

# A Study of Parallelism in English Speeches

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Every public speaker prepares his or her public speech meticulously. Witty remarks emerge in an endless stream, and demonstrate the rhetoric beauty of English to a great extent. Almost every speaker employs parallelism in his or her public speeches. The present paper is intended to study the concept, the classification and the significance of parallelism in English.

*Keywords:* speeches, parallelism, concept, classification, significance

## Introduction

Almost all public speakers employ rich rhetorical devices to make the address powerful to persuade people to trust him or her. Research shows that it is usually difficult for the readers or the audience to forget parallelism. English parallelism, as a common rhetorical device, has long been considered a style, and has been widely used in various types of texts and addresses (LIU, 2006, p. 129).

Why is English parallelism so widely used as to bear the test of time, even in an age of information explosion, the age we are living in? What merits does it have to deserve our special attention? One of the commonly accepted answers is that parallelism is a rhetorical device with striking stylistic features, which is facilitated by the fact that it is a device that can be learned and practiced with relative ease.

## Concept of Parallelism

Parallelism has caught a lot of attention from the scholars at home and abroad. The following are some of the influential definitions:

- (1). Parallelism refers to a similarity or correspondence in the form of two or more closely related sentence elements, whether at the level of word, phrase, clause, or sentence (Podis & Podis, 1984, p. 208).
- (2). Parallelism means exact repetition in an equivalent position. It differs from simple repetition in that the identity does not extend to absolute duplication. It “requires some variable feature of the pattern—some contrasting elements which are ‘parallel’ with respect to their position in the pattern” (WANG, 1990, p. 151).
- (3). Syntactic parallelism refers to the repetitions of the same syntactic form (e.g. tense, aspect) and phrase/clause structure in two or more neighbouring clauses/structure. The similarity in syntactic form is

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a device of emphasis, which reinforces mainly by contrast or antithesis, or helps to build up an emotional climax. Syntactic parallelism is usually endorsed by Iexis (QIAN, 1991, p. 95).

- (4). A sentence containing words, phrases, clauses, or structures which are repeated (Richards & Schmidt, 2000, p. 329).

Since the scholars consider it from totally different aspects, all of the definitions present us different descriptions of parallelism. Although they have different opinions on the definitions of parallelism, we can see that they have agreement on three of the following:

- (1). Parallelism should have the same grammatical functions.
- (2). There are at least two parallel elements within the structure.
- (3). It can be words, phrases, clauses or sentences.

The word “parallelism” comes from Greek “paraliēlismos,” which means “place side by side.” According to these references, parallelism presents its parallel construction, which has the same grammatical functions, commonly in words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and even paragraphs.

### **The Significance of Parallelism**

As we all know, parallelism was used in poems firstly. And it pursues the similar constructions and pleasing rhythm. The character of the style can stand out.

Through all the above examples, we can see that almost every president has used parallelism. For example, there are in Obama’s inaugural address 2,440 words, 31 paragraphs and 91 sentences. He used the word “we” 62 times and the word “our” 67 times. He exerted to put different kinds of parallel constructions in his address, such as parallel words, the parallel phrases, the parallel clauses, the parallel sentences and the parallel paragraphs. He used parallel sentences at least 7 times. And those parallelisms make his address expressive, persuasive and attractive. Those parallelisms make his tone and emotion expressed more strongly. In fact, all the audience were encouraged and affected.

The stylistic function and the powerful expressivity would be the reason why parallelism is so popular and widely-used.

### **Classification of Parallelism**

In regard to its surface structure, parallelism can be achieved mainly by joining single words, phrases, clauses, sentences or paragraphs. We can find lots of parallelism in the inaugural addresses of American presidents.

#### **Word Level**

According to research, this level is classified in to three different categories. They are parallel nouns, parallel adjectives and parallel verbs. Through study on those elements, the function of the parallel words is displayed.

##### **Parallel nouns**

- (1) Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things (Obama, 2008).
- (2) We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories (Obama, 2008).

Obama used these nouns which help to catch the attention of the audience to show his ambition to the public, and to encourage people to believe in him.

#### **Parallel adjectives**

(1) I am honored and humbled to stand here, where so many of America's leaders have come before me, and so many will follow (Bush, 2001).

"Honored and humbled" is parallelism, which shows Bush's attitude toward the position, which would please his supporters.

(2) So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear... is fear itself... nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance (Roosevelt, 1933).

Roosevelt used three adjectives to describe the terror, through which he pointed out that this kind of terror is the most serious thing in the progress.

#### **Parallel verbs**

(1) This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper (Roosevelt, 1933).

Roosevelt encouraged his citizen to be confident about the future of America and himself resolutely believed that his nation would be revive through the recession.

(2) Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life (Obama, 2008).

Obama used the three verbs continuously express his respect and appreciation to America's predecessors.

#### **Phrase Level**

The phrase level is classified into noun phrases, adjective or adverb phrases, verb phrases, prepositional phrases and infinitive phrases. A lot of examples of parallel phrases prove that parallelism is widely employed.

#### **Noun phrases**

(1) But those values upon which our success depends—hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism (Obama, 2008).

Obama emphasized the greatness of America. He used three noun phrases to reaffirm that only working hard and encountering difficulties bravely can help America gain prosperity and freedom.

(2) Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms (Obama, 2008).

"Gathering clouds and raging storms" implies the bad and difficult time. This parallelism, which also is metaphor, is lively. If Obama used words like "disaster" or "rough," that would remind people of the economic crisis at that time.

(3) We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom (Kennedy, 1961).

Kennedy used "not, but" to state that this is the freedom of the people, not the party, which showed his great respect and admiration to his people.

#### **Adjective or adverb phrases**

(1) I am grateful for the honor of this hour, mindful of the consequential times in which we live, and determined to fulfill the oath that I have sworn and you have witnessed (Bush, 2001).

“Grateful for, mindful for and determined to”, the three adjective phrases in one sentence completely present Bush’s appreciation to his people and ambition to the country.

- (2) I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors (Obama, 2008).

This is the first sentence of the inaugural address; Obama used three adjective phrases to express his mood thoroughly. As the first Afro-American president, Obama’s sincere attitude and modesty pleased the public.

- (3) Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose today (Bush, 2001).

Through the adjective phrases, Bush aroused the belief of his people. He showed that American people are not afraid of difficulty.

### **Verb phrases**

- (1) Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burdens, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty (Kennedy, 1961).

In this sentence, Kennedy used five verb phrases. The tone which is stronger and stronger, step by step, can strengthen the theme and stress the keystone. That is very expressive.

- (2) Prescribed by law and marked by ceremony, we celebrate the durable wisdom of our constitution, and recall the deep commitments that unite our country (Bush, 2001).

By using “prescribed by law and marked by ceremony,” the logic shows law—ceremony—unite. Bush caught the attention of the audience at the beginning.

- (3) Our founding Fathers, faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations (Obama, 2008).

Obama described the hardship and determination of the founding fathers. He also reminded us that the new generation should work hard.

### **Prepositional phrases**

- (1) With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see. (Lincoln, 1861)

Abraham Lincoln pointed out what America should do to come up smiling. Only in this way, can America stand in the world.

- (2) With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love... (Kennedy, 1961).

Kennedy pointed that the way to lead the great land was to be conscientious. His words were like a beacon.

- (3) Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring conviction (Obama, 2008).

Obama stated his political view that, not only weapons are effective, but the cooperation and negotiation powers of a nation are also crucial.

### **Infinitive phrases**

- (1) Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations (Lincoln, 1861).

Abraham Lincoln expressed his determination to strive on to rebuild America. Parallel infinitive phrases make the address more expressive.

(2) The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation... (Obama, 2008),

Obama was confident and firm. He used a verb “come” to connect three parallel infinitive phrases to express that it is a new age and everyone should pass the historic spirit down.

(3) We renew our pledge of support—to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective, to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak, and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run (Kennedy, 1961).

Three infinitive phrases made Kennedy’s point which was aimed to build a friendly relationship to developing countries.

### 2.3 Clause Level

The clause level is also classified into five different categories. They are subject clauses, predicative clauses, object clauses, attributive clauses and adverbial clauses.

#### Subject clauses

Example (1)

What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition (Obama 2008).

Obama stressed that what they need to do is be honest and to restore American ideals.

#### Predicative clauses

Example (2)

The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born (Bush, 2001).

Through repeating the object clauses which begin with “everyone”, Bush emphasized that individual has basic rights to get all the support from his people.

#### Object clauses

Example (3)

We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace (Obama, 2008).

Obama used the word “that” four times to connect the clauses to stress his confidence about the future of America.

#### Attributive clauses

Example (4)

The neighbour who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others... the neighbour who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbours (Roosevelt, 1933).

Franklin Delano Roosevelt showed his attitude toward world policy. He used the attributive clauses to articulate his hope and dreams for a nation.

### **Adverbial clauses**

Example (5)

When our Founders...; when soldiers died...; when citizens marched...; (Bush, 2001).

Bush used three adverbial clauses to describe the history of America. He showed his esteem to the predecessors, the army and the people.

### **Sentence Level**

(1) And now we will extend this vision by reforming great institutions to serve..., we will bring the highest standards to our schools, ...we will widen the ownership of homes and business, ..., we will give our fellow Americans greater freedom from want and fear, ... (Bush, 2001).

Bush used “we will” four times, which is just like Chinese parallelism, to expatiate on four different aspects and make a promise for the future work. He used “we”, the common word, to attract the audience easily. (CHANG, 1998, p. 164).

(2) Our works are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive. our goods and services are no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year (Obama, 2008).

Obama employed the “our” structure three times to begin the sentences and employed the same comparative sentence construction. It shows that the people are a union.

(3) We will act-not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth. We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together. We will restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology’s wonders to raise health care’s quality and lower its cost. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age (Obama, 2008).

Obama stated all the promises and his ambition to fulfill them. The parallel sentences, which are strongly expressive and attractive, aroused the confidence of the audience.

### **Paragraph Level**

(1) In America’s ideal of freedom, ...In America’s ideal of freedom, ...In America’s ideal of freedom, (Bush, 2001).

Through the same beginning of three paragraphs, Bush made the tone strong and he explained America’s ideal of freedom from three aspects: the independent economy, right guarantee and the dignity.

(2) For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life.

For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.

For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.

“for us,” is used three times showed Obama’s respect to the America predecessor. And the following part, subject-predicate structure, also makes these paragraphs more powerful. And he aroused the audience about the pride of nation.

(3) The task can be helped by definite efforts to ...

It can be helped by preventing realistically the tragedy of the growing loss, ...

It can be helped by insistence that the Federal, State, and local governments ...

It can be helped by the unifying of relief activities which today are often scattered, ...

It can be helped by national planning for and supervision of all forms ... (Roosevelt, 1933).

The same structure of five paragraphs, which is appealing and full of power, demonstrated that Roosevelt is willing to help America go through the economic recession.

### Conclusion

In an inaugural address, every American president flexibly employs parallelism, to express their unswerving beliefs and political stands effectively in their inaugural addresses. As is known to us all, parallelism must have three preconditions: the same grammatical functions, at least two parallel elements within the structure, at word, phrase, clause, sentence or paragraph level. According to the above examples of the inaugural addresses, we can feel the power of parallelism in the inaugural addresses. Through the research, we can see importance of the use of parallelism in a public speech.

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