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Rhetorical Analysis of Famous English Quotation

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Abstract:

Quotations are famous sayings rich in ideological content and elaborate language. A good quotation can be the heart of a powerful credible political speech, a compelling well-crafted writing, a catchy advertisement and leave a lasting impact on the people. This paper aims to unveil that the power of quotations comes from their rhetorical content which operates in the phonological, lexical and syntactic level.

Keywords: English quotations, rhetorical analysis, phonological, lexical, syntactic

1. Introduction

English quotations are famous and popular sayings taken from literary texts, public speeches or written as such. They enter people's mind and memory, because of their delicate ideology and refined language expressed through rhetorical devices. Not everyone knows Shakespeare's Hamlet, but who doesn't know "To be or not to be"; or Lincoln's "The government of the people, by the people and for the people"; or Benjamin Franklin's "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, wise".

There is no public speech without rhetorical devices. Their absence is humorously compared by Atkinson (2004: 179) with making "an omelette without using any eggs". There are different ways of expressing the same thing. Atkinson (2004) emphasizes that even though the message conveys more or less the same meaning, the impact on the audience may be very different. Through the use of rhetorical techniques, direct, dull, bland and unmemorable statements (e.g. I can't decide whether or not to commit suicide) may be transformed into powerful and persuasive messages ("To be or not to be" - Hamlet), "which might strike a chord with the audience, prompt applause, be remembered afterwards and even enter different quotation dictionaries" (Atkinson 2004: 181).

What makes them so unique and memorable and be frequently quoted in public speeches today? This paper makes an attempt to answer this question. In this investigation, the Forbes' top 100 inspirational quotes¹ have been examined qualitatively to unveil the beauty of the rhetorical devices used.

Rhetorical devices use words in a certain way to convey meaning or to persuade or to evoke an emotion on the part of the reader or audience, so to be memorisable. Rhetorical techniques employed in the quotations operate in the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels. Our rhetorical analysis will focus only on those rhetorical techniques that are found in the 100 quotations under investigation.

2. Phonological Analysis of the English Quotations

The most common phonological patterns used in the quotations are: alliteration, assonance and consonance.

Alliteration² is the recurrence of initial consonant sounds. The repetition can be juxtaposed (and then it is usually limited to two words), as the initial /d/ in (1) direction and dreams and the initial /l/ in live and life. This two-word alliteration calls attention to the phrase and fixes it in the reader's mind, so it is useful for emphasis, as well as art. Alliteration is used twice in the following quotation.

(1) Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined. – Henry David Thoreau

However, in other quotations several words not next to each other, as /d/ in do and done, and /g/ in get and gotten (2 and 3), are alliterated and the effect is more artistic.

(2) If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten. – Tony Robbins

(3) You become what you believe. – Oprah Winfrey

Assonance refers to the repetition of similar vowel sounds in successive or proximate words containing different consonants.

(4) Winning isn't everything, but wanting to win is. – Vince Lombardi

Consonance refers to the repetition of a consonant sound or a consonant cluster, especially at the ending of the words, as /ŋ/ in (5) getting, having, giving, being. Interestingly, consonance is often combined artistically with assonance, for instance, the vowel sounds /e/, /i/ in getting and having and /i/ in giving and being (the effect is melodious even though there is not a real repetition in the examples given, as getting contains /e/, whereas having contains /æ/, and giving contains /i/, whereas being contains /i:/). Example (6) is an artistic combination of consonance and assonance: /m/ in mind and man; /k/ in can and conceive; and /iv/ in conceive, believe and achieve.

- (5) Life isn't about getting and having, it's about giving and being. – Kevin Kruse
 (6) Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve. –Napoleon Hill.

3. Lexical Analysis of the English Quotations

Traditional studies about metaphors have considered metaphors only in connection to literary and ornamental language. However, their usage in language is more than a mere stylistic matter. Metaphors can exceed their ornamental function and be powerful rhetorical means. "A picture may sometimes tell a thousand words, but words can just as easily be used to create a thousand images" (Atkinson 2004: 215) and metaphors, among others, are a perfect example. This is more than a good reason for quotations to be rich in metaphors.

- (7) Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage. – Anais Nin
 (8) A truly rich man is one whose children run into his arms when his hands are empty.–Unknown
 (9) The battles that count aren't the ones for gold medals. The struggles within yourself –the invisible battles inside all of us – that's where it's at. – Jesse Owens

Analogy is a kind of extended metaphor or a long simile, by means of which a comparison is made between two similar things in several respects, with the purpose of explaining or clarifying some unfamiliar or difficult idea or object by showing how the idea or object is similar to some familiar one, as in (10) where motivation is compared with bathing, or as in (11) where the image of the airplane taking off against the wind is compared with things in life going against you.

- (10) People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing. That's why we recommend it daily. – Zig Ziglar
 (11) When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it. – Henry Ford

4. Syntactic Analysis of the English Quotations

Contrast or antithesis establishes a clear, contrasting relationship. It is a powerful rhetorical device which makes a quotation be remembered for long. "For at least 2000 years, many of the quotations that have survived have involved the use of a contrast" (Atkinson 2004: 183). This holds true for our analysis, as well. Contrast is the most common rhetorical device on the syntactic level, whereby 60 out of 100 quotations contain a contrast.

The contrast in the sentence can be achieved using different syntactical structures: by means of contrastive pairs; positive/negative forms; and inversion among many others.

The contrastive pair "contains two parts which are in some ways in opposition, but in other ways use repetition to make the overall effect" (Beard 2000: 39). Contrastive pairs produce stark and dramatic sounding contrasts, as in (12), where easily forgive is contrasted with real tragedy of life, child with men and dark with light, or as in (13) dreams is contrasted with fears, and the negative with the positive form we are not living with we are living (14) fall with stand up, (15) closes with opens and closed with opened, (16) education with ignorance.

- (12) We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light. – Plato
 (13) Too many of us are not living our dreams because we are living our fears. – Les Brown
 (14) Fall seven times and stand up eight. – Japanese Proverb
 (15) When one door of happiness closes, another opens but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us. – Helen Keller
 (16) Education costs money. But then so does ignorance. – Sir Claus Moser

Contradiction 'not A but B'/'A but not B' is a kind of contrast which is achieved by means of positive/negative oppositions. The negative comes in the first clause followed by the positive in the second clause or vice versa.

- (17) not A: Life isn't about getting and having,
 but B: it's about giving and being. – Kevin Kruse
 (18) not A: Happiness is not something readymade.
 but B: It comes from your own actions. – Dalai Lama

The use of the Comparison 'more A than B' provides another rich resource in contrasting two objects, concepts, feelings in quotations.

- (19) more A: I would rather die of passion
 than B: than of boredom. – Vincent van Gogh

Puzzle-solution format consists of a puzzle (P) during the first part of a contrast and the solution (S) in the second part. The use of this technique is to intrigue the audience to start wondering what is coming next, to prompt them into actively trying to anticipate a solution, to increase their attentiveness to a point where they will be listening out closely for the solution. The puzzle may be expressed by means of a statement, hypothesis or a question. Whereas the solution may combine more than one rhetorical technique, as in (20) the solution is combined interestingly with the comparison 'more A than B'.

- (20) P: In order to succeed,
 S: your desire for success should be greater than your fear of failure. – Bill Cosby

Another kind of contrast is oxymoron, which is a paradox reduced to two words, used for effect, complexity, emphasis, or wit. It is used when things go against the expectations, beliefs, desires, forming a contrastive irony as in the following quotation (21) where the contrast is expressed with begin vs. end and become silent vs. things that matter:

- (21) Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.– Martin Luther King Jr.

In our everyday discourse conversation, we tend to avoid repetition as emotionless and monotonous. However, in the formal style of quotations, repetition is very common and takes a totally different and unique colouring and emphasis. According to Marinelli (2009), repetition of certain words during a political speech makes it to be learnt by heart and fixed in the minds of the public. The element that is repeated can be a word, a group of words, a clause or even a sentence. In (22) the clause If you look at what you have in life and you'll have are both repeated twice, once in positive and once in negative, also forming a contrast. Contrast is employed in the second part of the quotation where always is contrasted with never, and more with not enough. The combination of contrast with repetition can be seen in (23) as well, where isn't who is going to is repeated in negative form is who is going to, and let me contrasts with stop me.

(22) If you look at what you have in life, you'll always have more. If you look at what you don't have in life, you'll never have enough. – Oprah Winfrey

(23) The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me. – Ayn Rand

A special kind of repetition is the list of three, by means of which new ideas or information is presented in three parts. There is something magic in the rule of three and it creates a stronger effect and impression at the public (Dlugan 2009). Through its structure, the concepts are expressed in full, the ideas are highlighted and the chance that the message be memorized is increased. The list of three could contain three identical words (24), three different words (24, 25), three phrases, clauses (25, 26) or sentences (27). Quotation (27) shows Aristotle as an excellent expert of the list of three. First, three different adjectives are listed (definite, clear and practical). Second, three different nouns are listed (ideal, goal and objective), and third, three sentences are listed introduced with the words first, second and third to enhance the emphasis of the list of three.

(24) There is only one way to avoid criticism: do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing. – Aristotle

(25) Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

(26) Start where you are.

Use what you have.

Do what you can. – Arthur Ashe

(27) First, have a definite, clear practical ideal; a goal, an objective.

Second, have the necessary means to achieve your ends; wisdom, money, materials, and methods.

Third, adjust all your means to that end. – Aristotle

Anaphora is the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or sentences. It is commonly used in conjunction with climax, parallelism, lists of three conveying the message more powerfully, as in (28). In this quotation the anaphora people will forget is combined with the puzzle-solution format, contrast (A, B but not C), parallelism and the list of three.

(28) P: I've learned that

S: A: (1) people will forget what you said,

B: (2) people will forget what you did, but

but not C: (3) people will never forget how you made them feel. – Maya Angelou

Anadiplosis is the repetition of the last word of one phrase, clause, or sentence at or very near the beginning of the next. It can be generated in series for the sake of beauty or to give a sense of logical progression. In (29) the last part of the first clause lift yourself up is repeated in the beginning of the second clause, but with a contrast lift up someone else.

(29) If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else. – Booker T. Washington

Chiasmus, also called reverse parallelism, refers to a grammatical construction where its second part is balanced or paralleled by the first part, only in reverse order. It is a very effective rhetorical device as a linguistic game, for the reason that the two parts of the contrast are not only of the same length, but also with the same sound, which makes it easier to concentrate in those elements that differ and make the contrast very noticeable, as in the contrast of you run the day with the day runs you (30) or the years in your life with the life in your years (31).

(30) Either you run the day, or the day runs you. – Jim Rohn

(31) It's not the years in your life that count.

It's the life in your years. – Abraham Lincoln

Combined format is the most powerful rhetorical technique which consists of several techniques together. Rarely do the rhetorical devices appear alone in quotations, as evidenced in many of the above-mentioned quotations. In (32) the contrast (you didn't do with you did do) is combined with the rule of three (explore, dream discover), metaphor ((a) throw off the bowlines, (b) sail away from safe harbour, (c) catch the trade winds in your sails expressed metaphorically with the list of three) and comparison 'more A than B' (more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do).

(32) Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do, so throw off the bowlines, sail away from safe harbor, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore, Dream, Discover. – Mark Twain

5. Conclusion

From this analysis we conclude that the 100 most famous quotations are rich in rhetorical devices. A very important and interesting finding in our analysis is that there is not any quotation which does not contain at least one rhetorical device. The rhetorical techniques contribute to the quotations by adding life, vividness, sophistication and power.

6. References

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In fact, they are 102, but the title with the number 100 is a simple yet rhetoric strategy to affect the readers

² All the definitions of the rhetorical devices analysed in this paper are cited from *A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices* by Robert Harris [retrieved: <http://virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm> July 15, 2015].