake, defuse tension generated around the topic, and minimize its probable impact.

After the joke about the problems "inherited" from George Bush, Barack Obama continued: "But now that I'm here, it's great to be here ... Michelle Obama is here ... Hasn't she been an outstanding First Lady? She's even begun to bridge the differences that have divided us for so long, because no matter which party you belong to we can all agree that Michelle has the right to bare arms" [20].

The mild joke in the second part of the passage alluded, first of all, to the First Lady's sleeveless dressing style which she became known for, and second of all, to some articles that discussed her biceps, for example, "Should Michelle Cover Up?" in *The New York Times*, "Are Biceps the New Breasts?" in *The Guardian*, etc. So in that instance, Barack Obama used humour mostly in an attempt to defend his wife's honour which, in turn, allowed him to demonstrate another part of his personality cultivated during the 2008 election campaign – his image as a good and caring husband.

To sum up, with the help of humour in the speech, Barack Obama was able to demonstrate his type of character, using contemporary terms, his image. To be more specific, he managed to show his intelligence through wit; by means of self-deprecation he displayed his confidence; and by virtue of admitting his mistakes and flaws, he was able to increase his credibility. Additionally, it is justified to suggest that if Barack Obama decided to deliver the messages he conveyed in the White House Correspondents' Dinner speech in the non-humorous speech, the audience would have been more captious and critical about his arguments.

On top of all, every mentioned component, along with pleasure Obama's jokes brought his audience increased his likeability which can be illustrated by his ratings as

for the end of the week May 4-10, 2009 that reached 66 per cent. In comparison, the previous week, before he gave the speech at the WHCD, his approval rating was 65 per cent [19].

**Results.** Having analyzed the usage of humour in the Barack Obama's speech to the 2009 WHCD, we managed to confirm our hypothesis that the president used jokes to coordinate his public image.

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