Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis
DOI: 10.32996/jpds
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jpds

JPDA
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Intertextuality in John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

Kay L. Oaks, M.A., M. Ed
English Teacher, English Language Department, Confluence Academies, St. Louis, Missouri, USA
Corresponding Author: Kay L. Oaks, M.A., M. Ed, **E-mail**: kay.oaks@confluenceacademies.org

| ABSTRACT
John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech on January 20, 1961, represented more than an introduction to the new President. Kennedy was "doing politics" (Van Dijk, p. 18) in a very real sense through discourse. The intertexual references and allusions made by Kennedy transcended the contemporary time of the 1960's by connecting the speech with the words of other Presidents of the United States. In these connections, Kennedy forged a sense of purpose that united the people of the U.S. during the Cold War.

| KEYWORDS

Discourse analysis, political speech, intertextual, Cold War.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 August 2024 **PUBLISHED:** 21 August 2024 **DOI:** 10.32996/jpda.2024.3.2.3

1. Introduction

Discourse situations allow for various types of analysis to occur. Gee (1999) described how in each unique situation in which discourse occurs, there are certain "situated meanings" (94). That is, people are communicating in a certain situation, in a certain way, using specific words, and expecting certain results from their speech. Yet, each of these situations is similar to dozens of other similar situations which people have experienced. The accumulation of past experiences allows people to construct shared theories or expectations about present experiences and to develop mental "storylines" about situations that connect thought patterns and language to real-world items and experiences (Gee 95). Such storylines influence the ways that people act and interact in various situations. Gee developed an explanation of the components of these "discourse models" which influence and are influenced by our sense of reality (97). Discourse analysis, therefore, investigates how language is used to create meaning in particular situations.

One of Gee's components of any discourse situation is connections. He refers to how "we use language to render certain things connected or relevant (or not) to other things, that is, to build connections or relevance" (100). A major question posed by Gee in regard to connections is, "What sorts of connections are made to previous or future interactions, to other people, ideas, texts, things, institutions, and Discourses outside the current situation?" (112). In examining any oral or written discourse, intertexual links, allusions, or ideas connecting the discourse to previous (or even future) discourses may become apparent as well as allusions to extra-textual ideas, people, or events. These links between a discourse and forces outside of the discourse give insight into how the speaker or writer used language to make connections to other discourses, people, events, etc., whether intentional or not, to create a picture of reality in the minds of the listeners or readers.

Political speeches are a type of political discourse that are well-known for their ability to make connections that construct meaning, that is, a certain view of reality, in order to sway constituents. Van Dijk considers political discourse to be "a prominent way of '*doing* politics'" (18, emphasis mine). That is, Van Dijk views political speech as accomplishing something, much more than just saying words. One such political discourse example, a speech by John F. Kennedy, was his inaugural address on January 20, 1961. Certain intertextual and extratextual links may be perceived within the ideas of the speech. The historical context of the speech

can be considered one type of connection between the discourse and the outside reality. The United States in 1961 was immersed in a tense Cold War with the USSR. Although Kennedy does not refer to the USSR or the atom bomb by name, he makes several allusions to the uneasy relationship between the U.S. and the USSR and the threat of immediate annihilation. He appeals to Americans' sense of history and their place in it by referencing other political texts. Several examples from the speech will be given that connect to other political discourses.

2. John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address Sections 1-3

After acknowledging the honorable listeners and the general public listening to the speech, President Kennedy began his speech with distancing himself from party politics by transcending the specific political situation in which he found himself and placing himself in a historical line of Presidents dating back to George Washington: "I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago" (Section 1). By alluding to the unchanging text of the Presidential oath, Kennedy essentially ensconced himself in history, drawing the listener's mind far away from the contemporary situation of 1961 to the auspicious founding of the nation. Abraham Lincoln accomplished much the same feat at the beginning of the Gettysburg Address by noting, "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth, on this continent." (abrahamlincolnonline .org). Kennedy may have intended that his audience view him as "larger than life," that is, more than a mere mortal who had the capacity to lead the nation out of the dangerous war of words and ideas with the USSR just as Abraham Lincoln led the nation out of the Civil War.

Directly after in Section 2, President Kennedy returns the listener to the current situation in 1961 by referring to the threat of the atomic bomb: "For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of…human life." Here he states aloud, without uttering the word "bomb," the deep secret fear that every American citizen had in that age. The effect on the audience was surely to rivet their attention on what Kennedy had for them in the way of a solution to the bomb problem. The meaning constructed was clear: presented with the threat, Kennedy would give the audience some proposed solutions to the problem.

In addition, in the same section, Kennedy connects the current situation to the founding of the nation by way of "the same revolutionary beliefs" (Section 2) that the American Revolution was based upon: "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God" (Section 2). As divinely given rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (archives.gov), these rights according to Kennedy are always worth fighting for since the founding of the country to the contemporary situation in the 1960's. The connection of the Cold war situation to the foundational document of the country surely was not by accident and surely was meant to buttress the people's support of Kennedy's position on the matter. The audience of that time would have immediately recognized the reference to the Declaration of Independence and the patriotism stirred by the allusion to it. Kennedy seems to utilize patriotism to ensure that his constituents would support his Cold War plan.

In the next section (Section 3) Kennedy reminds listeners that they "are the heirs of that first revolution." As heirs of the American Revolution, the citizens have the responsibility to be good stewards of the inheritance of freedom and to pass that inheritance on to their heirs, the next generation. In addition, Kennedy used an Olympic Games reference to the "torch" having been passed to this new generation of Americans from the founding fathers. As Olympians running a "race," albeit of arms and words instead of literal running, the new generation of Americans must feel the weight of their obligation to the country's founders to not only succeed in the race, but to pass the torch or baton of freedom to the following generation. His generation had been "tempered by war," alluding to World Wars I and II. His generation had also been "disciplined by a hard and bitter peace," that is, their enjoyment of freedom in the world had been curtailed by the harsh reality of the Cold War with the USSR. The terminology of "bitter peace" seems oxymoronic, but that is the paradox of a Cold War in which there are no actual battles, only the looming threat of sudden annihilation.

As the bearers of freedom, said Kennedy, the Americans were "unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed" (Section 3). Clearly, in contrast to the rights embodied in the Declaration of Independence, Kennedy was alluding to the United Soviet Socialist Republics' repressive treatment of their own citizens: "Genuine civil and political rights were strictly limited, as the Gulag camps were filled with political prisoners. Freedom of religion was circumscribed and official atheism enforced" (Patinaude). By connecting his speech to the actions of the founders of the United States, Kennedy seems to have been marshaling the patriotism of his audience and their ill will against the Soviets, painting them as a villain on the world stage.

3. John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address Sections 6, 10, and 22

To the allies of the United States, Kennedy pledged faithfulness (Section 6). He used the sentiment of unity and division to illustrate the strength of the allies together against a foe and the futility of fighting a common foe alone. "United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do – for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and

split asunder" (Section 6). His words hearken back to those of Abraham Lincoln in his House Divided speech on June 16, 1858, at the Republican Convention in Springfield, Illinois (abrahamlincolnonline.org/ lincoln/speeches/house.htm). Lincoln had secured the Republican nomination for Senator after which he spoke, pointing out that "a house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*." The Union, he stated, could not endure division. Yet this image of a divided house was not original to Lincoln; he borrowed it from the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Abraham Lincoln Online website notes that this would be "a concept familiar to Lincoln's audience as a statement by Jesus recorded in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke)." Kennedy once again transcends the current day by aligning himself with one of the United States' most illustrative Presidents, Abraham Lincoln. By using a phrase similar to the one which probably more than anything else helped Lincoln to become President 2 years later, Kennedy in effect seems to position himself as a new Lincoln who can unite the country's allies against the "powerful challenge" of the USSR.

In Section 10, President Kennedy pledged support for the United Nations, "our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace" (Section 10). His words echo Abraham Lincoln's words while the Civil War raged in his 1862 Address to Congress: "We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth." Again, Kennedy hearkened back to famous words by Abraham Lincoln in a speech that undoubtedly would have been familiar to the people in the audience. While Lincoln was referring to the United States as "the last best hope," Kennedy enlarged the idea to include all of the countries joined together as the United Nations as a force for peace. The balance of "instruments" had shifted from peace to war, but the "last best hope" of the United Nations would be to serve as a "shield" for the weaker countries tyrannized by the USSR. Kennedy also hoped to "enlarge the area" of the United Nations, to "forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance" (Section 22). Indeed, the UN was intended to serve as a peacekeeper in the world since its founding 16 years before Kennedy's inaugural address (un.org). Understandably, with the USSR as a mammoth threat compared to the Confederacy of the American Civil War, Kennedy hoped to solidify his audience's support of the UN as a way to peace.

4. John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address Sections 12, 19, 20

In Section 12, Kennedy intoned, "We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed." Ironically, a large supply of weapons increased the chances for peace, claimed Kennedy. His words echoed the idea of Theodore Roosevelt's, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Vice President Roosevelt uttered those words in 1901, two weeks before suddenly becoming President upon the death of President McKinley. This philosophy defined his foreign policy throughout his presidency. Roosevelt practiced his foreign policy of negotiation with an unspoken threat of military force (so-called "Big Stick Diplomacy"). President Ronald Reagan employed much the same strategy in his foreign policy throughout the 1980's, culminating with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaling the beginning of the USSR's demise. It is as if Kennedy was reaching back in time to Roosevelt and forward in time to Reagan at the same time. Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan, three Presidents of different eras, all believed in peace through strength. As a favorite past President of the twentieth century, Roosevelt and his words carried a great deal of meaning to people in the 1960's.

Kennedy takes the listeners' minds back to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in Sections 19 and 20. First, he states that "all this will not be finished in the first one hundred day…nor…in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet" (Section 19). Kennedy's "all this" must refer to the work of ensuring lasting freedom. The battle for freedom is constant. Lincoln spoke of "unfinished work" at the Gettysburg battlefield: "It is for us the living, rather…to be dedicated here to the *unfinished work* which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced" (abrahamlincolnonline.org, emphasis mine). In Lincoln's day the "unfinished work" would necessarily have included the reuniting of the nation after the Civil War. Yet, beyond the immediate situation of Lincoln's time, he indicates at the beginning of the address the continuous work that must always be done to preserve "Liberty, and… the proposition that all men are created equal" (abrahamlincolnonline.org). The "work" of freedom is not yet finished; it is in process. Indeed, this work will never be completed. This work will continue long after Kennedy's administration as it continued long after Lincoln's. As Kennedy alludes to aspects of the Gettysburg Address, he seems to again transcend the time and space of his current day to appeal to Americans' sense of patriotism and pride. This appeal surely was intentionally made in order to convince listeners of the importance of Kennedy's mission in the Cold War against the USSR.

5. Conclusion

John F. Kennedy's speech on January 20, 1961, was not a mere introduction of the new President to the American people. Kennedy was "doing politics" (Van Dijk). By connecting the contemporary time with the course of American history from the founding of the country, to Abraham Lincoln, to Theodore Roosevelt, to Ronald Reagan and beyond, Kennedy succeeded in meshing his place in history with other great figures of American politics. By linking his cause with their cause, he firmly places himself and his fellow Americans in a position of importance, recognizing the gravity of the situation of the 1960's. Van Dijk considers such political discourse "a special case of political *action*, and as a functional or strategic part of the political process" (18, emphasis mine). The ideas behind the words act and come alive, as it were, beyond the sounds in the air or the print on the page, to create in people's

minds and hearts a very specific image of their country and its situation. In this way, Kennedy earns the support of his constituency for a continued effort in the Cold War.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Gee, J. P. (1999). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, Routledge.
[2] Lincoln, A. (n.d) The Gettysburg Address. (n.d.) https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org /lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm
[3] National Geographic Society. (19 October 2023). Sep 2, 1901 CE: Big Stick Diplomacy. Education.nationalgeographic.org. education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/big-stick-diplomacy/
[4] Patinaude, B. R. (n.d.) Regional Perspectives on Human Rights: The USSR and Russia, Part One. Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies, Stanford University,https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/regional_perspectives_on_human_rights_the_ussr_and_russia_part_one
[5] United Nations. (n.d.). Peace and Security. UN.org. un.org/en/global-issues/peace-and-security
[6] Van-Dijk, T. A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis. *Belgian journal of linguistics*, 11(1), 11-52. Retrieved from https://www.jbe-platform.com/

Appendix A. Text of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

From the National Archives archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address (section numbers added for convenience)

Sec. 1 We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end as well as a beginning--signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

Sec. 2 The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

Sec. 3 We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Sec. 4 Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

Sec. 5 This much we pledge--and more.

Sec. 6 To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

Sec. 7 To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom--and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

Sec. 8 To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

Sec. 9 To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge--to convert our good words into good deeds--in a new alliance for progress--to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

Sec. 10 To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, 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.

Sec. 11 Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

Sec. 12 We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

Sec. 13 But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course--both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind's final war.

Sec. 14 So let us begin anew--remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.

Sec. 15 Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms--and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Sec. 16 Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

Sec. 17 Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free."

Sec. 18 And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

Sec. 19 All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

Sec. 20 In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Sec. 21 Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are--but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Sec. 22 Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

Sec. 23 In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

Sec. 24 And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

Sec. 25 My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Sec. 26 Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. 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, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.