Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union”

Context of the Speech
“A More Perfect Union” was given at one of the most decisive points of the 2008 Democratic Campaign.

- Obama was involved in a very close race with Hillary Clinton;
- He was being criticized in the press, in the democratic party, and among his electorate over statements made by
  - former vice-presidential candidate and Hillary Clinton supporter, Geraldine Ferraro, who had said “If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position”
  - his former pastor, Reverend Jeremy Wright, who had made statements accusing the US government of blatant racism and directly blaming US policies for the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

The mass media continuously replayed Wright’s angry comments, which were affecting Obama’s popularity. In such a climate the expectations for the speech were extremely high, especially since, for the first and only time in his campaign, Obama was directly addressing the issue of race. It was evident that this speech would frame the rest of his campaign and possibly decide the winner of the Democratic Primaries.

Another important part of the context of this speech is the strategic choice of venue: the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Both the city of Philadelphia and the Constitution Center are extremely important landmarks of American history. Moreover, as the home of the American Revolution and the US Constitution, upon which much of the speech is based, the location provided both a visual and a metaphorical link with the principles and ideals of US history, along with its original 13 colonies, its independence, its legal institutions, and its founding fathers.

Obama’s Discourse
Obama’s skilful use of speeches as a political tool has been widely noted, and on more than one occasion he confronted “serious political or policy problems with the Big Formal Speech”. Obama’s rhetoric, however, is clearly different from the model of traditional black leaders, such as Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King. Instead, his discourse practices can be likened to a new generation of black leader, which tends to exhibit more confidence and “sobriety than their white counterparts” (Bourdieu 1991, in Suleiman & O’Connell 2008: 387).

Obama’s discourse has been described as deracialized or post-racial. Rather than focusing solely on his African American identity, which in itself may be seen as a “construction”, Obama’s electoral campaign message highlighted his mixed background:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather … and a white grandmother …. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. www.barackobama.com

Media Reception
“A More Perfect Union” was generally well received in the press, a view exemplified by The New York Times: “It’s hard to imagine how he could have handled it better”. The non-partisan Pew Research think tank labelled the speech as “arguably the biggest event of the campaign” estimating that some 85% of Americans had heard “at least something” about the speech (‘Obama Speech on Race Arguably Biggest Event of Campaign’ 2008). Positive media descriptions are important for political success, since, now more than ever, political events (and actors) are mediated by the mass media, and their meanings are transferred between social practices, texts, and genres (Fairclough 2003: 30). This relationship is so strong as to be almost “symbiotic” (Wodak 2009a: 3).

The Obama campaign immediately grasped the importance of exploiting new media to distribute campaign materials to a more varied voting public. As with other speeches, “A More Perfect Union” was immediately made available online in a cleaner version than on television (Heffernan 2009). The influence of this medium is confirmed by the 10% of Americans, who viewed the speech online (‘Obama Speech on Race...’ 2008) and by the fact that the video has been played more than 6 million times on YouTube alone (see also Heffernan 2009).
Critical Discourse Analysis

In CDA language use is not only a product of society, but also that it is important force in (re)shaping social practices, both positively and negatively. Closely tied to this notion is how discursive practices “conceptualize” the power and dominance relations present in society and how they are related to “unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed in particular sociocultural contexts” (Fairclough 1995: 1). In other words, discourse is determined according to the roles of speakers and hearers in society and institutions (Chilton and Schäffner 2002: 31), which, in turn, provide a set of frames for people’s action in certain situations (Fairclough 1995: 38). Texts cannot be analyzed without considering institutional and discourse practices (Fairclough 1995: 9) because of this “dialectical relationship” between discourse acts and social practices (Wodak et al. 2009: 8). With its interest in power, dominance, social and institutional practice CDA naturally lends itself to the analysis of political discourse.

Identity, Ideology and Race

The notion of identity implies two possible parameters of comparison in interpersonal relations: ‘similarity’ and ‘difference’ (Wodak 2009a: 13). In other words, people identify themselves in terms of their similarities and differences to others. This is strongly tied to the predominant ideology, which “can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between … social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258). The way people talk about themselves and others, both positively and negatively, reflect deeply ingrained power relations, and the texts they produce can serve to sustain or change ideologies (Fairclough 2003: 9). In his description of social cognition Van Dijk speaks of “schemas” underlying the organization of representations and attitudes within society, such as those schemas that whites have about blacks or that men have about women (1993: 258). We can presume, then, that there is also a schema that blacks have about whites. Moreover, these schemas, like all discourse practices, are constantly changing to reflect new realities, as well as changing relations and power structures (Mazid 2007: 353).

In any analysis of political discourse the issues of identity and ideology are crucial to understanding the political actors, as their performance is defined and perceived according to social identity (Fairclough 2000: 95) and ideological group membership (Van Dijk 1998). However, this relationship is further complicated by the fact that a group ideology can also define a group identity (Van Dijk 1998: 118). Thus, a politician’s identity is influenced by the tension between the (often constructed) public office and the private (Fairclough 2000: 97), or tension between dominant and subordinate power positions. Furthermore, individual identity is dependent on both personal and social factors and “[p]art of our self-representation is inferred from the ways others … see, define and treat us” (Van Dijk 1998: 118). In the case of African American politicians, other factors come into play, to varying degrees, such as background, upbringing, education, racial identification, etc, which complicate the situation even more and create even more tension.

Recontextualization

Recontextualization is “the appropriation of elements of one social practice within another” (Fairclough 2003: 32): it is mostly seen as belonging to intertextuality or text-external referencing, when an argument is taken from one context and restated in a new one; in this way the object is first decontextualized and then recontextualized in its new context (Wodak 2008: 3). Wodak proposes a four-level “triangulatory approach” to context: (1) the text internal co-text; (2) the intertextual; (3) the extralinguistic; (4) and the broader sociopolitical and historical contexts (2001b: 67).

On a global level, we can observe recontextualization from one discourse, text or genre to another, in which a dominant text imports elements of another text for some strategic purpose (Chilton and Schäffner 2002: 17). On a local or surface level, recontextualization most often occurs lexically or syntactically, through rhetorical figures, semantic structures, etc. (Van Dijk 1993: 261). Lexically, recontextualization is achieved through substitution or repetition and resemanticization (see Wodak and De Cillia 2007; Van Dijk 1993) and can also be used to create metaphor and metonymy. More specifically, semantic relations can be highlighted or obscured in texts through substitution, exclusion, synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, etc. (Fairclough 2003).

Recontextualization also commonly occurs in pronominal use, which is closely tied to the notions of identity and ideology. Thus, pronouns can indicate (or obscure) collectivity and individuality (Fairclough 2003: 162), or they can be used for ‘self’ or ‘other’ referencing or as a way to polarize representations of ingroups and outgroups (Van Dijk 2001: 103; see also Suleiman and O’Connell 2008).
Barack Obama’s speech on race: March 18, 2008

“We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.” Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution – a Constitution that had at is very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part – through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk - to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign – to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together – unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.

Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate Flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans.

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either “too black” or “not black enough.” We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

And yet, it has only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

On one end of the spectrum, we’ve heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it’s based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we’ve heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary
language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.

I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy. For some, nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely – just as I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren’t simply controversial. They weren’t simply a religious leader’s effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country – a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

As such, Reverend Wright’s comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems – two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and YouTube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way.

But the truth is, that isn’t all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a U.S. Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God’s work here on Earth – by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Listen to the rest of the speech and take notes.