

**Политическа комуникация и реторика**  
**Political Communication and Rhetoric**

**A Political Communication Model of the Inaugural  
Address Speech of President-Elect Joseph R. Biden**

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Communication Context, Political  
Rhetoric and Argumentation**

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**Abstract:** A major feature of the analysis impacts the model of persuasion used in presidential inaugural address speech by creating powerful rhetorical techniques, emotional and visual messages, expressing feelings and ideas that bring people together around a national cause. President-elect-Joseph R. Biden was sworn as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of America in a particular communication situation – with no predecessor attending the inauguration ceremony, as a whole sparse crowd attendance because of coronavirus pandemic and under tight security after an unprecedented assault on the Capitol. The in-depth study of political rhetoric about crucial social “America United” main appeal considers the significance of the event supported by three former presidents, dozens of official representatives and several Hollywood celebrities. The 2021 inauguration ceremony was structured on three primary communication levels – the sample of prominent political speech in a historic moment, the flamboyance inauguration performances, and the unique virtual segment – a rare joint video, recorded by former presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama with delivering a message of “upholding democracy and staying civically engaged”. The hypothesis is that the verbal rhetoric of an inauguration address as well as visual and virtual performances and parades constitute nationhood, invoke the national spirit, and demonstrate a model of political communication of how to explain values in embarrassing and turbulent times.

**Keywords:** political communication, presidential inaugural speech address, genre features, rhetorical situation, rhetorical figures, political arguments.

**Introduction**

In the frame of this article, political communication as an instrument of the institutional discourse of the United States of America through the White House Office administration and the President -elect is characterized as an instrument of impact and influence, based on nation-wide national values. The presidential in-

inaugural address speech is considered as a model of political public speaking that indicates significant subject – the great and strong metaphor “America United”, structured by such communicative tactics as prominent historical acts, distinguished orators speech phrases, sacral symbolization, and the most important spiritual and political value of the American people – presidential orator’s directly pronounced message: ”we come together as one nation and similar rhetoric like “the cause of Democracy”, “America has been tested anew” and “the will of people has been heeded” and “democracy has prevailed”. On the material of the inaugural speech of Joseph R. Biden, delivered on January 20, 2021, political communication consolidates democracy as enduring because of the fact by this special political rhetoric the word “democracy” has been used more times than in any other inauguration speech in the U.S. history. As a model of political public speaking in the context of necessary political communication purposes, the very unique inaugural address speech topic in various ways expands persuasive impact to spur a change.

### **Method and Research Design**

The American Presidential Inaugural Address has always been arousing scholars’ great concern in the field of political communication and political rhetoric as it is delivered to the global public when the newly elected presidents make their government policy known with communicative functions of worldwide influence and long-lasting significance (Liu, 2012). [1]

Different approaches are used during the studies of political speeches and in particular inaugural address speeches. Some of the methodological approaches of scholars focus on linguistic pragmatics and meta-language terms as communicative strategy, communicative tactics, communicative move (Bacevich, 2004) [2], (Issers, 2008) [3] among others - emphasize the characteristics of formal political speech, restricted to the conventions embedded in official ceremonies (Trosborg, 2000) [4], (Campbell, K. K. & Jamieson, K.H., 2008). [5] In the article entitled “American Values as the Base of Political Communication” grounded on the same approaches, the author presents communicative strategy as the general plan of communication, subordinated to the practical goals of the speaker, and communicative tactics as a way of implementing communicative strategy” (Golubovska, 2019). [6] With the recent academic development, political speech and communication endowed in the model concept of an inaugural address are achieved using English political speaking characteristics and according to particular purpose within the text by Move – Structure Analysis of the Presidential Inaugural Speeches (Liu, 2012) [7], (Kyei, Emmanuel & Donkor, Naomi & Ap-

piah, Michael Kwame, 2020). [8] Frequently, academics in the field implicate the Genre Theory (Bhatia, 1993) [9], (Swales, 1990) to investigate the move and discourse structure of the presidential inaugural address speeches, delivered by the newly elected presidents in countries that celebrate the democratic process. Bulgarian scholar studies also examine political modes of discourse and official speech rhetoric – traditional and modern royal rhetoric as a part of theoretical rhetorical heritage (Mavrodieva, 2020) [10] and a comparative rhetorical analysis of royal speeches in a particular rhetoric situation (Kassabova, 2020). [11] The research design of the current study includes clarifying the politically complicated communication situation, rhetoric explanation of the persuasive strategy of the orator, and organized visual events of support for the start of the new presidential administration on diverse communication levels. The model of the 2021 inaugural address speech as a rhetoric situation of political public speaking was the act of sacred oath and swearing-in of the elected president, but actually through the ritual of transition between the citizenry and their leader’s ceremonial rhetoric provides understanding for the values and moral foundations of the nation. This study aims to reveal how a specific American model of political communication in times of divisible uncertainty has achieved unprecedented levels of audience involvement despite coronavirus circumstances.

### **Genre’s Feature of Speech**

The inaugural address is the speech delivered by the president-elect on the inauguration day. This speech is generally classified as a political speech. (Jegade, 2020). [12] It is assumed that the genre of the inaugural address imposes some restrictions and speech frameworks according to the rhetorical strategy purpose. The generic structure of the text as linguistic realization or communicative functions further entrench the pivotal effect of communication – to persuade the public to accept and support the new presidential leadership. As one of the most recognizable communicative events, regularly occurred in the period of four years, the inaugural address speech is structured and conventionalized as a genre also by communicative purposes as well as communication context based on factors like form, content, positioning, intended audience, political intentions, and functional value. In detail, it means that the speech- language should fulfill at least the following functions: to present a political opinion, to make people think of the speaker’s expressed viewpoints, and encourage them into action. As (Liu, 2012) [13] noted the communicative functions found in the genre of public speech could be revealed by a linguistic and rhetorical analysis approach as a deeper explanation of the relationship between the form and the function and

within the target text of the inaugural address the role of the move is emphasized. The basic unit for the analysis of the genre is “the move”. The same author pointed out “the move is the logic maneuver adopted by communicators in written or spoken discourse” (Liu, 2012, p. 2408). [14] The genre convention of the inaugural address in the characteristics of political speaking is also accentuated by the overwhelming power of logic eloquence, burst into an inspiring expressing force. From another research perspective, Kerstin Weber has defended a master thesis analyzing the genre of American presidential inaugural address by taking a look at the ancient rhetorical theory, finding out the peculiarities by generating a keyword list and rhetorical insight for the generic character of the inaugural address to be identified (Weber, 2011). [15]

### **Communication Context and Rhetorical Situation**

The inaugural address speeches mark the end of the election campaign and at the same time, the beginning of the new administration. As an academic researcher noted the inaugural address is not required by the constitution, but it has already become a tradition set by the first president-George Washington and since then it is made every four years by all the presidents before they take the office (Liu, 2012, p. 2409). [16] The transition of leadership change is celebrated ceremonially and through the symbolic act of inauguration, the newly elected leader declares traditional values, being reasserted in the political intention (Wang, 2010). [17] Generally, inaugural addresses attempt to persuade the citizens of the nation and the worldwide audience about the legitimacy of the new political power, to call for support, and to develop loyalty.

The communication context of the 2021 inaugural address speech is politically and socially complicated after the previous president’s four years of political divisiveness and provoked “raging fire” under global pandemic concerns. With the close of 2020 and at the beginning of 2021, America is still reeling from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, a national reckoning on racial justice, and the violent aftermath of a continuous presidential election. Throughout the unprecedented year past, the American presidential inaugural address speech set out to cover these news stories briefly with clarity and relief. There are two specific traits of the personal profile of the new presidential-elected couple (president and vice-president elected) that indicates orally and based on fact-checking methodology new levels to build trust – as he took the oath of the office in January, Mr. Biden has become the oldest person ever sworn as a president, as previously in November he turned 78. The question of his age in interviews during the presidential campaign is the

legitimate aspect of the communication context related to change as the new President presented himself as a “transition candidate” who would help nurture new Democratic talent (Diaz, 2021). [18]

The second unusual and extraordinary fact concerned the vice-president who is given communicative traits in a historical perspective - at another inaugural, brave women marched for the right to vote 108 years ago, but “...today, we mark the swearing-in of the first woman in American history elected to national office, Vice President Kamala Harris”. The political communication of the inauguration like no other also immersed in the unique historical moment as Obama and Harris ushered as the first African Americans to serve as president and vice president, respectively. Harris officially became the first female, the first Black, and the first South Asian vice president.

A deeper insight into the communication situation the inaugural will allow us to see the subject of stability and unity being brought into prominence. Three interrelated factors affect the current communication situation – pandemic restrictions and no large crowds and gatherings, heightened security concerns, the absence of the outgoing President, and, on the contrary, at the opening moment for the new presidency, Biden and Harris were joined by former Presidents and First Ladies Barack and Michelle Obama, George W. and Laura Bush, and Bill and Hillary Clinton. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the ceremony looked very different. This was the first inaugural address event that should have demonstrated a tradition, symbolizing the peaceful transfer of power, but wherein the incoming president surveys a group of uniformed members of the military. The communication context was different for other reasons as well. Rather than stage the traditional parade in D.C, the inauguration has been celebrated with a virtual parade. In addition, Biden’s inaugural committee has produced a 90-minute television special, called “Celebrating America”, to celebrate the new president’s swearing-in. As the official event featured celebrities, thus the “Celebrating America” TV special, hosted by Tom Hanks, featured performances from musicians and Hollywood actors who in many cases publicly declared no support or tolerance to the previous presidential administration policy. The main inaugural difference came from the decision of President Trump to leave the White House early and not to attend the ceremony – bypassing the protocol, he became the first living president to miss his successor’s inauguration since Andrew Johnson in 1869.

### **Structural Features of Inauguration Address**

The historic import of this inauguration should directly respond to the threats and crises facing the nation. In general, the analysis of the complexity of

the communication context is the key path to the nature and parameters of the political communication that the new presidency tried to enter. The President-elect should take the responsibility to communicate effectively the new policy identifying how the phenomenon of the inaugural event is reflected in the language (the rhetoric situation), in political-institutional discourse (official political support and transition in the Chief Office), and audience involvement (fellow Americans and people of the world). Because of all the unusual circumstances, the inaugural event has gained the communication opportunity to let the picture tell the story. Media convergence possibilities for the insightful coverage of different portions of the occasion ceremonies brought inclusive content for a global and multicultural audience, available via multiple avenues. From the media perspective coverage, the 2021 inaugural address is structured and oriented to adapt the communication situation from the obvious obstacles like a pandemic, social division and political opposition to inspirational rhetoric, visual and virtual integrated, and continuous ritual of celebration. The concept of the prevailed democracy emerged in a beautiful demonstration. The long-held tradition on the exact site, where Joe Biden should ask for unity, symbolizes the soul and the heart of the American nation. Despite undertaken restrictions, the inaugural address of Joe Biden is an example of a new model of political communication and a modern concept for traditional institutional celebration ceremonies. Insisting on a model of political communication that is derived from concrete communication context, the strategy has been successful because the inaugural ceremony transformed into media exposure of splendid verbal, visual, and virtual memorable moments. The 2021 inauguration ceremony was structured on three primary communication levels – on the one hand, the official parts of swearing-in and the political rhetoric speech at a historic moment, the flamboyance inauguration performances of the anthem, traditional song, and poetry, and on the other hand, programming segments of visual parades and celebrities expressed support via social media, and last but not least, the unique virtual segment – a rare joint video, recorded by former presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama with delivering a message of “upholding democracy and staying civically engaged”.

On the first communication level, concerning the rhetoric situation and the orator’s behavior, Joe Biden gave a speech in a calm, confident, and eternally optimistic style, with an invitation to civility, occasionally stuttered, seemed to be thinking over the strength of the right words. While Biden’s speech touched on numerous topics – unity, democracy, Covid-19, his political rhetoric became a strong voice in remarks about the media. Specifically, the 46<sup>th</sup> president of America called out the media companies that have enabled Trump over the past years,

as noted: “Recent weeks and months have taught us a painful lesson. There is truth and there are lies. Lies told for power and for profit”. This episode was emblematic in the process of first communication level as Biden directly pointed out the information crises plaguing American politics and society. In fact, the new president stated an assault on truth has been waged unlike anything seen in modern American politics: “We must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured”. Biden argued, at times forcefully, but in general he used his speech to offer hope.

The second communication level of inspiring by the inaugural address was the visual communication effect viewing waving flags of the American States and the celebrities guest showed their support – Lady Gaga performed a rendition of the national anthem, Jennifer Lopez crooned a mash-up of three beloved songs and a country star Garth Brooks performed a thematic song, too. The youngest person, who stole the show, was a 22-year-old poet Amanda Gorman in her talent to read a poem at the presidential inauguration.

On the third communication level, the staging portion of the inaugural ceremony was the global virtual effect of the parade and special programming, dedicated to the moment of the presidential transition. Biden’s presidential team has had nearly three months to plan the initiatives included in virtual celebrating of the official occasion – a virtual inaugural parade, hosted by Scandal star Tony Goldwyn, along with a rare appearance from former *Daly Show* host Jon Stewart and the inaugural special, hosted by Tom Hanks, to conclude the day’s events, featuring appearances from many popular talents. It was anticipated that the inaugural committee prepared in advance a first-ever curated livestream for young Americans before and during ceremonies, making informal appointments in the White House.

The unprecedented, good surprising portion and of great political importance was the recorded joint video of the three former presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama – another action of unusual virtual celebration. The free-flowing conversation among the three former presidents was recorded and planned to be aired in the last segment of Wednesday night’s prime-time programming. It is crucial to emphasize that this joint message had a useful supporting role in the new president’s call for national unity. Appearing side-by-side, the trio each wished a peaceful transfer of power, institutional integrity, and “to have more in common than what to separate us”. The three former presidents standing together in a joint video to honor the president-elect was one of the most notable moments on the inauguration day. The released video was a rare political reunion for a rare inauguration day address. The short communication initiative

of “ex-presidents club” was a summit declaration encouraging majesty of the passage of power and calling for unity in a constantly maintained political tone (Weinberg, 2021). [19]



*Figure № 1- A screenshot of a rare joint video of three former presidents – Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama Ask Americans to Work Together, NBC News*

Additional structural features of the inauguration day happened and were expanded through social media. Strong voices of honor and support were expressed by leading opinion-makers. Oprah Winfrey, Stephen King, and Hollywood stars celebrated the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. They have expressed themselves as Democrat supporters and applauded the show of unity as well. The actress Reese Witherspoon built up the social media communication situation alongside a picture of Ms. Harris with her sincere comment: “Such a powerful moment for women of this country to be represented in the highest office”. A similar statement was made by the TV mogul and famous young African-American ladies’ tutor Oprah Winfrey, defining the act of swearing-in of Kamala Harris as an extraordinary moment for women in the U.S. and the world. Having her distinguished role as a former First Lady, Michelle Obama expressed her views in political communication via social media: “We are entering the next chapter of American leadership with the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris”. She defined them as the kind of leaders the nation deserved – ready to put the needs of their nation before their own in contrast to the terrific examples of leadership, have left in the past.

## **Appeals, Arguments and Rhetorical Figures**

The great speech needs a unifying theme that is clearly pointed and plainly to be spoken. The theme of unity is the main subject and standpoint for powerful rhetorical figures to flourish in the speech structure. In the middle of the usual appeals of the inauguration address from “let us continue” to “let us continue anew”, typically communicated by the new presidents, it was a forgone that the newly sworn-in President Joseph R. Biden would speak of unity and democracy in his inaugural address speech. From the very beginning of his presidential campaign, these two themes were prioritized and logically transferred to the body of the most expected and watched speech. The call for national unity has been acknowledged in many other inauguration speeches, but in the case of the spoken situation, expressions of concern were presented: “We come together as one nation”, “Democracy has prevailed”, “My whole soul is in this” and current circumstances were described in phrases constructions – we have much to repair, much to restore, much to build, much to heal - and much to gain. The argument of the orator’s concern is structured in series of rhetoric figures – the metaphor noticed – “a winter of peril” and counting five following rhetoric figures of anaphora. An anaphoric iteration with a gradual increase in the degree embodied certain communicative intentions of the address.

The president-elect has been approved as a splendid orator during his chief officer tenure as a former vice president and longtime senator, substantially transmitted in media as he knows that words matter. Regardless of personal beliefs or political affiliations, every president distinguishes themselves by the words they chose for their inaugural address. As presidential rhetoric expert and professor of communication studies, Robert Rowland commented that “Joe Biden is well aware of the rhetorical norms for an effective inaugural address” and is expected to lay out “a clear, moderate/pragmatic liberal agenda” to emphasize the commonalities shared by Americans, rather than their differences (Hellman, 2021). [20] While the language used to convey the message into the linguistic style with many unique historical and social significant insights, the prominent orator imaginary portrayed that incoming administration would face the challenges of subsequent priorities. In the words of (Trosborg, 2000) [21], “it is neither the individual nor the situation that speaks, but the institution that does so. The president-elect Biden declared clearly at the beginning of the speech: “we celebrate the triumph, not of a candidate, but a cause, the cause of democracy” and pledged to the nation: “I will be a President for all Americans, all Americans. And I promise you, I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did”.

It is a seemingly predictable situation president Joe Biden predominantly addresses political issues as a rhetoric of hope. His calling for American unity is based on the understanding of the classical rhetoricians that there are three basic means of persuasion – rational, emotional, and ethical. The communication strategy was endowed in the orator’s behavior to be authentically recognizable common-man touch. The appeal to unity after crisis sounded like a real political priority as the country faced a devastating pandemic and need to be united and mourning together more than 400 000 Americans who have died of a terrible virus, more than died in the military in World War II. The America United metaphor seemed to be the only possible and necessary political suggestion and rhetoric argument against inconsistencies resulted in huge job losses and business closures, urgent cries for racial justice. The rhetoric figure illustrated the optimal choice for the nation to feel again “hope, renewal, and resolve” and that was the challenge the new presidential administration needed to face and express to the citizenry. In comparison with the unity appeal, known and usually used political public speaking, the newer theme appeared to make the argumentation stronger – the invocation of truth as the foundation of unity. As the reason has been utterly declared: never truth has been more necessary, or more endangered.

In a 20-minutes long speech, President Biden has spoken nearly 800 words than his predecessor in a style of slightly shorter sentences and minimal use of adjectives registered. The word “democracy” has had special rhetoric meaning and constructive significance in the speech exposure. The speech framework of the inaugural address started and ended with democracy. It was also a rhetoric characteristic of his speech that President Biden used the word “democracy” more times than any other inaugural speech in U.S. history – exactly 11 times in comparison with the other presidents in the past – Harry Truman, who said “Democracy” nine times in his 1949 address, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who did the same during his third swearing-in ceremony in 1941 (Rattner, 2021). [22]

### **Conclusion**

On national grounds, the political communication on the day of the 2021 inauguration address in each ceremony step taken showed the massive amount of responsibility on the president’s shoulder to get the country and nation back on track. As political rhetoric, the communication model of the inaugural address speech of Joseph R. Biden historically turned the page from Trump’s era of “America first” to the American United Democratic Nation on the world stage. In the end, as Fox News contributor Donna Brazile summed up the inauguration media coverage in one common and historic feature: Biden’s speech was “a call

for unity. This is not a call simply for the moment. It is a call for the ages” (Jones, 2021).[23]

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*Manuscript was submitted: 16.06.2021.*

*Double Blind Peer Reviews: from 17.06.2021 till 25.06.2021.*

*Accepted: 26.06.2021.*

Брой 48 на сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, юли 2021 г. се издава с финансовата помощ на Фонд научни изследвания, договор № КП-06-НП2/41 от 07 декември 2020 г.

Issue 48 of the Rhetoric and Communications Journal (July 2021) is published with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund, Contract No. KP-06-NP2/41 of December 07, 2020.