

Great speeches: How to know one if we hear one

October 12 2011

With the season for political oratory hard upon us, how does the rhetoric of this year's crop of presidential contenders measure up?

"So far none of the [Republicans](#) stands out as a great orator," said Sara Forsdyke, an associate professor of classical studies and history at the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science & the Arts (LSA).

"And while President Obama has delivered some great speeches in the past, his oratory has gone downhill recently. I was quite disappointed in his jobs [speech](#) to the joint session of Congress."

Forsdyke teaches a class called "Great Speeches Ancient and Modern" in which she reviews the principles of public speaking that have been handed down by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and applies these principles to modern as well as ancient speeches.

"The power of persuasive speech isn't really a matter of inborn charisma," she said. "People can learn the techniques of effective public speaking that have been used both by great orators of classical antiquity and by great modern speakers, from Winston Churchill to Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama."

Using the Greek philosopher Aristotle's book "On [Rhetoric](#)" as a guide, Forsdyke shows students how the construction of great speeches follows long-established techniques.

Among these:

1) Repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of clauses or sentences. The Greek term for this rhetorical device is anaphora and great verbal stylists across the ages have used it to emphasize key aspects of their language and key themes of their speech.

A perfect example of this is Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, Forsdyke says. Another example is Churchill's World War II "Miracle at Dunkirk" speech: "We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender."

2) Patterned word order. Called chiasmus in Greek, this technique involves ordering pairs of words so that the first half of the sentence is the mirror image of the second half.

"John F. Kennedy's inaugural address is a good example of how effective this technique can be," Forsdyke said. "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

3) Use of words derived from the same root in different grammatical ways. Called polyptoton in Greek, this device is often used to put emphasis on a particular word or theme.

In Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address, for example, it is used in what has become the speech's most memorable line: "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Forsdyke says that Obama uses this technique quite often, for instance in the line, "We can disagree without being disagreeable."

Using established rhetorical devices like these is important, but the construction of a speech is only part of what makes it great, Forsdyke says.

"When the great Athenian orator Demosthenes was asked to identify the three most important aspects of a great speech," she said, "he answered, 'Delivery, delivery, delivery.'"

Given the importance of delivery, Forsdyke ends her class by asking students to not only write but also deliver a speech of their own.

"Last year, the students were so enthusiastic, they asked to deliver their final speeches outside on the front steps of Angell Hall," she said. "This year's students seem pretty excited about the idea of doing that as well."

Provided by National Science Foundation

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