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Discourse Analysis – draft 1

Frederick Douglass proclaimed that “there is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him.” Yet, in antebellum America, 1852, the abolition cause was not well supported. Most Northerners were ambivalent to the matter and in fact, only 10% of the Northern population is estimated to have openly support abolishing the internal slave trade (Davidson et al. pg). While African Americans did live freely in the Northern states, they did not live equally. They were commonly regarded as an inferior people and often suspected or accused as being runaways. Such was the national atmosphere when Frederick Douglass made his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” in 1852 to the Ladies of Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society. Confronted with such a task, at such a time, this kairotic situation dictated Douglass’s rhetorical strategies: requiring of him language and syntactic structures that challenge preconceived notions of the ignorance and inadequacy of African Americans. His deft discourse therefore becomes a metamessage of equality – matching the syntactic and stylistic ingenuity of his contemporary white intellectuals. Though he belongs to a group widely considered inferior, Douglass creates credibility with Ethos, structuring and controlling his language to make appeals to knowledge, elegance and refinement.

Douglass has two ambitions in his speech; one, to persuade his audience to join the cause of abolition, and two, to prove that he is good enough. Good enough to make the speech, good enough for freedom, good enough for equality. Douglass’s first challenge in his speech is to

establish Ethos, a classical device defined as “the persuasive appeal of one’s character, especially how this character is established by means of the speech or discourse” (Burton). Douglas’s persuasive appeal lies in more than simply what he says. How he speaks; how he constructs and manipulates his language, is more valuable in the pursuit of Ethos. His discourse itself must challenge the prejudice of his inferiority. In order to appear an intellectual equal of the white audience in 1852, Douglas demonstrates his wisdom of the past with his ability to call to mind other authors, other texts, in context of his own argument. This strategy belongs to anamnesis, a member of Ethos. “Calling to memory past matters,” (Burton) anamnesis is a type of quotation – an effective strategy situating the speaker as a peer to the authors quoted. Douglas’s first demonstration of anamnesis, in paragraph thirteen, is the quotation of the Declaration of Independence. This document is the American epitome of freedom and a judicious first quotation: through its borrowed words, Douglas adopts the declaration as his own and extends its advantages to “those he represents” (Douglas). Anamnesis invokes the spirit of the authors, blessing the discourse with their own authority. Douglas’s second use of anamnesis, in paragraph thirty, is the quotation of fellow abolitionist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a white poet respected for his own command of language. Similarly, Douglas quotes poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier in paragraph fifty two and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in paragraph thirty seven. By quoting his fellow abolitionists, who are white, Douglas magnifies the power and authority of his discourse with the rally of his supporters. Anamnesis continues with the citing of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “The evil that men do, lives after them, / The good is oft’ interred with their bones.” This invocation is a double appeal to knowledge: Douglas quotes the height of the English canon while simultaneously alluding to the political crimes of ancient Rome. The most prolific example of anamnesis is Douglas’s use of Biblical quotes to support his

arguments against injustice. Douglas quotes the Bible a total of ten times, but it is his first quotation that is the most interesting. In paragraph thirty one, Douglas quotes Matthew 3:9, "...we have Abraham to our father,' when they had long lost Abraham's faith" as an example of the misuse use of great names. He quickly follows with the sarcastic "We have Washington to our father." The second quasi-quotation is a combination of the rhetorical devices anamnesis, allegory and permutatio. Douglas exchanges the name Washington for Abraham in order to condemn the hypocrisy of slave owners who lionize Washington while ignoring Washington's abolitionist deeds. The usage attacks the Fugitive Slave Act and its protection of the inhumanity of slavery. The permutatio of the Bible passage is part of Douglas's metamessage: credibility in the face of discredit. Douglas abhors the misuse of great names, and likewise abhors the use of the Constitution to shield the internal slave trade. In paragraph sixty five, he invokes Shakespeare's Macbeth to intensify his reproach for the unfulfilled Constitutional promise of freedom: "your fathers stooped, basely stooped, 'To palter with us in a double sense: / And keep the word of promise to the ear / But break it to the heart.' " In all, Douglas quotes Shakespeare twice, the Founding Fathers three times, fellow Abolitionists four times and the Bible ten times. These sources are weighty authorities in their respective fields, and Douglas takes full advantage of their authority to grant credibility and establish Ethos in his speech.

However, the appeal to Ethos is made with more than anamnesis. Syntactically, Douglas presents tightly-knit sentences, demonstrating a superior control of language and a conscious effort to convey meaning through structure. Parallelism is a common form he employs to create emphasis. In particular, Douglas uses isocolon, "a series of similarly structured elements having the same length" (Burton). For example, "biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm and stern rebuke" (Douglas) is a delightful demonstration of isocolon. Four noun phrases follow

one after the other in the same form, driving home Douglas's impatience. Another example, in paragraph twenty five is: "Prayers are made, hymns are sung and sermons are preached in honor of this day" (Douglas). Here, each clause is in the same form: plural noun, second-person present-tense "to be" and a verb in the past participle. This instance is shortly followed with the passage, "[The causes] have all be taught in your common schools, narrated at your firesides, unfolded from your pulpits and thundered from your legislative halls." The quick succession of the two passages intensifies the emphasis and the religious images that the passage themselves create. Here Douglas's use of isocolon supports the Ethotic objective by casting Douglas as a preacher – a religious leader.

Hypophora, "a figure of reasoning in which one asks and then immediately answers one's own questions" (Burton) also furthers Ethos. Related to rhetorical questioning, the speaker is not actually asking for the audience's response and the audience cannot actually give their opinion. Hypophora is referred to as "reasoning aloud" (Burton) and can be considered a member of Ethos because the speaker demonstrates that they do not need anyone to help them reach a conclusion. This use of rhetorical questioning cuts off any voice but the speaker's, underscoring the speaker's command over the audience. For example, in paragraph thirty four, Douglas asks:

For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man.

This passage somewhat resembles isocolon for its repetitious clauses of the same form. Later Douglas rhetorically asks "Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is

the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it.” The section of text from which that passage was pulled is dense with hypophora, consuming at times entire paragraphs. The section ends with the finality of “What, then, remains to be argued?...The time for such argument is past” (Douglas). Hypophora is used to reach a logical point through elimination of argument. Through the tight control of reasoning, Douglas casts himself as a believable subject matter expert, contradicting the prejudice of inferiority.

Tightly controlled language is most evident when Douglas employs the classical rhetorical device of climax. This refined approach controls the pace at which he makes his argument. Defined as “the arrangement of words, phrases or clauses in an order of increasing importance, often parallel in structure” (Burton), climax controls emphasis, increasing the stress as the structure takes shape. In paragraph thirty nine, Douglas controls the climax of his point, the manhood of the slave. The passage of 133 words is actually one sentence, bound together with coordinating conjunctions. The paragraph begins, “For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race” and continues, in one breath, to say:

Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver and gold; that, while we are reading, writing and cyphering, acting as clerks, merchants and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators and teachers; that, while we are engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men, digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hill-side, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the

Christian's God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave,
we are called upon to prove that we are men! (Douglas)

In Greek, the rhetorical strategy of 'climax' means "ladder" (Burton) and it is the perfect definition for how Douglas gradually layers his emphasis, choosing the order of laddering based on social importance. The list begins with Earthly pursuits such as farming and building upwards towards the higher pursuits of skilled trades, the arts, family and "above all...immortality beyond the grave." The layers of examples are organized into verb phrases in which a series of synonymous and parallel verbs follow the main verb. The series that follows the main verb is an ellited structure – the main verb is left out but understood to also act upon the subsequent series of verbs. The grouped phrases are also subordinated to the previous, building the climactic rise through the dependent clauses themselves. In the below dissections, the main verb is bold face while the parts of the parallel series it acts upon are underlined and the ellited verb inserted with brackets:

*Is it not astonishing that, while **we are** ploughing, [we are] planting and [we are] reaping...*

The following two dissections are subordinate to the above example, taking from it the conjugated adverbial phrase 'while we are.'

[while we are] using all kinds of mechanical tools, [while we are] erecting houses, [while we are] constructing bridges, [while we are] building ships...

The follow dissection has particularly interesting ellited verb phrases. Not only is it dependent upon the first clause's 'we are' verb, it ellites the verb 'working' in the noun series.

[while we are] working in metals of brass, [while we are working] iron, [while we are working] copper, [while we are working] silver and [while we are working] gold...

By the end of the passage, Douglas has moved the mind's eye from the ground (ploughing) to the sky, placing at the pinnacle of his climax the phrase "God," the highest "test" of manhood and civility. The climax of the passage ends with that phrase, but does not end until Douglas reiterates manhood of his race; the ultimate point vehemently reached through the control of climax. Douglas deeply layers his syntax, each phrase dependent upon the previous and, indeed, the very first, creating an increasingly emphatic and vehement tone. This complex sentence grows to be mostly a list of parallel verb structures, which is a stark instance of homoioteleuton, the "similarity of endings of adjacent or parallel words" (Burton). While climax is the most interesting device in the passage, the paragraph is rich with examples of rhetorical devices. Congeries (the piling up of words of different meaning but for a similar emotional effect), contributes to the emotional impact, asyndeton (the omission of conjunctions) contributes to the emphasis, and isocolon (a series of similarly structured elements having the same length) contributes to the pace and coherence of the passage. This excerpt of his speech is a fine example of his appeal to refinement; it is dense with classical devices that elevate his language, establishing Ethos.

Frederick Douglas challenges the perception of inferiority through his masterful control of language in his speech, "What to the slave is the fourth of July." 1852 America presented a kairotic situation that required him to choose rhetorical strategies that would elevate his message: equality in knowledge, refinement and elegance as well as equality in law and society. To achieve this elevation, Douglas establishes Ethos, appealing to his credibility, character, education and experience by demonstrating the rhetorical devices of anamnesis, hypophora, isocolon and climax, overcoming the discrediting prejudices of inferiority and inadequacy.

Works Cited

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