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English 2500 / Bickmore

11 December 2012

Discourse Analysis – final draft

Frederick Douglass proclaimed in his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” in 1852 to the Ladies of Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society 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 supported abolishing the internal slave trade (Davidson et al. 424). While African Americans did live freely in the Northern states, they did not live equally. They were commonly regarded as an inferior race and often suspected or accused of being runaways. Such was the national atmosphere when Frederick Douglass made his speech. This kairotic situation dictated Douglass’s rhetorical strategies: it required of him language and syntactic structures that challenged preconceived notions of the ignorance and inadequacy of African Americans. His deft discourse therefore became a metamessage of equality – matching the syntactic and stylistic ingenuity of his contemporary white intellectuals. Though he belonged to a group widely considered inferior, Douglass created credibility with ethos by structuring and controlling his language to appeal 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 appeal defined as “the persuasive appeal of one’s character, especially how this character is established by means of the speech or discourse” (Burton). Douglass’s persuasive appeal lies in more than what he says. How he speaks, how he constructs and manipulates his language, is as valuable – and as critical – as the contents of his speech. His discourse itself must challenge the prejudice of his inferiority. In order to appear an intellectual equal of the white audience in 1852, Douglass demonstrates his wisdom with his ability to call to mind other authors and texts. This strategy belongs to anamnesis, a member of ethos. Anamnesis, “calling to memory past matters,” (Burton) is a type of quotation – it invokes the spirit of the quoted authors, blessing the discourse with their own authority. Douglass uses the quotation to lend credibility and support to his own argument. For example, in paragraph thirty-seven Douglass quotes his fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, famous for his fiery orations against slavery, insisting that, “I will, in the name of humanity...dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery – the great sin and shame of America! ‘I will not equivocate; I will not excuse;’ I will use the severest language I can command...” (Douglass). Anamnesis is an effective strategy to establish ethos since it situates the speaker as a peer to the authors quoted. Douglass himself is able to proclaim, by the defense of Garrison’s own experience and credibility, that he will neither “equivocate” nor “excuse” the message on which he is about to embark.

However, anamnesis begins much earlier in the speech, first appearing in paragraph thirteen with the quotation of the Declaration of Independence. This document is the American epitome of freedom and a judicious fist quotation: through its borrowed words, Douglass adopts the declaration as his own and extends its advantages to “those he represents” (Douglass). Douglass’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, Douglass quotes poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier in paragraph fifty-two. By quoting abolitionists who are white, Douglass magnifies the power and authority of his discourse with the rally of his supporters. Anamnesis continues with the citation 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: Douglass quotes the height of the English canon while simultaneously alluding to political crimes in ancient Rome.

The most prolific example of anamnesis is Douglass's use of Biblical quotes to support his arguments against injustice. Douglass quotes the Bible a total of ten times, but it is his first quotation that is the most interesting. In paragraph thirty-one, Douglass quotes Matthew 3:9, "...we have Abraham to our father,' when they had long lost Abraham's faith." He quickly follows scornfully with, "We have Washington to our father." Douglass exchanges the name Washington for Abraham in order to condemn as frauds slave owners who lionize Washington while ignoring Washington's abolitionist deeds. Douglass does this to make a point of the hypocrisy that lies in adopting a great name as a banner of identity in order to receive the privileges of its legacy. He repudiates any undeserved power achieved while cowering behind nothing other than a successful name meant "to cover your indolence" (Douglass). The quasi-quotation ("We have Washington to our father") is a combination of the rhetorical devices anamnesis, allegory and permutatio. Permutatio is a cousin to allegory and "employs a comparison in order to magnify or lessen" (Burton). The quotation touches all of these devices: quoting the Bible is anamnesis, the passage itself alludes to the loss of faith and the replacement of the name is permutatio. Such a powerful grouping of rhetorical devices is strong mortar in building a metamessage of credibility in the face of discredit. 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, Douglass 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 Douglass takes full advantage of their authority to establish ethos and grant credibility to his speech.

Douglass's appeal to ethos is made with more than anamnesis. He 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, Douglass uses isocolon, "a series of similarly structured elements having the same length" (Burton). For example, the passage, "...I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder" (Douglass) is a delightful demonstration of isocolon. Four noun phrases follow one after the other in the same form and the parallelism of structure follows in the second sentence. The repetition in the first sentence of the excerpt creates a driving pace, emphasizing Douglass's impatience, while the balanced structure in the second sentence emphasizes Douglass's resolution. Another example in paragraph twenty-five is, "Prayers are made, hymns are sung and sermons are preached in honor of this day" (Douglass). Here, three clauses are in the same form, each with parallel parts: a plural noun, a second-person present-tense "to be" and a verb in the past tense. 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 impatience, while the religious images in the passage cast Douglass in the light of a religious leader, supporting his Ethotic objective.

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 help to 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, Douglass 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.

Later Douglass 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 that the passage was pulled from 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” (Douglass). Hypophora is used to reach a logical point by eliminating possible disputes. By tightly controlling his reasoning, Douglass casts himself as a believable subject matter expert, contradicting the prejudice of inferiority.

Tightly controlled language is most evident when Douglass 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 Douglass controls the climax of his point, the humanity of the slave. This 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! (Douglass)

In Greek, the rhetorical strategy of climax means “ladder” (Burton) and it is the perfect definition for how Douglass gradually layers his emphasis, choosing the order of laddering based on social importance. The list begins with Earthly pursuits such as farming and builds upwards towards the higher pursuits of skilled trades, the arts, family and “above all...immortality beyond the grave” (Douglass). 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, Douglass 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 the paragraph and sentence do not end until Douglass reiterates manhood of his race, the ultimate point vehemently reached through the control of climax. Douglass 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, defined as 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 and establish ethos.

Frederick Douglass 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, Douglass establishes ethos, appealing to his credibility, character, education and experience by demonstrating the rhetorical devices of anamnesis, hypophora, isocolon and climax to overcome the discrediting prejudices of inferiority and inadequacy.

Works Cited

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