

Henry and Reagan – A Linguistic Analysis

by Karen McCain

The two works I have chosen to analyze are speeches given 206 years apart by two famous Americans. The first is Ronald Reagan's first inaugural speech that was given on January 20, 1981, and the second is Patrick Henry's address given at the Virginia Convention held at St. John's Church in Richmond Virginia on March 23, 1775. I chose political inches because they are both political in nature and their theme is freedom. They are also similar in their plea for people to understand who they are, the power they have, and the actions they need to take to secure their own freedom. Both men are great orators. Yes, Reagan's speech was written by his chief speechwriter, Ken Khachigian, but Mr. Khachigian praised Pres. Reagan as the "Great Communicator" and talked about how they worked together on speeches (Orange County Registrar, 2011). Both speakers begin by talking about struggles they have come through in the recent past. Mr. Henry talks about coming to a desire to throw off the chains of slavery the crown. Pres. Reagan addresses the economic struggles of the period of inflation that was so devastating to the whole country. Mr. Henry's message is that it is time to understand that they will never be free as long as they are under the thumb of a king. He lets them know that they have the power with the help of Almighty God to change their fate. Pres. Reagan encourages the American citizens to see themselves as everyday heroes understand that they have the power to change the economic situation in the country and to change their fate.

Mr. Henry's speech is the shorter of the two. Read aloud it is about eight minutes long, whereas Reagan's inaugural address

runs about 20 minutes. Both Mr. Henry and Pres. Reagan seem to vacillate between using simple, common words/phrases and more complicated sentence structures as well as more highly educated vocabulary. They each are talented in creating clear pictures with their words and stirring the emotions of their audiences.

Patrick used words like "supplication" and "beseech" as well as "subjugation" and "disloyalty". To a modern audience it overalls sounds more formal because of his inverted sentence structure. Other times he starts his questions with "Shall we". (Henry, 2) 206 years later language used even in a formal speech doesn't have the same level of formality. When he describes how they have done everything they could do to make things right with the British crown he uses many words with stops in the manner of articulation.

"Let us not, I **beseech** you, sir, **deceive ourselves**. Sir, we have done everything that could be done to **avert** the storm which is now coming on. We have **petitioned**; we have **remonstrated**; we have **supplicated**; we have **prostrated ourselves** before the throne, and have **implored** its **interposition** to **arrest** the **tyrannical** hands of the **ministry** and **Parliament**. Our **petitions** have been **slighted**; our **remonstrances** have **produced additional violence** and **insult**; our **supplications** have been **disregarded**; and we have been **spurned**, with **contempt**, from the **foot** of the throne. In vain, after these

things, may we **indulge** the fond hope of peace and **reconciliation**. There is no longer any room for hope. If we wish to be free² if we mean to **preserve inviolate** those **inestimable privileges** for which we have been so long **contending** if we mean not **basely** to **abandon** the **noble struggle** in which we have been so long **engaged**...”

As someone with hearing loss I can say that vowels are easier to hear and consonants are easier miss or confuse with the wrong sound. Words with these stronger sounds in them, therefore, must be enunciated and stressed. In a room full of people Mr. Henry would want everyone to hear this message and he would make sure everyone heard him and his message. It makes sense that he would use words that sounded well when stressed.

Pres. Reagan used similar sound in his sentences from time to time. “To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous **social, cultural, political** and economic upheavals.” When this happens in a sentence it seems to get the attention of the audience and they are more likely to pay close attention to see where the statement is going. Another example is the –“-tion” sound. “Why then should we think that collectively, as a **nation**, we are not bound by that same **limitation**?”

Pres. Reagan is talking to the average American and many times in his speech he uses monomorphemic words. For example, “**We are a nation under God, and I believe God intended for us to be free.**” Mr. Reagan goes on to say, “**It would be fitting and good, I think, if on each inaugural day in future years it should be declared a day of prayer.**” where Mr. Henry used the word “supplication” which is polymorphic.

Pres. Reagan starts his speech by addressing the special guest my name who were invited to the inauguration and his “fellow citizens”. The phrase “fellow citizens” is a clue to Pres. Reagan’s real intended audience. He has a very formal tone in the beginning as he mentions the “orderly transfer of authority” and then thanks the previous president, Pres. Carter, for his for his “gracious cooperation in the transition process”. Even in these first two paragraphs that are so formal in their register he has already started using words such as “we”, “as”, and “our”. These terms are used consistently throughout the speech and will be discussed more later on. Pres. Reagan adds the word “all” as he makes it clear that he is addressing the common man, his “fellow citizens”. The speech is more for their benefit than for the other politicians in attendance. He keeps the tone informal by speaking as if he is one of the citizenry and the government is a separate entity than himself even though he is now the leader of the government. Pres. Reagan kept the tone conversational by inserting the word “Well,” at the start of several sentences. With the use of these elements Pres. Reagan showed that he understood his audience to be the everyday, common American citizen. He met their needs with his speech by identifying himself as one of them by keeping his tone folksy and unpretentious.

His dialect can be described as a general or common American dialect, maybe a West Coast dialect. He was raised in the Midwest but later lived for many years in California. He did not use any terms or pronunciations that were indicative of a certain region of the country. This helped his message resonate more strongly with his entire audience.

As a way of emphasizing his connection with the common man or the

everyday citizen Pres. Reagan used the rhetorical device of a diacope (Nichol) when he said, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” A few paragraphs later he used the same device when he said “... the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government.” The repetition used in these instances helps to emphasize each of the points he is endeavoring to make. In the first one he is saying that a government that has grown too large and is overstepping its bounds into the private lives of the citizens is one of the causes of the “current economic crisis”. In the second one he is reminding the average citizens of their power over the Federal Government because as citizens of the individual states they created the federal government and not the other way around.

Pres. Reagan’s use of language is very clear and easy to understand. He uses some multi-syllable words and some complex phrases, but he keeps them to a minimum. Overall, he uses common, every day terms, and clear sentence structure. One example of this is what he said “We have every right dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we’re in a time where there are not heroes, they just don’t know where to look.” Again, he sticks to a general American dialect, avoiding any regional terms, concepts, or pronunciations. Pres. Reagan spoke metaphorically when he spoke of American citizens as heroes. He describes their seemingly mundane daily activities. Then he said “... I’m addressing the heroes of whom I speak-you, the citizens of this blessed land.” And credited these heroes and their values as what sustains “our national life”.

Pres. Reagan consistently uses the very uniting words of “we”, “us”, “our”, and “all”. Many times he used phrases such as “our children”, “our nation”, “we have”,

“we achieved”, “all of us”, and “all Americans”. With the use of these words and phrases he evoked a feeling of unity that resonated in the hearts of his “fellow Americans”. By doing this he let his audience know that his message was meant to unify, inspire cooperation, and hope in the future of America.

Mr. Henry directed his remarks the president of the Virginia convention, but the rest of the audience was made up of Virginia legislators. They were educated men of high social standing. Most, if not all were Christian or at least God-fearing men. (*Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*) Mr. Henry appealed to their sense of right and wrong by alluding to a few Bible verses to support his argument and make his case. He does not shy away from saying things that might offend them. He says that to do so would make him “guilty of treason” and show his disloyalty to God he is bold in his declaration that Britain is never going to reconcile with them but is actually preparing for war and they must be prepared to fight.

Stylistically, Mr. Henry used metaphors and created a clear mental imagery with his words. These words and phrases served to strengthen his argument by invoking emotions in his audience of fear of becoming slaves and losing their liberty to the British crown. An example of metaphorical speech is in the second paragraph. He says “Are we disposed to be up number of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth, to know the worst and to provide for it.” Mr. Henry is referring to Ezekiel 12:2, 4 (The Holy Bible) which says:

“2 Son of man, thou dwellest
in the midst of a rebellious
house, which have eyes to
see, and see not; they have
ears to hear, and hear not: for
they are a rebellious house.

...

4 ... and thou shalt go forth
at even in their sight, as they
that go forth into captivity.”

He is comparing the colonists to the people of Judah who were “a rebellious house” and who chose not to see and not to hear the truth when it was right in front of them, and eventually “went forth into captivity.” Mr. Henry is telling the colonists that they need to see and hear the truth of the words and actions of the British matter the cost be ready to act or they will lose their freedom. Later on, he mentions the accumulation of British armies and navies in their region of the world uses the metaphor to create a mental image. He says “They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging.” (Henry, 3)

By using a series of questions followed by bold answers Mr. Henry gave the appearance of being very knowledgeable and confident. His interrogative sentences varied in length and were all very direct. The assertions that followed left no question about where Mr. Henry stood on the matter of opposing the British and fighting for their freedom. He repeated his imperative statement when he said.

“If we wish to be
free- if we mean to preserve
involute those inestimable
privileges for which we have
been so long contending- if
we mean not basely to
abandon the noble struggle in
which we have been so long
engaged, and which we have

pledged ourselves never to
abandon until the glorious
object of our contest shall be
obtained, we must fight! I
repeat it, sir, we must fight!
An appeal to arms and to the
God of hosts is all that is left
us!”

He repeatedly used the words “our” and “we” to convey to his audience that although they might not agree with his assertions he was making they were all on the same side. He knew his ideas were not popular with everyone, so he was trying to create a sense of unity with the audience.

In her article *A Linguist Explains What Old-School British Accents Sounded Like* Gretchen McCulloch explained that “...when the majority of British settlers arrived in North America, they actually spoke much more like current Americans than current Brits.” She goes on to explain that by looking at diaries, letters, and other less formal texts it can be seen that the colonists were speaking rhetorically. That means that they were pronouncing the /r/ sounds after a vowel. In the 18th century it was the British who changed the way they spoke to a non-rhotic way of speaking except for a few dialects. With this information it can be assumed that Patrick Henry did not speak with what is commonly thought of as a British accent. He spoke more like modern Americans.

Mr. Henry’s use of language shows the mind of an educated man. His vocabulary is rich with polymorphemic words. He knew how to combine these more complicated words with monomorphemic words. A great example of this is as follows “Shall we gather strength by irresolution and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance, by lying supinely on our backs, and hugging the delusive phantom of hope, until our enemies shall have bound us

hand and foot?The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.” Such a use of language message is clear and unmistakable. It is penetrating and memorable.

Mr. Henry’s *Liberty or Death* speech and Pres. Ronald Reagan’s *First Inaugural* speech are both political in nature and are part of the rich tapestry of American history. The setting in which these two speeches were given was very different, as was the number of people in each audience. Mr. Henry gave his famous speech to the members of the Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775 at St. John’s Church in Richmond, Virginia. It was about 15 months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. There was no actual transcript of his speech and he did not use any notes. The written speech that we have now was reconstructed by his biographer, William Wirt, in the early 1800s by gathering information from several of the delegates who heard it firsthand (Andrews). The colonies had been fighting with Mother England for about 10 years over their rights and freedoms. Mr. Henry wanted Virginia to have a local militia and he introduced a resolution to form one. His tone was very urgent. He earnestly pled for the president of the convention and other delegates to understand the severity of their situation. He saw the actions of England as threatening, as England marshaled its military forces “in this quarter of the world.” Mr. Henry feared a complete loss of their freedoms to the British crown. His tone continued to be urgent and pleading as he put forth his call to arms. He told them that the war had already begun and that they could not sit there idle. A quote mentioned earlier is a good example of this. He said:

“If we wish to be free
if we mean to preserve
inviolable those inestimable

privileges for which we have
been so long contending -if
we mean not basely to
abandon the noble struggle in
which we have been so long
engaged, and which we have
pledged ourselves never to
abandon until the glorious
object of our contest shall be
obtained, we must fight! I
repeat it, sir, we must fight!”

Some members of the convention were loyal to the British crown and its culture even though they were separated from England by the Atlantic Ocean. They felt that Mr. Henry’s speech was treasonous.

It is obvious that Mr. Henry’s speech is the older of the two. His sentence structure is different than modern English. He asks a series of questions throughout his speech. The syntax in his questions is different than the way we would structure them. He asks: “...what means this martial array...” The word order in modern English would be different and we would add the verb “does” to the sentence. In a modern speech the question would be “... What does this martial array mean...”. (Henry, 2) He also uses words that are not part of modern vocabulary. Words such as “remonstrated”, “beseech”, “inviolable”, and phrases like “inestimable privileges” and “...have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament.” (Henry, 3) The words and phrases he used were specific to the political situation of the time. His syntax was very normal for the period. Henry spoke specifically about the political situation and how it would affect their lives. He used the metaphorical language to create mental images in the minds of the audience members of the British binding them with the chains of slavery. These negative images persuaded the delegates to act. Their action

had a positive outcome because the resolution to form a militia was passed. Only a few weeks later the Minutemen of the colonies faced British troops at Concord in Lexington where there were the first casualties of the Revolutionary War “with the shot heard round the world” (Andrews).

If a writer wanted to make Mr. Henry’s *Liberty or Death* speech sound more like it belonged in the 1980s, sentences would need to be shortened and the tone would need to be changed from a formal, fiery lecture to a more relaxed, conversational, hopeful one like Pres. Reagan’s. However, changing the tone of Mr. Henry’s speech would cause the semantics to change and the whole message would be lost. Mr. Henry’s speech has sentences that can be simplified by replacing a long phrase with one or two words. “And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years, to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves, and the House?” can be changed to “And judging by the past, I wish to know what the British ministry has done for the last ten years, to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves, and the House?” The word “solace” can be replaced with the word “comfort” which is more commonly used in modern English, and which is less formal. “Solace”, as a verb comes from the late 13th century and means “comfort, console in grief” (Solace).

The intended message of Mr. Henry’s speech is enhanced by his figurative language. The metaphors that he uses help to elicit feelings and his audience that moved them to action. This same figurative language can’t be somewhat ambiguous at times if the audience member (or the reader of the speech) is not familiar with the biblical text, its vocabulary, and doctrine.

The members of the Virginia convention were well educated men who were well-versed in the Bible. (Religion and the Founding of the American Republic) If a modern reader is familiar with the biblical text and with American history then they will understand the concepts and ideas Mr. Henry was expressing.

President Reagan’s speech was his *First Inaugural* speech given on January 20, 1980, on the West Front of the Capitol in Washington, DC. Coming out of the 1970s energy crisis, high unemployment, and high inflation Reagan used a tone of “hope” and “new beginnings”. He spoke highly of, and praised the average working-class American. This positive politeness is very evident in the following sentences: “Now, I have used the words “they” and “their” in speaking of these heroes. I could say “you” and “your,” because I’m addressing the heroes of whom I speak—you, the citizens of this blessed land.” He went on to show even more solidarity with his audience by saying “**Your** dreams, **your** hopes, **your** goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God.” I

When Pres. Reagan mentioned God in the above sentence he was appealing, again, to average American citizens who were God-fearing people, for the most part. He harkened back to the Christian roots of America’s founding when he mentioned that he was grateful for the prayer meetings that were being held on that day and when he said:

“We are a nation under God, and I believe God intended for us to be free. It would be fitting and good, I think, if on each Inaugural Day in future years it should be declared a day of prayer.”

(Religion and the Founding
of the American Republic)

He knew that this country was founded by those who sought religious freedom and that many Americans were still God-fearing people. He was appealing to those who held any sort of religious beliefs, no matter their religion or denomination. He was also showing the audience that he was aligned with God in his intentions and actions. When Mr. Henry referred to God and referenced parts of the Bible, he did it for the same reason. He knew that there were people in his audience who had deeply held Christian beliefs and would be moved to action if they felt that they were doing what God wanted them to do.

Pres. Reagan knew that he was speaking to millions of people across the country. In our modern day, with modern technology, his words could be heard and he could be seen in real time as he gave his speech by citizens across the country and people worldwide. He kept his whole

message simple. It is easy to see that the speech is the more modern of the two. He touched on a few key topics that were of interest to the American people in 1980. Pres. Reagan's vocabulary was full of terms they carried a very specific message to the audience. He did not shy away from the "economic ills" and "the longest and one of the worst sustained inflations in our national history" that the American people had been facing the last several years. In a time of high unemployment, he talked about "putting all Americans back to work". This was a very timely message for his audience. His language was also very specific about the "unnecessary and excessive growth of government". He used many unifying pronouns such as "we", "us" and "our". Having a new president that used unifying words to show that he included himself as one of the American people, and who directly named the challenges they faced, his audience felt very positive about the new administration and the future of the country did send a message of hope.

Resources

- Andrews, Evan. "Patrick Henry's 'Liberty or Death' Speech". *History.com*. 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/news/patrick-henrys-liberty-or-death-speech-240-years-ago>
- "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death". *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*. 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.history.org/almanack/life/politics/giveme.cfm>
- Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. "Solace". Dictionary.com. 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/solace?s=t>
- Henry, Patrick. *Liberty or Death* March 23, 1775. *Great American Speeches*, pp. 1-4. Random House Value Publishing, Inc., 1993. New York.
- History.com Staff. "Jimmy Carter". *History.com*. 2009. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/jimmy-carter>
- Khachigian, Ken. "Ken Khachigian: What made Reagan the Great Communicator". *The Orange County Register*. February 5, 2011. Retrieved from <https://www.ocregister.com/2011/02/05/ken-khachigian-what-made-reagan-the-great-communicator/>
- McCulloch, Gretchen. "A Linguist Explains What Old-School British Accents Sounded Like", March 19, 2014. *The Toast*. Retrieved from <http://the-toast.net/2014/03/19/a-linguist-explains-british-accent-of-yore/>
- Nichol, Mark. "50 Rhetorical Devices for Rational Writing", 2017. *Daily Writing Tips*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-rhetorical-devices-for-rational-writing/>
- Peters, Gerhard and John T. Woolley. "Ronald Reagan" XL President of the United States: 1981-1989, Inaugural Address January 20, 1981". *The American Presidency Project*. 1999-2018. Retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130>
- Reagan, Ronald "Inaugural Address", January 20, 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. 1999-2018 Retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130>
- The Holy Bible - Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Authorized King James Version, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1979.
- Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*. Library of Congress. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel02.html>