

Metaphors as a rhetorical figure in Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream*

Dr Trisnowati Tanto, M.Hum

English Department, Faculty of Letters,
Maranatha Christian University, Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract

In the case of speeches, a writer's style of writing or speaking is worth analyzing, especially when this style can serve as a powerful tool to convey the writer's message as well as to attract the readers or listeners' attention in keeping on reading or listening and appreciating the writer or speaker more. In this case, a writer or speaker can use certain linguistic features to function as foregrounding elements in the text. This paper focuses on the use of metaphors as a rhetorical figure used by Martin Luther King in his speech, *I Have a Dream*. Furthermore, this paper will see how these metaphors become interesting and effective foregrounding elements that can attract the readers' or listeners' attention. The method used in analyzing this is the descriptive method with the referential technique. The grand theory used is Stylistics, which is a study of style in language, or more specifically, the study of distinctive linguistic features. This analysis results in the findings that the metaphors in the speech are proved to be a powerful feature in conveying King's messages.

Keywords: speech, foregrounding elements, metaphors, rhetorical figure.

Introduction

As a social creature, communication is a vital aspect in human life. People are related to one another by communicating. We can communicate and exchange our thoughts, opinions or feelings to other people. Nevertheless, the ways of communication should be based on the context, participants and the communication goals as well.

There are many options of how to communicate something. A speaker has to choose one of the best styles in delivering the message appropriately. When it comes to choosing something, there must be a good reason for that. The speaker has to decide the choice of the style that he or she uses for a special purpose or intention.

According to Leech (1994: 12) style is the linguistic characteristic of a particular text. In Linguistics, the study which deals with the style of language is Stylistics. Stylistics is simply defined as "the (linguistic) study of style" (Leech, 1994: 13) and it "describes what use is made of language" (Leech, 1994: 13). In Stylistics we are able to explain something explicitly or implicitly "how language serves a particular artistic function" (Leech, 1994: 13).

Leech (1994: 210) also states that rhetoric is one of the topics in Stylistics. Rhetoric deals with some features of language that create "the art or skill of effective communication." (Leech,

1994: 210) By using rhetoric in our communication, we will achieve such communicative ends at a different level. Besides being able to make the communication successful in transferring our ideas, we can also produce effective and beautiful form of communication. Moreover, when one tries to communicate one's ideas through writing, one must think more deeply, as readers with different points of view will read it. It is possible that the reader may not see something exactly as the writer sees.

In our daily life, there are many examples of the use rhetorical figures in our daily life: in speeches, advertisements, song lyrics or any texts. A writer must make a text "interesting, clear, persuasive, and memorable, so that they will pay attention to, understand, believe, and remember the ideas it communicates." (Harris, 2011: para. 5).

Analyzing the use of metaphors as a rhetorical figure in Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* is interesting. Martin Luther King was active and a very important figure in the civil rights movement in America. He fought for gaining social reformation, especially in the abolishment of the practice of racial discrimination, but he did not approve of any kinds of violence. Besides, he was also known as a very good writer. All this was internationally recognized, which was obvious from the Nobel Peace Prize that he got in 1964. ("Biography of Martin Luther, Jr.")

He succeeded in changing the history through his phenomenal speech, *I Have a Dream*, delivered on August 28, 1963 in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Basically this speech contains the description of the sufferings of African Americans caused by the practice of racial discrimination in America. King also intended to make the federal legislation to pay attention to this issue and make changes. ("I Have a Dream-Background"). The speech is very powerful and that leads to the analysis of the rhetorical figures, especially the metaphors, which are used in the speech and how they give a big impact to the speech.

The topic of Stylistics is significant because it encourages us to be more critical in understanding an effective way of communicating an idea. Thus, when reading a text, we will learn to take a deeper meaning through some of the rhetorical figures that are used in the text. Besides learning how to comprehend the context of the text, we can also learn to appreciate the form or style of the language so that we can get pleasure from the artistic value of the speech. Moreover, we can also be encouraged to think 'out of the box' in dealing with the issue of stylistics. In brief, we are expected to be able to communicate better on a meaningful level.

In this article the metaphors that Martin Luther King, Jr. uses in the speech *I Have a Dream* are discussed in detail and his purpose of using those metaphors in the speech.

Method

This research is a descriptive research. After intensively reading the data source, which is a text in the form of a speech, the data are collected by selecting the metaphors used by the speaker. The metaphors collected are limited to the ones describing the black Americans' condition before and after the decree of the emancipation was made. The data was then analyzed based on the literal meaning of the words used in the metaphors and related to the context.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing a text, we need to pay attention to the type, the way in which language is used in the text, and the writer's intention or reason for choosing a certain style. Style is "linguistic characteristics of a particular text." (Leech, 1994: 12) In a text we can see the style in detail and focus on what words or structures are specifically chosen to others. In Linguistics, we have "the

study of style ... defined as the analysis of distinctive expressions in language and the description of its purpose and effect” (Verdonk, 2010: 4) called Stylistics. In Stylistics we also deal with literary appreciation and linguistic description in order to get the aesthetic function as well as linguistic evidence. (Leech, 1994: 13)

In this stylistic analysis what is focused more are the outstanding forms and structures. Each of these element “holds a promise of stylistic relevance with the reader’s or listener’s interest or emotions” (Verdonk, 2010: 6). This means that the reader or listener is influenced psychologically by these outstanding elements in a text, which is termed as foregrounding in stylistics. Foregrounded elements often include “a patterning of parallelism in a text’s typography, sounds, word choices, and grammar or sentence structure.” (Verdonk, 2010: 6) Other potential markers are repetitions of “some linguistic element, and deviations from the rules of language in general or from the style we expect in particular text type or content.” (Verdonk, 2010: 6)

Actually, we can say that one communication is successful when “the speaker initiates a message which is encoded into a text, and then it is decoded successfully into a message by the hearer.” (Leech, 1994: 210) The message from the speaker is delivered as it is to the hearer. However, there are additional standards of success which make the communication more effective as well as having an artistic value, which is called rhetoric. Therefore, basically rhetoric is “the set of principles for achieving communicative ends at a certain level in the traditional sense of art or skill of effective communication” (Leech, 1994: 210). More specifically, rhetoric of the text deals with “the superficial expressive form of language, as it is determined by syntax, phonology, and graphology.” (Leech, 1994: 211)

Furthermore, by using rhetoric, the speaker leads and draws the hearer to get the affection expected, such as feeling or emotion (angry, pleased, love, satisfied, etc). (Peacham, 1997: para. 1)

Rhetorical figures generally are the figures of “decoration and variety that help the hearer to pay attention, help them to believe on the speaker and emphasis, association, beauty, and organization that will help them remember.” (Harris, 2011: para. 5)

According to Leech (1994: 214), there are five kinds of rhetorical figures, namely end-focus, segmentation, simple and complex sentences, iconicity and cohesion. Besides, Harris (2011: para. 5) adds some more kinds of rhetorical figures. There are metaphor, repetition, understatement, antithesis, asyndeton, hyperbole, euphemism, allusion, and parenthesis. In this thesis, I only focus on the use of repetition and metaphors as they are dominantly used in the text analyzed.

Aristotle says "It is metaphor above all else that gives clearness, charm, and distinction to the style." (Harris, 2011: para. 26). A metaphor is a type of figure of speech in which there is a comparison between two things. Thus, there must be some similarities between the two objects or ideas being compared. (Mangrum & Strichart, 2011: para. 1)

Metaphors are used in a way to make the hearer get a picture or an image in their mind, once the speaker conveys the message. Therefore, through a metaphor we can explain things “by making the abstract or unknown concrete and familiar”. (Harris, 2011: para. 26) Besides, a metaphor also “enlivens by touching the reader's imagination.” (Harris, 2011: para. 28) Furthermore, it affirms “one more interconnection in the unity of all things by showing a relationship between things seemingly alien to each other.” (Harris, 2011: para. 28)

There are several reasons why a speaker uses metaphors when delivering his or her message. The first one, metaphors “can help readers or listeners to better understand something about the object or idea to which the metaphor is being applied.” (Mangrum & Strichart, 2011: para. 3). The second reason is that metaphor “can make speaking and writing more lively and interesting, so that it can communicate a great deal of meaning with just a word or a phrase.” (Mangrum & Strichart, 2011: para. 4). The last reason is that metaphor implies something, so the hearer has to think what they are hearing.”(Mangrum & Strichart, 2011: para. 5)

One of the examples of metaphors can be found in this sentence ”The teenage boy's stomach was a bottomless pit.” (Mangrum & Strichart, 2011: para.8) If a pit has no bottom, it will never be full no matter how often it is filled. It is a metaphor because here a pit is compared to the teenage boy's stomach, which means that he always feels hungry and wants to eat. The writer encourages the reader to have a better understanding about how big the teenage boy's appetite is by imagining a bottomless pit. The writer does not imply the meaning directly; on the other hand, the reader has to think what they are reading in another way, that is by imagining that the boy's stomach is like a bottomless pit. Furthermore, the writer prefers the phrase bottomless pit to make the writing more lively and interesting to read, so that it can communicate the meaning well.

Discussion

When using metaphors, a speaker conveys the meaning implicitly, but it helps the hearer think more logically and globally. It turns out that when the metaphors are given, the hearer is encouraged to logically think further to get the meaning behind the metaphors. In the speech, King uses metaphors which are closely related to the black American's life, like nature, so that they are able to understand and remember the points. Furthermore, metaphors can make the speech more interesting to read.

There are 17 data of metaphors found in the speech, and they can be classified into the metaphors used to describe the black Americans' condition before the decree is made (13 data) and metaphors used to describe the black Americans' condition after the decree is made (4 data). The metaphors of the first classification of metaphors can be seen in the following:

- (1) “flames of withering injustice”
- (2) “the long night of their captivity”
- (3) “crippled by the manacles of segregation”
- (4) “the chains of discrimination”
- (5) “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity”
- (6) “the whirlwinds of revolt”
- (7) “jangling discords of our nation”
- (8) “quicksands of racial injustice”
- (9) “sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent”
- (10) “mountain of despair”
- (11) “the dark and desolate valley of segregation”
- (12) “sweltering with the heat of injustice”
- (13) “sweltering with the oppression”

(King, Jr., 1963)

King uses some metaphors to describe the black American's condition before the decree is made. King states that the condition is like data (2) “a long night of captivity”. *Captivity* is the state of being kept as a prisoner or in a confined space. Furthermore, in this metaphor, the word *night* is engaged with the negative sense. The word *night* can be related to the period of darkness.

It is not the literal darkness, but it represents the life of the black American before the decree was made. Hence, the black American are not only described as being captivated but they are also described as being in the state of darkness, lacking a clear direction, because we can hardly see something in the dark, even something near. King intensifies his explanation of the black American's condition by adding the word *long*. It emphasizes the duration of the captivity which did not take place in a glance, but for a very long time.

Furthermore, King also portrays the condition as (7) “the jangling discords”. The word *jangling* means to make an unpleasant sound, like two pieces of metal hitting each other, while *discord* is harsh confused mingling of sounds. Both *jangling* and *discord* have a negative meaning. King takes the similarity between the jangling discords and the situation of the black American before the decree was made, which is unpleasant, messy, and complicated.

King also relates the black American's condition to data (10) “the mountain of despair”. The word *despair* means the feeling of having lost all hopes. The word *despair* clearly has a negative meaning. It describes the feeling of the black American; they have already lost heart and given up all hope or expectation. This desperate condition is intensified by the word *mountain*, which suggests something big, tall, and solid.

The next metaphor that King uses is (5) “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity”, in which the two main ideas, namely island of poverty and a vast ocean of material prosperity, seem to contradict each other. It is amazing how King describes that actually the black American lived in both conditions. Basically, the word *island* has a neutral meaning. It is a piece of land surrounded by water; however, in the speech the word *island* does not stand alone. There is an adjective used to describe what kind of island the black American lives on. It is a lonely island. The word *lonely* means sad and spent alone, unhappy because there are no friends or people to talk to. We can see that King shows the similarity between a lonely island and the condition of the black American. It is the same as the black American's condition as they are unhappy without anyone who supports and helps them. Besides, no one can get on or off an island without crossing the water first. This means that we are separated from others by water. King further tells about “a vast ocean of material prosperity”. Therefore, one barrier for the black American is the prosperity that surrounds them. This condition is so ironic because they live in a poor condition and suffer from the lack of everything in the midst of great prosperity. The words *lonely* and *poverty*, which refer to the black American, obviously have a negative meaning. The intensity of the black American's negative condition is heightened when an ironic situation is added by the other metaphor.

There is one topic that is highlighted by King in his metaphors. It is about racial injustice. Data (1) “flames of withering injustice”, (12) “sweltering with the heat of injustice”, and (13) “sweltering with the heat of oppression” all illustrate injustice. The word *injustice* is preceded by the word *withering*, and *sweltering*. *Withering* means “intended to make somebody feel silly or ashamed”. (Hornby, 2011: 1708) It has more or less the same meaning as the word *sweltering*. *Sweltering* is “to be very hot in a way that makes us feel uncomfortable”. (Hornby, 2010: 1511) How the black Americans must have felt at that time because of the intense injustice happening to them is illustrated by the word *sweltering* again by King, in (9) “sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent”. Thus, when the summer described here is a sweltering summer, it can be imagined how unbearable it is. Through these metaphors, King wants to show how uncomfortable the Negro's life before the decree is made. King defines the intensity of injustice that happened at that time by including the words *flames* and *quicksand*, as in data (8) “quicksands of racial injustice”.

As we know, flame is different from fire. It is “one of the visible manifestations of the combustion process and the main source of heat from a fire.” (Johnson and Miyanishi). In this context, the word *flames* is associated with the negative meaning, because King uses that word to describe the high intensity of the injustice for the black American. In addition, King intensified the condition by comparing the condition to the quicksand. *Quicksand* is “deep wet sand that we sink into if we walk on it” (Hornby, 2010: 1201) or a situation that is dangerous or difficult to escape from. Being in a quicksand, we are not able to move and do anything. Quicksand limits our moves and actions. Once we sink into it, we will find it difficult to escape and survive. It is exactly the same as what happened to the black American. The racial injustice stopped their movement, so that they could not move forward and they became passive. In this metaphor, once again King uses words which carry a negative meaning.

Talking about racial injustice, King brings the discussion narrower, to the segregation, discrimination and oppression that has happened many times in the black American’s life. In the table, we can see there are two metaphors, (3) “crippled by the manacles of segregation” and (4) “(crippled by) the chains of discrimination”. Literally speaking, *crippled* means “to damage somebody's body so that they are no longer able to walk or move normally”. (Hornby, 2010: 348) The word *crippled*, which has a negative meaning, is used to give a picture about the Negro’s condition. They are seriously damaged so that they cannot run their life normally. King compares the thing that made the black American crippled to two things; the manacles and the chain. The manacle and the chain here are closely related to the power of segregation and discrimination which have bound them tightly. Segregation and discrimination have a negative meaning. Both of them stand for more or less the same thing. It is about treating someone in an unfair way. Thus, a much bigger negative sense is created when those negative words are joined with the words chain and manacles, which are usually made out of metal or strong material. It stresses on how powerful the bondage of segregation and discrimination was.

King also compares the black American’s condition related with segregation to (11) “the dark and desolate valley”. *Valley* is “an area of low land between hills or mountains, often with a river flowing through it; the land that a river flows through.” (Hornby, 2010: 1648) Connotatively, valley is considered a low point or condition. As valleys are between mountains or hills, and below them, the word valley signifies the low condition of the Negro. Furthermore, King elaborates the condition of the valley, with the adjectives dark and desolate. Therefore, in this metaphor, the negative associative meaning of the word valley is even more emphasized by the negative adjectives dark and desolate.

King tries to portray that the opposition happened not in one time only, but like whirlwinds, as seen in data (6) “the whirlwinds of revolt”. It keeps spinning around until it causes a lot of problems for the black American. It is clearly seen that both *whirlwinds* and *revolt* contain a negative meaning, which leads to the understanding that the black American’s condition here is portrayed negatively.

From all the diction that King uses in the metaphors, it is obvious that all of the words either have or are associated with a negative meaning. Thus, we can conclude that actually King wants to tell the hearer that before the decree is made, the black American was poor, unhappy, desperate and treated unfairly. All the good things or conditions did not seem belong to them.

King also gives a great picture of what will happen after the decree is made. The metaphors illustrating the black American’s condition at this moment are as follows:

- (14) “the sunlit path of racial justice”
- (15) “the solid rock of brotherhood”

- (16) “an oasis of freedom and justice”
(17) “a beautiful symphony of brotherhood”
(King, Jr., 1963)

We believe those great things will not happen until the decree is really taking control over the black American’s life. Now, he describes the condition by associating it with the sunlit path of justice, solid rock and beautiful symphony of brotherhood, and an oasis of freedom and justice. King puts positive diction in describing the condition. He states racial justice as the sunlit path and oasis. The word *sunlit* means “illuminated by direct light from the sun, while oasis has a meaning of a fertile spot in a desert, where water is found”. (Hornby, 2010: 1497) *Sunlit* can refer to something bright which is good, because if there is light, darkness will disappear. As a result, all the negative things will be left behind, as the black American is walking to a better future of racial justice. It is the same with the word oasis. If we are wandering in the desert without any water, without any food, and without any hope anymore, but suddenly we hear about oasis, we will extremely be full of joy at the moment. It is like what happens to the black American. They have been suffering for a long time and now King offers them hope of racial justice. From both metaphors, we can see the same points that the black American will find hope, justice and chance to live a better life after the decree is made.

King not only gives the black American hope of racial justice, but also a wonderful picture of living in unity. He emphasizes on how beautiful they are by giving the picture of beautiful symphony and solid rock. It is interesting why King still puts the adjective solid and beautiful, which is redundant. *Symphony* is “a long complicated piece of music for a large orchestra, in three or four main parts (called movements).” (Hornby, 2010: 1514) Surely, it must be harmonized and beautiful. What is more, when we talk about a rock, it will be associated with something strong and solid. Therefore, we can say that those adjectives are really unnecessary; on the other hand, King thoughtfully uses redundancy in order to emphasize how beautiful condition is, after the decree is made.

Conclusion

There are seventeen data of metaphors in the speech. All the data of metaphors are used properly to describe the condition of the black American before and after the decree is made. In order to describe those conditions, which are abstract, King has his own way. First, from all the data of metaphors, most of them are closely related to nature, such as night, summer, ocean, quicksand, mountain, etc. Only two of the metaphors are related to the black American’s experience, such as manacles and chain.

King is really wise in choosing certain words in the metaphors. He does not use a sophisticated yet unfamiliar words, but simple words that can be understood easily by the hearer. I think nature is one of the most general things. It means all people are considered to know it so that it can be seen, felt and heard easily. It does not require high education and deep thinking to know it.

Besides, King is really thoughtful in using the words or phrases, most of which are closely related to their past life as slaves in the plantations. As a result, King uses some words like chain and manacle to describe the segregation. In my opinion they will understand the metaphors easily, because those objects are usually found when they are in the plantations. Besides, they are also the things they can see, so that they are familiar enough for the Black American. The use of simple and familiar words in the metaphors becomes King’s style in delivering the message.

References

- Harris, Robert A. "A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices." Retrieved 24 February 2014 from <http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm>.
- Hornby, A.S. (2010). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Eighth ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King, Jr. Martin L. (1963). "I Have a Dream". Retrieved 30 November 2014 from <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>
- Leech, Geoffrey N., Michael H Short. (1994). *Style in Fiction*. London and New York: Longman.
- Mangrum, Charles T. and Stephen S. Strichart. "What is Metaphor?" Retrieved 30 November 2014 from <http://www.how-to-study.com/mobile/article.asp?id=7>
- Martin Luther King Biography*. U.S Government Research Papers. Retrieved 15 Feb 2014 from <http://www.studymode.com/essays/Martin-Luther-King-49060602.html>.
- Peacham, Henry. "A Glossary of Rhetorical Terms." Retrieved 29 January 2014 from <http://staff-www.uni-marburg.de/~naeser/rhetglos.htm>
- Soukhanov, Anne H. (1996). *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Third ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Verdonk, Peter. (2010). *Stylistics*. Fifth ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.