

***'The Great American Scaffold'. Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse, Frank Austermühl. 2014.***

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Seeking to understand identity as a dynamic and public phenomenon, the discursive approach has become in the past 25 years a focal point of interest in Pragmatics. Actually, there has been a radical shift of identity in general “from the 'private' realms of cognition and experience, to the 'public' realms of discourse and other semiotic systems of meaning-making” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 4).

Such a discursive perspective is embraced by Frank Austermühl 2014 in his metaphorically entitled research study: *'The Great American Scaffold' Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse*. Still, his theoretical framework is an interdisciplinary one, blending theories of intertextuality, discourse analysis, and presidential rhetoric. The focus of the research is to reveal the ways in which the combined discourse of American presidents achieves a significant role in shaping American culture and national identity, as well as answering two simple questions: “Who are we? Where do we belong?” (Huntington 2004: 12).

The book under review is divided into six chapters that guide the readers through the analysis. These are preceded by one page of acknowledgements, and followed by a bibliography, an appendix (comprising the speeches cited and the search clusters employed in the theme analysis in Chapter 3), and two exhaustive indexes: of name and subject. It starts from two premises and it is driven by the conviction that public discourse, especially when implemented by powerful political actors, creates “a window into the culture of a nation” (Austermühl 2014: 9). The first premise is represented by the interpretation of presidential discourse as a complex phenomenon, interconnected on a number of different textual levels, and implemented through specific forms of intertextuality. On the other hand, the second

one builds on the idea that presidential discourse matters, i.e., it exhibits a powerful pragmatic dimension, and represents a cultural phenomenon.

Observing the ‘paucity’ of previous research concerning the link between presidential discourse and American culture and identity, and responding to the call for an “expansion of scholarship on the presidency and national identity” (Henry et al. 2008: 350), Austermühl decides to emphasize the central role of political discourse in understanding some cultural phenomena, such as national identity. The novelty of his approach consists in using the concept of presidential intertextuality for defining national and cultural identities.

As far as the methodological approach is concerned, the study (re)presents “a historically and textually comprehensive analysis, both quantitative and qualitative” (Austermühl 2014: 41), based on a large corpus, comprising all inaugural addresses (55 speeches) and State of the Union messages (220 speeches), from George Washington to George W. Bush. This extensive corpus was supplemented by an additional contemporary one, including 18 major addresses on foreign and security policy from the past World – War – II era.

Based on his definition of the presidential discourse – “a complex intertextual phenomenon” (Austermühl 2014: 7) -, the author discusses in the first chapter of his book the intertextual connections between speeches of American presidents, precisely, stylistics parallels and quotations. This introductory chapter starts *ex abrupto*, with an observation on George W. Bush’s inaugural address and continues with a parallel analysis of Bush and Clinton’s speeches, in which the two political men invoke their predecessors, namely Reagan and Kennedy. It is only in the second part of this chapter that the author starts sharing the premises and aims of the book. In his opinion the term “scaffold” (from the title of the book) is used metaphorically to describe the presidential discourse (“a discursively erected cultural ‘scaffold’” (Austermühl 2014: 8)) as an edifice for the identity construction and affirmation. Then, we are told that the study of presidential discourse is carried out from an institutional perspective, i.e. the researcher considers that the American presidency *as a whole* represents the author of the analyzed speeches.

First of all, Austermühl describes this type of discourse within the paradigm of intertextuality, in order to emphasize the interconnectedness of presidential speeches as well as the restrictions imposed on the creation of new texts by previous productions of the institution of presidency. Furthermore, he provides an overview of the previous research carried on the rhetorical presidency, including Windt

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(1984), Medhurst (1996), Corwin (1987, 1957), Ceaser et al. (1981). He also presents the core theoretical framework of his approach, namely the theory of intertextuality (starting from Kristeva (1966), Hebel (1989), Pfister (1985), Genette (1982/1997)) in order to propose a typology that could be applied to the analysis of intertextuality in the discourse or in any other collection of texts.

The second chapter (“The voice of the nation” -The democratization of American presidential discourse) focuses on the study of pronouns “I” and “we” as a central part of discourse analysis. Through the use of these pronouns a reduction of the “discursive space” takes place and a special relationship is established between the president and the nation. The diachronic study (covering the inaugural addresses from 1789 to 2008) starts with the investigation of specific linguistic phenomena, such as *text*, *sentence* and *word length*, and then continues with some observations regarding the use of “type-token ratios” and the Flesh Reading Ease Index, as well as the use of active and passive voice. The quantitative analysis (supported by many diagrams) confirmed the assumption that the form “I” loses discursive ground against “we”, the collective pronoun being more and more frequently used. Despite this increase in use of the collective pronoun “we”, the presidential “I” is always “the only active element” (Auster Mühl 2014: 73), while the “we” umbrella concept covers administration, government, nation, but it is too fragmented and under the president’s dominant power. Basically, the American presidency has become “a single site where articulations of national identity consistently appear backed by sufficient social and political power to render those articulations as matters of custom and law” (Stuckey 2004: 10). This chapter ends with a presentation of eleven presidential genres that can be grouped into three macro structural categories: rhetoric of investiture, rhetorical acts representing interaction with Congress and rhetoric of divestiture (Campbell and Jamieson 1990). Auster Mühl summarizes and complements these three groups, focusing on functional aspects.

A presentation of the most prominent of presidential genres – the inaugural addresses – and its main generic features is the subject of the third chapter (“To declare to the world” –Inaugural addresses, eternal topoi, and American civil religion), the focus being on “thematic intertextuality”. This type of presidential speech is special because of its architextual properties, but also because it represents a major source of allusions and thematic intertextuality. After identifying the generic features of the inaugural addresses, the author describes its topoi, and he carries out an extensive content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, investigating 13 thematic categories out of 55 inaugural addresses. The aim of this analysis is to

identify the frequency and the intensity of the inaugural themes, and some of the results are the following: the frequency of the theme-related terms, namely *sites of memory*, *union* and *values*; the theme with the complete coverage is the *mission* theme; the theme with the highest intensity is the *values* theme.

Entitled “Freedom and fear are at war” - The making of an American hypotext, the fourth chapter approaches the phenomena of hypotextuality and hypertextuality in American presidential discourse, following Genette’s definition and classification. The term “evil” is taken as a core instrument, having a pragmatic function in the description of the Us-vs.-Them hypotext. This hypotext is believed to “provide speakers with a template for the negotiation of identities of selves and others, and for the justification of political actions in a context dominated by uncertainty and fear” (Austermühl 2014: 190). This section ends with a discussion on the pragmatic functions (organized on five pragmatic levels: the policy level, the institutional level, the personal level, the systemic level and the national level) that are closely connected to the presidential hypertextuality.

Chapter five (“In the words of...” - Sacred texts, lieux de memoire, and presidential allusions) is devoted to a description of the so-called *material intertextuality*, that is of quotations and allusions, which are considered to be intended and having a pragmatic dimension. After proposing a typology of allusions (previously described by Hebel (1991): *quotational allusions*, *titular allusions*, *onomastic allusions*, *pseudointertextual allusions*), the scholar describes their forms and functions, and then analyzes the occurrences of these forms in 15 presidential addresses given from 1949 to 2005. The final paragraph of this chapter describes the pragmatic functions of presidential allusions that are structural elements of presidential inaugural addresses. Among the identified functions, such as the aesthetic function, “interpretation and linkage” and “action stimulation” (Grabel 1985), the most important is the first one, because allusions are considered to “elevate the status of the speaker by placing him or her in the halo of the texts, places, or people alluded to” (Austermühl 2014: 265).

The final chapter, which also gives the name of the book – *The Great American Scaffold* – contains the concluding remarks on the extensive work of Austermühl’s team. They are confident to have reached their goals, proving that the speeches of American presidents represent indeed a cultural intertext, and that “a crucial factor in identity management is the ability of actors to perform in a way that convinces others of their identity” (Mullaney 1999: 269).

From my point of view, a general characteristic of the book is the fact that the argumentation is often refreshingly even-handed. One of the strong points of the study is represented by its interdisciplinary character, meaning that it combines approaches from political studies, presidential studies, communication, American studies, as well as discourse analysis and applied linguistics, the most important being the theories of intertextuality. The book gives a comprehensive account of all these theoretical frameworks using corpus data. Its numerous tables and figures are useful for explaining the main principle of the book, that is all presidential discourses – especially inaugural addresses – follow the same pattern. A further major asset is that most chapters not only paint a contemporary picture of the current state of discourse analysis, but also map future theoretical, methodological, and empirical directions. However, my critical evaluation of the study should also take into consideration a weakness: the overlook of the metaphors so often used in presidential discourses (the author himself using one of these in the title of his book) or of the speech writing process. The author claims that one of the reasons why he excluded speechwriting from this book/analysis is that the institution of presidency, and not individual office holders, is considered the author of the speeches. I think that especially for that reason he shouldn't have ignored the concept of authorship as it is a very important tool in achieving his goals.

Written in a clear academic style, with detailed reference lists and well-organized indexes of name and subject, *'The Great American Scaffold' Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse* is directed toward researchers and graduate students in the discipline of any of its main sub-fields and represents an important, useful, and valuable contribution to the literature.

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