

THE RHETORIC OF HOPE: BARACK OBAMA'S PROMISES THROUGHOUT THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESSES

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Abstract

The present article looks into the way in which former US President Barack Obama capitalizes on the emotional resources of the rhetoric of hope, making use of promises in the State of the Union Addresses in order to win over the audience or, as the case may be, to reinforce his legitimacy and enhance the credibility of his political persona. The research sheds light on the role promises play in political communication, on the way in which they have become an inherent part of a politician's permanent campaigning, that is, campaigning that goes beyond electoral purposes and aims to put forward and consolidate a specific, long-lasting public image. The corpus consists of the State of the Union Addresses Obama delivered throughout his two terms of office, and our main goal is to identify how the speaker resorts to making promises both for electoral purposes, and to adequately respond to the public's expectations. Thus, promises not only help lay out the prospect of a brighter future, they also contribute to shaping a political agenda in line with the requirements of the audience.

Keywords: promise, commitment, values, mitigation, intention

1. Introductory remarks

In the present article, we are looking into Barack Obama's *State of the Union* Addresses delivered between 2010 and 2016, throughout his two terms of office, attempting to shed light on the way in which he resorts to promising as a means to enhance his political credibility, maintain popular support and strengthen his bond with the audience, by showcasing his dedication to the country's welfare and encouraging everyone's participation in political life.

Barack Obama is undoubtedly one of the greatest American presidential orators; his speaking has been termed "electric", "inspirational" and "soaring" (Leeman, 2012: 21). His outstanding rhetorical skills contribute to building up his public image as a "singular embodiment of a leadership style, personal temperament and political persona premised on a unique ability to (...) resolve difficult domestic and international issues by applying his sophisticated, reasoned, and reasonable understanding to them." (Renhson, 2012: 36).

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Nowhere is Obama's rhetorical prowess more obvious than in the *State of the Union* Addresses, a form of political communication that has deep roots in American history and tradition (the first "Annual Message" was delivered to Congress in 1790 by George Washington; subsequently, over the centuries, the discourse underwent a number of changes, acquiring the official name it has today in 1945); to this day, *State of the Union* Addresses, delivered to Congress on a yearly basis, represent the backbone of presidential communication in the USA, and their message to the public serves a number of important goals.

While the immediate purpose of these speeches is to report on the condition of the US both domestically and internationally, to recommend a legislative agenda for the coming year and to give the president the opportunity to impart his vision for the nation, thus presenting both a summary of the previous year's achievements and a preview of the administration's plans for the next, at a deeper level, they serve to establish a powerful bond between rhetor and audience, boosting the former's credibility and enhancing the latter's support and confidence. They increase the social and political participation of the public, while for the political actor, they represent a way of accounting for the past year and making a pledge for the future. *State of the Union* Addresses cover a wide range of topics of interest to the public, including both domestic issues (such as combating unemployment, education, taxation, health coverage, energy and the environment etc.) and foreign policy issues, that revolve mainly around the idea of American supremacy in the world.

State of the Union Addresses target an emotional response more than they do a rational one, in that, while they refer to the incumbent president's past achievements as well as to his future intentions and plans, they also bear significant contribution to building the orator's public image; therefore, he capitalizes on this institutional opportunity to make sure his authority in the public eye is consolidated, while consent and endorsement persist. "(...) By describing past achievements in detail, by making promises and explaining future policies, the sitting president aims to steer public opinion in his direction while making sure the citizens are on his side. It is not only a matter of persuasion, it is also a matter of control." (Enache, 2017: 27). Amongst the wide array of strategies employed to persuade and seduce the audience, *promises* play a paramount role: they lay before the recipients' eyes the enticing prospect of a better, brighter future, thus tapping into their infinite emotional resources of hope.

2. The importance of promising in political communication

Promises represent the backbone of political communication, the structure around which everything else is built. Generally speaking, they tend to respond to a state of expectation from the audience – especially so in the *State of the Union*

Addresses, where the administration's intentions for the future represent a strong priority. This state of expectation is met with a proposition that allows the audience to overcome their suspense and envisage a concrete future forecast – an outline of the things that can be reasonably expected from the speaker. Promising represents an impactful communication tool, as on its trustworthiness depend the speaker's image as well as their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

In the political world, it takes time to fulfil a promise; even if not eventually met, a promise not delivered on does not prove the speaker's intention to deceive or lie or gain votes at all costs, irrespective of their intentions. A promise not met in no way reflects the initiator's ill faith or their intention to mislead the audience, since there are many considerations involved in carrying out one's plans. However, the speaker's credibility dwindles in the long run, and broken promises contribute to the decrease in the level of trust people have in politicians who have failed them.

As far as promises are concerned, there are several factors involved – on the one hand, the longer the incumbent president has been in office, the more difficult it becomes for them to make a promise – since the more they have been in office, the more they ought to have accomplished already – in this respect, the years of holding power become a disadvantage. On the other hand, if more years in office translate into palpable achievements, these bestow legitimacy upon the speaker; in light of past achievements, future-oriented promises tend to become more credible. Promising plays on the audience's feelings of hope, a positive emotion, thus casting themselves as a powerful instrument of positive campaigning (campaigning reliant on highlighting the speaker's merits), unlike explicit or implied threats, which tap into the negative emotion of fear, thus falling under the scope of negative campaigning (campaigning built around tarnishing the opponents).

From an emotional point of view, promises spawn a state of suspense from the audience, (Enache & Militaru, 2013: 41-45), who are steered towards expecting an answer or a solution; therefore, the value of that answer increases, as it is seen as the long-awaited fulfilment of an already existing need, rather than an extraneous, expendable addition designed by the rhetor in order to gain votes. Thus, the promise becomes part of an emotional crescendo, of a spiral of hope aiming to project the vision of a better, brighter, desirable future.

3. Barack Obama's rhetoric of hope as reflected in his promises

Generally speaking, Barack Obama's discourse revolves around a "rhetoric of social mobility based on merit" (Ferrara, 2013: 15); thus, meritocracy lies at the core of his political creed. In his view, which falls into line with the American belief that merit (involving skills as well as effort) results in personal success, fulfilment is not a given, nor should it be taken for granted; it depends on the

individual, on their efforts, commitment and resilience, to move up the social ladder and attain wealth, prosperity and happiness. (Enache, 2017: 97-100). “At the heart of his political rhetoric are values (...) including work, discipline, temperance, self-reliance, duty, fairness, and compassion towards those less fortunate in our communities.” (Ferrara, 2013: 15). It is one’s own merit that leads to social amelioration, to a better condition; in this respect, the act of promising lays out a set of favourable circumstances that will enable the individual to grow, to attain welfare and success. Promising becomes inherently related to *hope*, capitalizing on the clash between the ideal and the actual, between the present *status quo* and a better future; one must strive to overcome the actual and achieve the ideal through one’s own personal value, abilities and effort. Hard work (the individual’s input) and opportunity (provided by what the promises deliver) intertwine, ensuring one’s rise from a low social position to success. Obama’s rhetoric dwells on features essential to the American narrative, putting forth an optimistic, forward-looking, reward-oriented, progressive approach. “The effectiveness of Barack Obama’s rhetoric of hope has a lot to do with the fact that it taps into central features of the American narrative, particularly those that are forward-looking and progressive”, shaping the audience’s view of the world into “a unique form of optimistic idealism.” (Ferrara, 2013: 17)

3.1 *The firm promise: conveying a commitment*

In political communication, explicit promises appear when the speaker is to a large extent certain that they will be able to carry out the desired actions as they have been thought out. Firm promises imply a great risk for the orator’s face. The issues addressed firmly tend to be best remembered by the audience, even more so when they are accompanied by specific facts and figures. They provide no loophole, no way out, no extraneous factors to blame if things go awry; if these promises are not met, face loss for the initiator is huge. Hence, in recent years, political speakers have become more wary of these promises, while mitigation is on the rise, as we will show in section 2.2 of our paper; still, when they do express a firm commitment, there is a twofold advantage attached: on the one hand, the message is more impactful, its persuasive force increasing; on the other hand, a firm promise bestows powerful legitimacy upon the orator, casting them as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Generally speaking, firm promises are more commonly used by political speakers who wield power, one way or another, as they have access to information more easily than representatives of the opposition; moreover, “the way in which information is presented, or indeed how much information is imparted, can suggest how legitimately power is exercised” (Lilleker, 2006: 103).

Throughout his *State of the Union* addresses, as in most of his public speeches, Barack Obama puts forward “a narrative persona that embodies a set of beliefs encoded in a system of cultural values” (Ferrara, 2013:110). In this respect, promising becomes illustrative of the Americans’ pursuit of continual betterment,

of capitalizing on opportunity and aspiring for a more fulfilling future rather than settling on an unsatisfactory status quo. Promising opens up the emotional resources of hope, it narrows the gap between the beauty of the ideal and a possibly grim reality, spawning a strong bond between the initiator and its recipients, a bond based on mutual trust and expectations: the audience expects the rhetor to deliver, while the rhetor expects to count on the audience's support in the future as well.

The 2010 State of the Union Address is replete with promises:

Ex. 1. "We will double our exports over the next five years, an increase that will support two million jobs in America." (2010)²

Ex. 2. "But realizing those benefits also means enforcing those agreements so our trading partners play by the rules. And that's why we'll continue to shape a Doha trade agreement that opens global markets, and why we will strengthen our trade relations in Asia and with key partners like South Korea and Panama and Columbia." (2010)

Both promises above refer to concrete economic measures to be taken, as economic topics are extremely important in the Addresses. While in the first case, Obama addresses the issue of exports (an undertaking that will likely generate new jobs and lead to economic growth) in a neutral, detached way, in the second case trade is envisioned as a fundamentally *competitive* task. In the lines preceding example (2), the speaker has specified that markets must be sought *aggressively*, so trade is seen as a pro-active, painstaking activity rather than something that just happens in the normal course of events. What is more, in the speaker's view, trade agreements must be *enforced* on partners – the verb functions as a linguistic reminder of American supremacy and of the country's role as a leader in all the international organisms it joins; trade relations are viewed as a partnership where the US plays the foremost role. In other words, although ideally, trade is supposed to be a level-playing field kind of activity, where all parties stand to gain and all citizens benefit, the extract in example (2) reveals the American perspective on international agreements – inherently, they perceive it as an asymmetrical negotiation whereby they are, by default, in a position of power. In fact, as *State of the Union* addresses respond to the public's agenda and expectations, perhaps more so than any other instances of political communication in the US, we could doubtless state that this is not solely Obama's outlook on things, but a general, commonly accepted one.

Sometimes, the political promise plays a more complex role, as the speaker aims to lead by example, and the promise has a prescriptive function (establishing a rule or a norm), while also casting itself as an incentive for the others to follow suit:

² The full transcript of the 2010 State of the Union address can be accessed at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/01/obamas-state-of-the-union-address-032111>, viewed on September 12, 2019.

Ex. 3. “(a) *But I also know this problem is not going away.*
 (b) *By the time I’m finished speaking tonight, more Americans will have lost their health insurance. Millions will lose it this year. Our deficit will grow. Premiums will go up. Patients will be denied the care they need. Small business owners will continue to drop coverage altogether.*
 (c) *I will not walk away from these Americans,*
 (d) *and neither should the people in this Chamber.*” (2010)

Conceptually, the extract above can be divided into four main ideas: in paragraph (a), Obama reminds his audience of the challenge he is facing, the problems with the health care system – this spawns a state of suspense and expectation from the listeners, while also generating fear – a powerful negative emotion trigger. The speaker thus plays on the *fear vs. hope* dichotomy, one that taps into the resources of the Manichean nature of political discourse – the audience is forced to choose between adherence to the speaker’s ideas and rejection thereof. (Enache & Militaru, 2013: 46-47). Paragraph (b) displays a series of negative promises, which closely resemble threats, especially since promises and threats have many features in common from a linguistic point of view – while a promise represents a pledge to do something *for* you, a threat represents a pledge to do something *to* you (Searle, 1969:58). Still, in the situation above, we are not looking at actual threats, as strictly speaking, the speaker does not undertake to carry out the negative actions himself. By contrast, he is merely presenting a state of affairs that is likely to ensue, unless his administration gains the support of Congress, as can be seen from the full transcript of the 2010 State of the Union Address. By highlighting these extremely undesirable possibilities, Obama implies that supporting his plan is the only reasonable solution as well as the obvious moral choice. In paragraph (c) the actual promise is delivered: it is a promise to support the citizens threatened by the prospects in paragraph (b). The promise is vague at the moment, due to physical constraints; however, reference to the health care plan appears in the next paragraph. Finally, in paragraph (d) we have the discursive climax, its prescriptive function: just as he *will not walk away* from those at risk, neither should Congress, as they are *the people in this chamber*. Hence, the construct above has served the purpose of a recommendation, attempting to morally compel Congress to endorse the policies proposed. The extract plays on the listeners’ emotions, more specifically on fear against hope, emotions triggered by reference to health insurance, an issue of crucial importance for all Americans.

Ex. 4. “*And that’s why my plan will make quality childcare more available and more affordable for every middle-class and low-income family with young children in America – by creating more slots and a new tax cut of up to \$3,000 per child, per year.*” (2015)³

³ The full transcript of the 2015 State of the Union Address can be accessed at <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/20/politics/state-of-the-union-2015-transcript-full-text/index.html>, viewed on September 12, 2019.

In the extract above, the speaker makes a concrete promise related to health care for children – a highly emotional topic. By indicating concrete numbers, the speaker gains credibility, he appears to know exactly what he is referring to and is likely to obtain the audience's trust and support. The extract is also populist, in that Obama refers not only to middle class families, but also to low-income families who raise children; furthermore, he mentions tax cuts for children; all of the above make him a sympathetic politician, attentive to the needs of the many and willing to restore social justice and lower the income divide.

Generally speaking, tackling the issue of socially vulnerable categories (such as women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities etc.) is commonly used in political communication in order to raise an emotional response from the audience. Thus, the actual information conveyed, albeit important, falls second to the feeling-oriented current raised, skilfully crafting a message whose impact derives from appeals to reason and emotion combined. "(...) Political communication needs to accentuate the humanity of political leaders, their emotions need to be laid bare in order that we identify with them, and they need to express themselves in a way that enforces recognition that they share common emotional experiences with their audience." (Lilleker, 2006: 80) The emotional appeal enhances the effectiveness of the message – although audiences respond to a subtle mix of rational and emotional factors, voting preferences and subsequent support depend more on affective reactions to politicians rather than on gauging their ideological positions. (Marcus, 2001: 195-232). In other words, emotion is more impactful than reason, and also functions to enhance the power of a message.

Ex. 5. "Let's do more to help Americans save for retirement. Today, most workers don't have a pension. A Social Security check often isn't enough on its own. And while the stock market has doubled over the last five years, that doesn't help folks who don't have 401ks. That's why, tomorrow, I will direct the Treasury to create a new way for working Americans to start their own retirement savings: MyRA. It's a new savings bond that encourages folks to build a nest egg. MyRA guarantees a decent return with no risk of losing what you put in." (2014)⁴

In example (5), the state of expectation of the audience translates into the rhetor mentioning a certain need of theirs; in most cases, there is a need spawning this state of expectation, a need expressing the social demands of one or several categories from the public. Hence, Obama starts by a plea – addressed to Congress, as the following paragraphs show -, a plea where the keyword is uttered – *retirement*. As in the previous extract, the impact of this word is strong, since it

⁴ The full transcript of the 2014 State of the Union Address can be accessed at: <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/01/politics/sotu-speech-transcript/index.html>, viewed on September 4, 2019.

refers to elderly, vulnerable citizens. After the targeted emotional response has been aroused, the speaker puts forward the actual information, in concrete terms – most workers don't have a pension. Against the established background of emotion and the audience's anticipation, the solution arises – the new savings bond which is explained in a few words. Two main features characterize the new retirement savings account: the decent return, and the absence of the risk of losing your money – thus, sufficiency and security become the two pillars around which the promise of a much-needed, popular social measure emerges, a measure that will likely appeal to elderly, risk-averse citizens.

Ex. 6. "(...) I will keep pushing for progress on the work that I believe still needs to be done. Fixing a broken immigration system. Protecting our kids from gun violence. Equal pay for equal work. Paid leave. Raising the minimum wage. All these things still matter to hard-working families. They're still the right thing to do. And I won't let up until they get done." (2016)⁵

The extract above is taken from Obama's last *State of the Union* Address, the one delivered in 2016, when he was approaching the end of his second term of office. We are witnessing a quintessence of his past achievements as well as a summary of his hopes for the future. In example (6), there is on the one hand a promise, vague in nature, therefore presenting fewer risks for the speaker's face – as has been said before, in the case of vague promises, which tend to be more easily forgotten by their recipients, face loss is smaller if the orator fails to deliver; the vague promise is enlarged upon by the speaker as he specifies what the domains are that need more work: the immigration system, one of his constant priorities, protection against gun violence (therefore, domestic security), equal pay for equal work (mainly, justice for women), economic policies like paid leave and raising the minimum wage – finally, all of the above are presented as important issues for *hard-working families* – representatives of the middle class, main supporters of the Obama administration. Also, reference to families always bears a strong emotional impact. The then sitting president's promise is, in fact, extremely vague – his commitment does not highlight any specific future course of action; yet, the entire extract aims for a passionate reaction, due both to the variety of subjects covered, and to the president's explicitly stated pledge to keep fighting for what he believes is right even beyond the boundaries of his mandates.

"Barack Obama's rhetoric of hope therefore has utopian propensities. To be utopian means to look at the world (...) and to imagine a better place. It means enduring discontentment with the status quo and holding fast to a stubborn impatience for a new day." (Ferrara, 2013:7). As Obama frequently speaks "the

⁵ The full transcript of the 2016 State of the Union Address can be accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/us/politics/obama-2016-sotu-transcript.html>, viewed on September 12, 2019.

language of values” (Leeman, 2012: 68), as he approaches the end of his second term of office and he prepares to withdraw from centre-stage political life, he is ever freer to move into the abstract realm and project before the audience the prospect of a better future – part of the political game, a game where he has doubtless delivered his fair share of work and can now step down with dignity, continuing to strive, but from a lesser position.

Sometimes, promises serve a more complex function, taking the form of an invitation to work together towards the desired end:

Ex. 7. “Now, clean energy breakthroughs will only translate into clean energy jobs if businesses know there will be a market for what they’re selling. So tonight, I challenge you to join me in setting a new goal: by 2035, 80% of America’s electricity will come from clean energy sources. Some folks want wind and solar. Others want nuclear, clean coal, and natural gas. To meet this goal, we will need them all – and I urge Democrats and Republicans to work together to make it happen.” (2011)⁶

The first thing the speaker puts forward in the excerpt above is a *condition*: if *x*, then *y*. The fiscal facilities Obama says should be given to clean energy companies are useless unless backed up by solid knowledge that there is demand available. Next, there is the promise, which comes as both a commitment and a challenge, thus translating into a second condition: the promise will only be fulfilled if both parties involved do what they have to do. The promise is in this case a common undertaking, requiring the cooperation of two parties: the speaker on the one hand, and Congress on the other. There are numerous occasions where Obama pleads for support from Congress as a condition for a goal to be achieved. It is not enough for the speaker to deliver on the promise he has made, other extraneous factors also play a part. In section 2.2 of our research, we will provide a more in-depth approach to conditional promises and their role in political communication.

Sometimes, reference to a past promise which has been fulfilled bestows increased legitimacy upon the speaker.

Ex. 8. “Two years ago, I set a goal of doubling US exports over five years. With the bipartisan trade agreements we signed into law, we’re on track to meet that goal ahead of schedule.” (2012)⁷

⁶ The full transcript of the 2011 State of the Union Address can be accessed at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address> viewed on May 10, 2020.

⁷ The full transcript of the 2012 State of the Union address can be accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/us/politics/state-of-the-union-2012->

Out of all the seven State of the Union Addresses Obama held throughout his two terms of office, the one delivered in 2012 is by far the most electoral. At the end of his first term of office and aiming for the second, the speaker finds himself compelled not only to project a good image of his own persona before the electorate, but also to convince them to cast the ballot in his favour once again. Hence, attempts to persuade the audience skyrocket and we can see an increased need to highlight past achievements up to the point of referring to every single detail. The speaker reminds the audience of a promise made two years before, then takes credit for having turned the agreement into law, without omitting to recognize the merits of the opposing political faction as well (“a bipartisan trade agreement”). Acknowledgement of the merits of the opposition allow him to appear fair and unbiased in his views, boosting the credibility of his assessments. Finally, he does not fail to emphasise that not only has he delivered on what he promised, but the promise will be met ahead of schedule.

3.2 Mitigated promises

Promises involve a high degree of commitment from the initiator and significant political consequences if they are not met. These consequences vary depending on the situation – if elections are approaching and the speaker intends to run, the impact is direct, translating into loss of votes. If no electoral stakes are currently at play and promising merely functions as part of the political actor’s *permanent campaigning*, their constant struggle to build and maintain popular support throughout their term of office (Lilleker, 2006: 143), their image still suffers through loss of credibility, criticism they might face and future loss of public support.

There are two main ways in which a speaker can loosen their commitment, ensuring a loophole in case things do not go as planned and they find themselves unable to deliver on the promise. The most popular strategies are *expressing an intention* (thus, the speaker turns certainty into possibility, since the firm pledge has been replaced by an intention), and highlighting the existence of a *condition* – in other words, the initiator’s delivering on the promise depends not only on their actions, but also on other extraneous factors, and contingencies must be taken into account. In both cases, the rhetor aims to soften the inherently binding nature of the promise, salvaging their image if the situation goes awry.

3.2.1 Expressing an intention

Promises can appear in a milder form, a mitigated form, in those cases where the speaker is uncertain they will be able to carry out their undertakings. Since a promise is a form of commitment, a politician risks losing face if they are unable to deliver as planned, to respond to the expectations their very promise has created. Also, it is often the case that the fulfilment of a promise does not depend on the speaker alone, since there are other factors to consider and other political forces involved. A mitigation, therefore, is a strategy whereby a political actor turns a promise into an intention; thus, if things go wrong, they avoid losing face and popular support. "Political speakers have to guard against the operation of their audience's "cheater detectors" and provide guarantees for the truth of their sayings." (Chilton, 2006: 23). A promise is an unwritten contract, while the orator's public image in many cases stands as a guarantee. If the promise is not met, the guarantee is lost and the damage done, impossible to assess. Thus, the strategy of mitigation appears as a buffer, a precautionary measure taken by realistic political actors in situations they do not fully control. Mitigation lowers the expectations of the audience, reminding them that perfection is impossible to attain in the real world and turning the ideal goal into a real, attainable one. Though mitigated promises flourish during elections campaigns, it is not unusual for them to appear in other forms of political communication as well. The *State of the Union Addresses* are no exception.

Expressing an intention rather than a firm pledge is usually achieved by means of verbs such as *try*, *intend*, *plan* etc., which turn the *commitment* into an *intention*, taking a huge burden off the speaker's shoulders. Briefly speaking, mitigation is a means for political actors to express caution rather than certainty about their future undertakings. The more political experience one has, the more reluctant one is to commit head-on to a future course of events depending on many extraneous factors going beyond one's good intentions.

Ex. 9. "I intend to protect a free and open Internet, extend its reach to every classroom, and every community – and help folks build the fastest networks so that the next generation of digital innovators and entrepreneurs have the platform to keep reshaping our world." (2015)

It is easy to see why Obama chooses to make use of the strategy of mitigation in the extract above. Extending internet access to every classroom is a local measure the implementation of which depends on many factors and many people aside from the person making a decision at the top. Moreover, we do not know if the infrastructure is available for this undertaking, nor can we be sure to what extent the speaker is familiar with all the details. Hence, the orator limits himself to declaring his intentions rather than making a clear – cut promise. The final

sentence of the extract also alludes to the place of the USA as the world hegemon, to the moral impact and responsibility of its standing; in light of this perspective, it becomes a national duty to be the world's chief innovator, lagging behind is not allowed, and the role of world leader is passed on to the future generations.

Ex. 10. "This year I plan to lift up the many businesses who've figured out that doing right by their workers or their customers of their communities ends up being good for their shareholders. And I want to spread those best practices across America. That's part of a brighter future." (2016)

We can see, in the example above, a promise that is mitigated by the use of the verb *plan*. In the first sentence, the speaker implicitly praises those companies that prove an ethical approach to doing business: by invoking *employees* (workers), *customers*, *communities* and *shareholders* equally, Obama in fact refers to the more complex category of *stakeholders* (primary and secondary), namely those groups of people without whose support the organisation would cease to exist, parties who have an interest to see a company is profitable. Indeed, while employees, customers and shareholders are considered to be *primary stakeholders* (they participate directly in operations of economic exchange with the company), communities at large are considered *secondary stakeholders* (even if they do not participate in direct economic transactions with the company, they can nonetheless be affected by the company's activities). Obama seizes the opportunity to present the mutual interdependence of these categories as a sign of an ethical approach to business – an approach where the accepted view is that profits are not the only thing that matters, where long-term interests override short-term profits and companies are willing to give something back to society – in other words, the speaker indirectly refers to the notion of *corporate social responsibility* – his promise is addressed specifically to businesses complying with these standards. In fact, the promise is vague in nature – we cannot understand exactly how the speaker is to *lift up* these businesses, nor can we grasp how he plans to *spread those best practices across America*. As has been said before, vague promises carry important advantages – if a speaker fails to keep such a promise, they will lose face to a lesser degree than if the promise had been concrete, putting forward explicit policies and plans – vague promises are barely remembered, their effect is mainly emotional as they serve to express a speaker's open support of a cause rather than their intention to carry out a specific plan. Therefore, vague promises that a speaker fails to meet are more easily forgiven by an already supporting audience; all the more so in this case, where the sitting president is approaching the end of his second term of office, he has nothing to lose from an electoral perspective, and this final address serves the prime purpose of establishing public perception of the Obama administration as a time of successful governance, replete with achievement and triumph. To maximize the emotional effect, at the end of the paragraph the speaker also plays the "brighter future" card – optimism and confidence are compulsory in this type of political communication.

3.2.2 Conditional promises

Conditional promises represent another instance of mitigated promises - in this situation as well, the speaker does not fully commit to a future course of events, leaving room for the possibility that the promised state will not be attained. However, unlike in the case of mitigated promises, where the loophole makes room for unpredictable contingencies, in the case of conditional promises, there is a specific condition attached to the promise, a condition that must be fulfilled for the promise to also be fulfilled. In other words, conditional promises lay out a better-defined future trajectory, where delivery depends upon one very specific factor.

Ex. 11. "Of course, the easiest way to save money is to waste less energy. So here's a proposal: Help manufacturers eliminate energy waste in their factories and give businesses incentives to upgrade their buildings. Their energy bills will be \$100 billion lower over the next decade, and America will have less pollution, more manufacturing, more jobs for construction workers who need them. Send me a bill that creates these jobs." (2012)

In the above, two conditions are in place for less energy to be wasted, leading to saving money. Firstly, manufacturers must be helped to decrease energy waste in their factories. Secondly, incentives must be given to businesses to modernize buildings. If these measures are implemented by legislation, this will result in a decrease in energy bills, with long-term positive environmental and economic consequences. The necessary condition, however, requires the support of Congress, so the extract above can be interpreted as a plea for support, while the speaker's promise is implicit.

The condition can also be implicit:

Ex. 12. "(...) America does not stand still – and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that's what I'm going to do." (2014)

In example (12), Obama explicitly commits to doing everything in his power to strengthen the middle class and enable other people's access to the middle class, the social category he feels closest to and he makes most promises to. However, in terms of economic policies, not much can be implemented without Congressional support – hence, the condition emerges. It is not visible at the grammatical level, as there is no conditional clause in the extract above. However, the orator does say that he will do everything he can without legislation – an idea which, alongside the rest of the paragraph, conveys the message that the scope of his actions is confined by the very limitations of the presidential prerogatives. The promise emerges as an *intention* to take action, whose results are limited by factors extraneous to the

speaker. Thus, he commits to the intention more than he commits to the concrete actions or to the result, which is in itself uncertain.

4. Concluding remarks

Promising represents a strategy of utmost importance in political communication, where it has turned into a ritual; its scope has broadened from the strictly electoral one, to that of an all-encompassing endeavour aiming to boost the political actor's image, enhance their legitimacy and ensure the trust and support of the public in the medium and long term. Promising is a powerful persuasive tool; it goes without saying that, the longer the political career that lies ahead for the speaker, the more effort they pour into bestowing credibility upon their promises and maximizing their emotional impact. A promise not delivered on carries a variable degree of face loss for the initiator; therefore, the cost-benefit ratio is carefully taken into account before launching a promise. It is precisely for this reason that mitigation has gained ground as a means of providing a loophole for the speaker to save face in case things do not turn out as expected or planned.

Promises pertain to the world of the future; hence, on the one hand, their compelling emotional power, as they tap into our infinite resources of hope, and on the other hand, the impossibility of defining them in terms of true or false; they can only be labelled as successful or unsuccessful, depending on the extent to which the initiator succeeds in meeting their promises. In reality, promises reflect the flaws of the democratic system itself, as they convey the struggle to narrow the gap between the actual and the ideal, between an imperfect status quo and a more adequate, highly desirable future world. In this context, a promise translates into an attempt to better the actual and aim for the ideal, presenting a descriptive as well as a prescriptive dimension, which are intertwined and cannot exist independently of one another. A promise arises from the clash between reality and ideal, it responds to the constant need for improvement and fights the resilience of present circumstances.

An orator of great skill, Obama unmistakably senses the huge emotional potential spawned by playing on the audience's expectations and capitalizing on their hope for a better future. We must bear in mind that he won the presidential elections in November 2008, in the wake of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression; one of the main reasons he won springs from his own heart-wrenching background (abandoned by his father, raised mostly by his grandparents, striving to make a modest living), his own rags-to-riches story puts forward both a compelling example of overcoming setbacks, and the certainty that he can best relate to the needs and fears of the middle classes, his favourite social category, and provide them with ladders of opportunity and with the comforting assurance that their woes are heard and the administration's policies are targeted at addressing social

inequities. For Barack Obama, promises provide legitimacy and uphold public support because they are, above and beyond everything else, as sincere as they are credible.

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