



Legitimizing meritocracy as part of the American Dream through the ritual of commencement speeches

Victoria Martín de la Rosa^{a,*}, Luis Miguel Lázaro^{b,*}

^a Department of English Studies, Faculty of Philology, Complutense University, Office A-22B, Plaza Menéndez Pelayo s/n, Madrid 28040, Spain

^b Department of Comparative Education and History of Education, Faculty of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Valencia, Avda. de Blasco Ibáñez n° 30, Valencia 46010, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 January 2022

Revised 17 September 2022

Accepted 28 September 2022

Keywords:

Critical discourse analysis

Critical metaphor analysis

Legitimation

Meritocracy

Commencement address

American Dream

ABSTRACT

Following an interdisciplinary approach anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), this article focuses on a genre which has flourished particularly at US colleges and universities: commencement speeches. The aim is to analyze this type of public communication from the perspective of legitimation, as part of CDA, to uncover the ideology behind this social practice, which functions as a rite of passage into adulthood. This paper proposes the study of four strategies, which flesh out all commencement speeches, as key points in a genre which emphasizes the core values in American society such as meritocracy and common good as constituting elements of the American Dream: (a) authorization; (b) self-commitment; (c) altruism; and (d) mythopoesis, where conceptual metaphors, within the framework of CMA, will be highlighted. The use of each strategy is illustrated with examples taken from 15 commencement speeches (2015–2019).

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Inc.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

1. Introduction: the genre of commencement speeches

Graduating ceremonies in US-American universities may be considered as a rite of passage marking a transition from one stage of life, where students leave college, to the next one, which will take them typically to either finding a job or pursuing graduate studies. In that quick passage from one phase into another, it is customary to hold a ceremony, as an institutionalized occasion to celebrate the achievements attained through the time spent in college; however, looking back at achievements works only as the necessary condition supporting the rest of the ceremony, which aims to engage students with what comes next. In other words, this ceremony does two things simultaneously: look backwards (a recognition of completion) and forwards (a new beginning), as suggested by Ronald Reagan in his commencement address delivered at Eureka College in May 1982. This is very much in tune with the following claim “Look closely at the rituals of any culture in the world, and you'll find that endings and beginnings are forever and inextricably joined” (Wall and Ferguson, 1988: 177).

The commencement ceremony, as a rite of passage, encompasses three subcategories “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation”, its primary purpose being to allow the individual to move “from a defined position to another which is equally well defined” (van Gennep, 1960: 11). This commencement ceremony can also be framed in the interaction rituals through sharing a number of features: (a) a feeling of membership; (b) a feeling of confidence in the individual; (c) symbols that represent the group such as wearing academic dress and tossing of the caps; (d) the sense of rightness in adhering to the group (Collins, 2005: 49). With a long-standing tradition, this ceremony has become a well-demarcated and meaningful moment in the traversing of university students' lives.

Regarding the main features of this genre, which has been greatly shaped by the marketization of higher education (Solly, 2012, 2014), there are a number of components that will often be found in these speeches: “Congratulating the graduates on their achievement, assuring them that the world is waiting for their talents, challenging them to use their talents [...], and reminding them that commencement marks the beginning, not the end [...]” (King, 1993: 4). In the same vein, Brubacher & Horn, 1978 writes that “it is the beginning of putting one's recently trained powers to the test of life” (XXV). Within this frame, the main goal for the speaker is to focus on those of his/her life expe-

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: mvmartin@ucm.es (V. Martín de la Rosa), Luis.lazaro@uv.es (L.M. Lázaro).

riences which may serve as a sort of rudder for students to hold onto.

Commencement speeches have been studied from the angle of how a new genre has been developed (Hartman, 2008; Jamieson and Campbell, 1982; Solly, 2012, 2014). However, not much attention has been devoted to the analysis of the linguistic strategies used. Hence, it seems reasonable to pursue a path where the aim is, following a qualitative analysis, to reveal how they are culturally-loaded and socially constructed in terms of the legitimation strategies used for the weight and effectiveness of their message. As will be seen, the naturalness of each strategy derives from the fact that they have been culturally constructed, which contributes to the speaker “sounding right” when relying on them (Charteris-Black, 2011, 2018).

2. Theoretical framework: legitimation and critical metaphor analysis

Anthropological approaches to the analysis of rituals and ceremonies using qualitative methodologies (e.g. Manning, 2000) have turned out to be an interesting perspective to the meaning of commencement speeches in the context of university culture. Additionally, following a content analysis methodology, studies focused on the analysis of commencement addresses have also revealed a high interpretive potential on the meaning of this university ritual (Partch and Kinnier, 2011). On the other hand, an intercultural perspective between English and Chinese commencement speeches can be seen in the work conducted by Zhu (2018).

The present study can be framed at the intersection of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA henceforth), and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA henceforth), as both are approaches whose main attempt is to unearth the ideologies behind this social practice. This combination will take findings further since the construction of legitimation will be strengthened with an equally critical outlook (CMA), where metaphor is considered as an important device in the legitimation of social action (Hart, 2018). Furthermore, this critical perspective will be complemented with a brief discussion on the discourse of meritocracy, which is a core element in American society and puts flesh on all commencement speeches.

Relying on a critical perspective when analyzing language – where the prominence of legitimation as a discourse goal by political actors is clearly present – has proven to be very successful as can be seen in the work conducted by many scholars (Cap, 2008; Chilton, 2004; Johnson, 2010; Martín Rojo, 1995; Reyes, 2011; van Dijk, 1992; van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), to mention but a few, often relying on the use of metaphor as a device which evokes certain imagery in discourse with an associated belief system. Despite these advances, analyses underscoring the use of a critical perspective when addressing the social practice of commencement speeches is still lacking.

2.1. Legitimation as part of critical discourse analysis

CDA is aimed at analyzing “social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach.” (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 2). Thus, the interest of CDA will fall on any social phenomenon that is to be challenged and not just taken for granted. Such practices are based on an ideological stratum which is established by the social institutions and then transmitted by the educational system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; van Dijk, 1998). Therefore, legitimation works as a feature of the persuasive type of discourse to subtly engage the audience into participating in the social practices of those institutions while maintaining power or achieving social acceptance (Reyes, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2008). Hence, some degree of obfuscation plays an important role as it requires some

form of agreement on the part of the audience (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998, 2005).

Legitimation, which is “a prominent function of language use and discourse” (van Dijk, 1998: 234), is understood as a linguistic process by which speakers try to make some social practice, idea or a certain act acceptable and even desirable to the audience. It means that legitimation is a discursive practice that aims to create a certain understanding of a specific action or a given institution by way of repetition (Reyes, 2011; Vaara and Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen, 2007). The way to push this process forward is by providing arguments and reasons that will justify and/or encourage its adoption in society. Even though its origin is very much linked to sociology, it has also come to be used in linguistics to refer to the process of justifying why something should be done. Following van Leeuwen’s wording, legitimation proves to be an answer to the more or less explicit question of “Why should we do this and why should we do it this way” referring to the process of making something appropriate and right, while serving a particular purpose in society (van Leeuwen, 2007: 93).

Legitimation studies rely on the critical analysis of linguistic expressions used by social actors and the particular social context they are produced in (van Leeuwen, 2008: 6), trying to disclose the underlying ideology of social institutions that present as commonsense practices that are culturally constructed (Jones and Wareing, 1999). Focusing on the present study, where the emphasis is placed on the institutional use of ritualized commencement speeches, it can be advanced that they seek to legitimize and justify a social structure based on a meritocratic approach, although this perspective is complemented with a search to contribute to the community’s betterment. Bringing both elements together translates into the endorsement of the American Dream, a concept popularized by the historian James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931), which is the guiding force shaping the meaning and content of this genre. Even though it is true that it has come to be associated with individual upward mobility and leading comfortable lives, the concept, in its original sense, also stood for the idea of commitment to the good of the whole and common well-being (Churchwell, 2021).

Commencement speeches are a type of discourse that clearly manifest the socially constructive nature of language use (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998), so any attempt to bring a better understanding of them will have to be done with a view to the specific culture where they are discursively developed, since their meaning is dialogically constructed and shaped (Bakhtin, 1981) within institutionalized organizations. Each commencement speech is thus intertextually connected to all the other speeches in a cobweb-like manner that, by way of repetition, get internalized and “habitualized” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 70).

For the study of legitimation on this type of speeches, this analysis is based on three out of the four categories of legitimation suggested by van Leeuwen (2007, 2008): (a) authorization; (b) moral evaluation; and (c) mythopoesis. The category of ‘rationalization’ has been discarded because of its low visibility in speeches. At the same time, this paper has been supplemented with the research conducted by Reyes (2011), where he explored the legitimation strategies used by George W. Bush and Barack Obama on the War on Terror and added the category of ‘altruism’, which in our study has been blended with that of ‘moral evaluation’. Replacing ‘moral evaluation’ (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008) with that of ‘altruism’ (Reyes, 2011) proved to be a good way to better match the meaning of those linguistic expressions used by commencement speakers that “legitimize proposals as a common good that will improve the conditions of a particular community” (Reyes, 2011: 787). Furthermore, we suggest a new category ‘self-commitment’ since –although it also makes implicit reference to a value system, as the category of ‘moral evaluation’ does– it is a distinctly singu-

larized category, as evidenced by the data found in all commencement speeches, focusing on concepts such as those of 'effort', 'hard work', 'perseverance' or 'determination'. Interestingly enough, they all point to the discourse of meritocracy –much discussed over the last 20 years by academics – as one of the core values in the narrative of the American Dream (see Section 2.3).

Hence, the strategies of legitimation analyzed in this study encompass the following types: (1) authorization (in reference to authority figures); (2) self-commitment (in reference to the meritocratic system); (3) altruism (in reference to moral justification); and (4) mythopoesis (in reference to storytelling), where the device of metaphor will be highlighted as a way of making sense of phenomena and creating a narrative that works for the interests of speakers.

2.2. Critical metaphor analysis

CMA contributes to the study of CDA (Musolff, 2012: 301), which claims that “meaning constitution” should be analyzed in the social context to uncover the ideologies that constrain social groups. It links up three different fields: critical discourse analysis (CDS henceforth), conceptual metaphor theory (CMT henceforth) and corpus linguistics.

It was first adopted by Charteris-Black (2004) by addressing the study of metaphor from the perspective of corpus linguistics. His study of political discourse addresses the ideological potential of metaphor in discourse by suggesting that metaphors will have to be analyzed in real discourse data instead of out of context, as was the case in CMT. The reason for such a claim is that “metaphor can only be explained by considering the interdependency of its semantic, pragmatic and cognitive dimensions” (Charteris-Black, 2004: 2). One of the benefits of corpus linguistics is that it provides extensive co-text, which is key when deciding whether a word sense is metaphorical or not. The particular context for a metaphor and the motivations behind its use are thus brought to the center of the stage.

This more enriched perspective transcends the previous cognitive dimension (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which highlighted a cognitive pairing between a source and a target domain reflected in a number of linguistic expressions, where the real focus is on the behavior of metaphor in discourse data. This will entail talking not only about how using metaphor will make the speaker's/writer's discourse more memorable, but about how metaphor is ideological in the sense of offering persuasive and shared ways of thinking about the world and by doing so legitimating a particular representation of reality to the benefit of those holding such views (Charteris-Black, 2011, 2018; Martín de la Rosa and Lázaro, 2017, 2019; Musolff, 2007; Semino, 2008; van Dijk, 1998).

Since metaphor –as claimed by cognitive approaches to metaphor– is not only about how we talk about something, but mostly about how we think about it, looking into the linguistic realizations of metaphor in discourse can help us understand dominant and systematic ways which people rely on to think of reality (Ng, 2020). Furthermore, particular metaphors can be used to enforce and perpetuate particular worldviews, whose assumptions –unless they are questioned– may be ignored. This explains why critical metaphor analysis becomes necessary as metaphors constitute verbal evidence for an underlying system of ideas. Therefore, moving from CDS, which is concerned with the exercise of power to influence perception and action, to the analysis of metaphor, which serves as a point of access into thought processes, can help examine ideological and systematic structures conveyed in discourse by considering the content of those metaphors in terms of what is highlighted (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2018).

2.3. Meritocracy

The term meritocracy was first coined in 1958 by Michael Young in his well-known fable “The Rise of Meritocracy”, where his proposal can be summarized in the following formula: I.Q. + effort = merit (Young, 2017: XIII). The discourse of meritocracy claims that “whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity [...] in order to rise to the top” (Littler, 2018: 1). As Bell pointed out, “The postindustrial society, in its logic, is a meritocracy. Differential status and differential income are based on technical skills and higher education, and few high places are open to those without such qualifications” (Bell, 1972: 30). This is an idea which has traditionally encouraged the expectations of upward mobility through education, which in turn has given way to an academic “credential inflation” (Collins, 1979) or “diploma disease” (Dore, 1976). The latter is a circumstance threatening those expectations of upward mobility through education since not every student starts off in life with the same opportunities to access higher education due to their different social origin and family cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). Despite all this, as stated by Wooldridge, meritocracy “is the closest thing we have today to a universal ideology” because its success “is crossing boundaries –ideological and cultural, geographical and political– while “shaping society from top to bottom” (2021: 1, 3). Besides, it should not be forgotten that a meritocratic conception of society, together with the benefits resulting from attaining the highest levels of education, is an essential element of the American Dream (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003), which works as “a potent philosophical means for constructing reformist discourses for American politics and education” (Beach, 2007: 148).

Drawing on the theoretical framework described above, where legitimation studies, as part of CDA, are supplemented with CMA, this study aims to contribute to the analysis of a type of public communication, commencement speeches, in an attempt to bring to light the cultural and social construction which lies at the heart of the speeches and which makes them a well-delineated genre through sharing a number of features.

3. Data and method

3.1. Corpus

A collection of 15 commencement speeches has been selected in order to conduct this study. To select those speeches, we followed a number of steps: 1) media reports on the most memorable speeches for the time span chosen were consulted; 2) a number of parameters –previously decided on for the compilation process– were taken into consideration to try to ensure our corpus is representative enough of the diversity of commencement speakers who tend to be targeted by universities: prominent figures in the community from the social, cultural, political and economic spheres in the USA (Solly, 2012, 2014). In fact, the very choice of speakers by higher education institutions is precisely the best evidence of a system based on the principle of merit.

The parameters referred to above were the following: time span, race, gender, ideology and employment.

- The time span ranged from 2015 to 2019, with a view to capturing the most recent view of speeches. Speeches given in 2020 were discarded because of their online format.
- Within race, speakers from White, Black, Hispanic and Asian origin are part of this corpus.
- Within gender, speeches from women and men are equally found (eight speeches by female speakers vs. seven speeches by male speakers). The rate of women featuring as commencement

speakers has notably increased over the last decade. A tendency which has accelerated from 2018 onwards due to the impact on society of the #MeToomovement.

- Within ideology, representatives from both a more liberal and conservative leaning are included.
- Within employment, speakers who come from different fields of life have been selected: politicians, an actor and an actress, a TV icon, a lawyer, a Chief Executive Officer and a Chief Operating Officer of Information Technology companies, a movie director, an actor-comedian, or an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

A list of the commencement speeches selected is provided in the following lines. The information included reads as follows: name of speaker, occupation, university/college where speech was delivered and, in between brackets, number of words. The total corpus amounts to 37,096 words.

2019: (5633)

Ken Jeong, Physician and Comedian, University of North Carolina Greensboro (1758 words)

Viola Davis, Actress, Barnard College, (1555 words)

Sonia Sotomayor, Associate Justice Supreme Court of the USA, Manhattan College (2320 words)

2018: (6669)

Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2920 words)

Hillary Rodham Clinton, ex-Secretary of State/Former First Lady, Yale University (3749 words)

2017: (3011)

Tim Cook, Chief Executive Officer of Apple, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1697 words)

Oprah Winfrey, TV icon, Smith University (1314 words)

2016: (13,133)

Barack Obama, 44th President of the USA, Rutgers University (4961 words)

Steven Spielberg, Movie director, Harvard University, (2456 words)

Mitt Romney, Politician, Trine University, (2561 words)

Michelle Obama, Lawyer/Former First Lady, City College of New York (3155 words)

2015: (8650)

Denzel Washington, Actor, Dillard University (1503 words)

George W. Bush, 43rd President of the USA, Southern Methodist University (1770 words)

Condoleezza Rice, ex-Secretary of State, College of William and Mary (3037 words)

Madeleine Albright, ex-Secretary of State, Tufts University (2340 words)

3.2. Methodology

The legitimation strategies which were suggested by the analysis of data are the following: (a) authorization; (b) self-commitment (c) altruism; and (d) mythopoesis, within which the focus will be placed on conceptual metaphor, a device which helps creating a narrative that works for the interests of speakers while letting them tune in with the audience.

All the speakers invited to be commencement speakers –and our corpus study is a good proof of this– try to legitimize their different proposals of how to transition into an adult life by holding onto a system of values and a certain approach to life which makes them “sound right” (Charteris-Black, 2011, 2018). This, partly, gives them a quick access to the audience’s emotional and rational backing (Chilton, 2004).

Concerning the process of analysis, we proceeded as follows:

- (1) a close reading of the speeches by both authors focusing

on the linguistic choices made by commencement speakers came first; (2) joint-reflection followed on the use of those linguistic choices found; while discussing data, two issues arose: (a) many of the expressions used by commencement speakers, which touched on concepts such as those of ‘effort’ or ‘hard work’ – deeply related to the discourse of meritocracy– did not fit any of the existing legitimating strategies, which led to coining a new category ‘self-commitment’; (b) replacing ‘moral evaluation’ (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008) with ‘altruism’ (Reyes, 2011), as already indicated in Section 2.1., proved to be a good way to better capture the meaning of expressions used by many commencement speakers, which frequently hint at the need to reach others in the community; (3) finally, each legitimation strategy was illustrated with examples retrieved from our corpus, as will be seen in the findings section.

Let us briefly introduce the different categories of legitimation proposed in this study:

a) Authorization

This strategy is exhibited by the fact that commencement speakers stand as authoritative figures. Although van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) discusses four types of authorization, namely, personal (vested in people), impersonal (in the law and regulations), expert (as the result of expertise in a given field), and role model (upon opinion leaders or celebrities), the two types that are clearly emphasized in this paper are the expert and the role model authorities –as a type of ‘social learning’ (Bandura, 1977)– as will be seen in the coming lines.

b) Self-commitment

This legitimating strategy, which supports a merit-based system, is very deeply rooted in American society, in the sense that since birth students are encouraged to work as much as possible since their success or failure will just depend on their talent and ambition, and how much time and effort they devote into pursuing their dreams. Hence, Americans are committed to the principle of ‘individualism’, where they consider themselves responsible for shaping their own destiny. However, this appeal to hard work is even more demanding in the case of minorities, as reflected in the well-known African American aphorism: “As a black person in white America, you’ve got to work twice as hard to get half as far.” (DeSante, 2013: 342). That is precisely the idea that back in 2015 the then First Lady, Michelle Obama, touched on in her commencement speech delivered in Tuskegee University (Alabama), while reminding the audience of their need to rise “above brutal discrimination” or the need to build “resilience to soar past obstacles and outrages”.

This strategy is important because, as Sandel says, “In an unequal society those who land on top want to believe their success is morally justified”; that is to say, “In a meritocratic society, this means that the winners must believe they have earned their success through their own talent and hard work” (Sandel, 2021: 13).

c) Altruism

It is a very important legitimation strategy since speakers strive to project their own vision and understanding of the world through claims based on a system of values which look for the benefit and well-being of others. Hence, upholding the benefit of others is presented as the moral justification to adhere to the proposals made.

Altruism is a concept with a long history in the United States. In fact, it was present in the ethical debates in the late nineteenth century, when thinkers across all ideological divides defended the moral need to strengthen socially the idea of altruism against “Social Darwinism” (Budd, 1956: 43). Nowadays, it still plays an important role since commencement speakers continue to uphold the

idea of altruism, even though it has been challenged in the context of a growing expansion of the "Market Society" (Sandel, 2012).

d) Mythopoesis

This strategy is conveyed by resorting to the social and cultural activity of telling stories to an audience in order to make sense of phenomena. Both moral and cautionary tales serve as good examples of how stories serve legitimation purposes. In moral tales, "protagonists are rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices [...]", whereas cautionary tales "convey what will happen if you do not conform to the norms of social practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008: 117–18).

Precisely, one of the important resources and tools that storytelling relies on is the use of metaphor, which analyzed from a critical perspective will uncover the value system of a community. Metaphors often imply stories, and stories often include metaphors (Fopp, 2009; Miller, 1995; Ritchie, 2012, 2013, 2017); in this frame, metaphor and storytelling seem to go hand in hand. Regarding metaphor as a story telling device, it must be said that the analysis of this cognitive tool will be restricted to the legitimation strategy of mythopoesis, which is in line with the final goal of this paper. As will be revealed from the high number of tokens, metaphor plays a very important cohesive role connecting extra-textually the speeches given by the 15 speakers.

Three main phases, following CMA (Charteris-Black, 2011), will be covered for the analysis of metaphor: (a) identification, (b) interpretation and (c) explanation of metaphors. Identification is the process of reading a text for metaphorical expressions following the procedure advanced by the Praggeljaz Group, 2007, where a lexical unit is considered as metaphorically used when its contextual meaning contrasts with a more basic meaning (Semino et al., 2018); secondly, the interpretation stage is where, based on the metaphorical expressions found, the researcher arrives at a number of conceptual metaphors—typically given in capital letters—through a generalization process. Finally, in the explanation stage, the discourse function of metaphor, where conceptual metaphors are likely to point to an underlying system of political and social ideas, is taken into account.

4. Findings

This section examines the four legitimating strategies previously commented on: authorization, self-commitment, altruism and mythopoesis, which commencement speakers—as key actors in the implementation of this social practice—rely on while contributing to the legitimating act which commencement speeches are.

As a methodological note, the italicized parts of the examples represent the linguistic choices relevant to the analysis. In addition, for a more detailed overview, a table has been included in the appendix providing the categories analyzed and occurrences for each of the speakers.

4.1. Authorization

As previously said, both expert and role model authorities are an overwhelming legitimation strategy in the very manner commencement speeches are articulated. It is not a question of public speakers who quote other voices to have their claims validated, but rather it is the very speakers who are authoritative sources; in other words, the speakers embody a model with a proven and successful trajectory in American society. This means that it is not by chance that they are selected as commencement speakers.

Even though a two-way division between expert (Cook, *Apple*; Sotomayor, *Associate justice of the Supreme Court of the US*, just to mention a few) and role model (Winfrey, *celebrity*; B. Obama, *President of the US*, to mention a few) authorities can be established in

this kind of discourse, both could ultimately be described as role model authorities since they embody the most tangible demonstration that the American Dream is real. This strategy clearly serves persuasive purposes since the fact that successful members have certain beliefs is enough to legitimize such ideas and the actions of their followers. Each of the commencement speeches is a good proof of this.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that most of the commencement speakers mention, in turn, other authorized voices—mostly male—within their speeches. This will be illustrated by providing some names of great figures given by commencement speakers:

- (a) "Nation's founders", as the shapers of the American Dream (Barack Obama, Michelle Obama).
- (b) Politicians: Winston Churchill (George Bush); Martin Luther King (Barack Obama, Tim Cook); Nelson Mandela (Denzel Washington).
- (c) Inventors: Thomas Edison (Barack Obama, Denzel Washington); George Washington Carver (Barack Obama).
- (d) Scientists: David Waltimore (Sheryl Sandberg); Jonas Salk (Michelle Obama).

4.2. Self-commitment

In spite of the growing criticism to the concept of 'meritocracy' from across the political spectrum—although for very different reasons, "this criticism has yet to shift popular opinion, which remains stubbornly loyal to the meritocratic idea" (Wooldridge, 2021: 5). Hence, the idea of highlighting the concept of 'merit', while backgrounding any other type of differences among social groups, has not only remained but has been reinforced over the past few decades. Meanwhile, Hochschild and Scovronick claim "Most Americans believe that everyone has the right to pursue success but that only some deserve to win, based on their talent, effort, or ambition" (2003: 2). As a further evidence, the scholar Markovits states that "meritocracy claims to be fair and benevolent, to align private interest to the common good, and to promote freedom and opportunity for all", even though it ignores "social and economic inequality" (2019: XXI).

This merit system matches the individualistic approach to life so ingrained in American society, where everybody is allowed to pursue their own dreams since all people are created equal, as stated in the second paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. That is precisely the idea that Hillary Clinton is referring to when she talks about "the vital role of higher education in our society to create opportunity and equality" (Clinton, 2018). This assumes that the departure point in life for all individuals is exactly the same, which implicitly denies the fact that some social groups may be at an advantage (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003) With that in mind, how successful you are in obtaining your goals in life will be based solely on your performance and how hard you work for your objectives. This theme is so compelling that it can be found in all the commencement speeches in our corpus (78 tokens).

In fact, this idea that we are all born the same is the preliminary condition on which the remainder of the discourse is based: that it is only through effort and ambition that students will manage to get as far as they dream to fulfill their objectives. This premise, which takes the focus away from the obvious differences among people depending on the social, economic and cultural backgrounds they are born into, is actually referred to by several commencement speakers across the political divide such as George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Madeleine Albright and Michelle Obama.

(1) In our hearts we believe *we all are created equal* under God. (George Bush, 2015)

(2) But, graduates, no matter where your journey started, you have all made it here today through the same combination of *unyielding determination, sacrifice, and a whole lot of hard work* – commuting hours each day to class, some of you (Michelle Obama, 2016).

Consequently, at the core of this system of values, we find the concepts of 'hard work', 'effort', 'perseverance' and 'determination', which run through all the speeches and are likely to sound familiar to students:

(3) [...], if you *strive to create the best, give the best, do the best for everyone* [...] (Tim Cook, 2017).

(4) But you know what my biggest talent is? It's *persistence*. I *do not give up*. I *do not give up* anything. [...], I *do not give up* [...]. And, honestly, *your persistence is the most important talent to have* (Ken Jeong, 2019).

All this hints at the fact that the only responsibility for one's success or failure falls on one's own shoulders. Thus, students are left with just themselves to blame if such success does not come their way, as previously said. Proof of this can be seen in the words of the following speakers:

(5) [...] you *can achieve success with your own work and energy and determination*. Choose these things to wish for, work for, live for, and you are virtually guaranteed success and fulfillment (Mitt Romney, 2016).

(6) No matter our race, creed, gender, or sexual orientation, *we are all equal shareholders in the American Dream* (Madeleine Albright, 2015).

This means that this legitimating strategy serves as a good resource to connect with the audience after spending four years at college in an attempt to reach graduation day. That being the case, it would be surprising not to find speakers capitalizing on such an opportunity to remind them of the energy and time invested in reaching this milestone, but also of the important challenges lying ahead for which their best performance will be needed. Speakers, relying on a path of continuous hard work, refer not only to what has been achieved so far but to what has yet to be achieved in the future, which gives coherence to their discourse and to the projected audience's lives. Furthermore, knowing they are equipped with the best knowledge and skills from all those fine universities, they are appealed to as the role models of the future.

(7) And, Class of 2016, it is your turn now to *shape our nation's destiny*, as well as your own (Barack Obama, 2016).

(8) The future [of this country] is *in your hands*. Congratulations! (Sheryl Sandberg, 2018)

However, this sense of resolve to fulfill your objective takes on some religious overtones in the case of some commencement speakers, since, as they claim, your main goal in life must be to carry out the service for which you have been brought to earth. This means that your sense of fulfillment is deeply intertwined with serving your call in life. In this light, the religious feeling of serving one's calling and one's self-commitment become one and the same thing for these speakers, who adopt a more religious or spiritual perspective on life.

4.3. Altruism

As already mentioned, Churchwell reminds us that James Truslow Adams (1931) approached the concept of the 'American Dream' emphasizing elements such as those of 'collective moral character' and 'well-being that is held in common and therefore mutually supported'. One of the guiding themes repeated in every single commencement address in our corpus is precisely that of placing the focus on the well-being of others (64 tokens). This theme acquires a new meaningful dimension each time it is taken up by a commencement speaker since it is recontextualized and renegotiated with different audiences, reaching back and

forth to other discourses as a kind of inter-discourse (Bhatia, 2010; Fairclough, 1992; Kecskes, 2019). The relevance of this strategy can be seen in the examples by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton:

(9) [...] to make *collective decisions on behalf of a common good*, we have to use our heads (Barack Obama, 2016).

(10) This is a moment to reach across divides of race, class, and politics, to try to see the world through the eyes of people very different from ourselves and to return to rational debate to find a way to disagree without being disagreeable to try to recapture a *sense of community and common humanity*. (Hillary Clinton, 2018).

One interesting move, coherent with the development of altruism as a legitimating strategy, is avoiding the construction and portrayal of two different groups, 'positive self' (us) vs. 'negative other representation' (them) (Chilton, 2004; Martín Rojo, 1995; van Dijk, 2005; Wodak, 1989). In fact, this strategy pursues erasing these two opposing spaces in an attempt to bridge both perspectives into a general and inclusive 'we', where the whole society –leaving differences aside– is presented as moving together towards the same goals, which connects very well with the need to build some shared attitudes with the audience in commencement speeches.

(11) They [Thomas Jefferson and John Marshall] stumbled. Sometimes they fell. But they kept going, and they left a legacy that allowed future generations – descendants of the free and descendants of slaves – to pick up the torch and walk toward the goal of making "*we, the people*" a more inclusive concept (Condoleezza Rice, 2015).

As explained above, the strength and inter-discourse value of this theme is such that it is repeated by every one of the speakers under analysis. In order to give evidence of the common ground and purpose held by speakers when addressing the audience, let us mention an example:

(12) As you *serve others*, you can inspire others (George Bush, 2015).

Projecting this type of altruistic motivation boosts a speaker's proposals and claims, since it implies a movement from ego to others, which materializes in the search for a benefit which goes well beyond oneself and turns into a social benefit. This provides a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives, as claimed, for example, by Viola Davis:

(13) Because no one talks about the real final cap, the real ceiling—and that's significant: living life for *something bigger than yourself* is a hero's journey (Viola Davis, 2019).

Self-commitment and altruism are nicely brought together in a powerful visual image –work hard and then reach back for those who come behind you, which seems to be the best claim to success in American society, where such success becomes really meaningful only if it contributes to the betterment of the community. This can be seen in the following example from Denzel Washington's speech, which will be repeated by Michelle Obama a year later (2016):

(14) Everyday you have to plan – everyday. You've heard the saying that we don't plan to fail, we fail to plan. Working really hard is what successful people do [...] And anything you want, you can have. So claim it. *Work hard to get it. When you get it, reach back pull someone else up* (Denzel Washington, 2015).

Linked to this altruistic component –where the importance lies in holding out to others– some speakers link this attitude to a religious and spiritual motive, where the need to help others seems to be set off by a superior force who knows best and is in charge of shaping our destiny. All the speakers touching on this religious/spiritual ingredient of life are African Americans: Oprah Winfrey, Viola Davis, Denzel Washington and Condoleezza Rice. This is not a coincidence as the preeminent role of religion in the lives of African Americans, through their communities, has been clearly established by different authors (Billingsley, 1999; Chatters et al.,

2009; Taylor and Chatters, 2010). It is illustrated in the following example:

(15) The only empowerment is when your personality, when you use who you are, what you've been given, the gifts you hold, to *serve the calling* that you have been brought to earth to serve (Oprah Winfrey, 2017).

However, the figure of the community is equally resorted to by most speakers, who believe that performing our better self necessarily implies having the community as the gravitational force of our activities, since communities thrive by making sure that every individual contributes and does his/her share. This is exemplified clearly in the following excerpt:

(16) My hope for all of you here today is that you find a life filled with meaning and that you create that meaning by *serving your community* and the people in your life (Sonia Sotomayor, 2019).

Considering that commencement speeches are addressed to some of the future leaders of the country —as indicated by one of the very commencement speakers “You are the leaders of tomorrow, and it will be your job to pick up the baton so often mis-handled by the leaders of yesterday and today” (Albright, 2015), we could understand that the special emphasis placed by every speaker on the commitment to the community may well find its justification in trying to reduce the rising gap and growing distrust between elites and blue-collar workers, who feel belittled and neglected by those elites. Such suspicion gave way to a certain ‘resentment’, which marked the beginning of a populist reaction towards the elites demanding more equality “as a defense against being excluded from that society” (Bell, 1972: 31). This is just a dynamics which has grown particularly over the last years (Markovits, 2019: XIX; Sandel, 2021: 19). Hence, coming to terms with this resentment could well be the motivating argument for the insistence on not closing in on selfish individualism but rather reaching out in an effort to link back with the community as suggested by Sheryl Sandberg, from the perspective of technology, when stating: “If we succeed — and we’ll succeed — we will build technology that *better serves not just some of us*”. In this scenario, the practice of philanthropy, for example, acquires its full meaning.

4.4. Mythopoesis

Legitimation can also be achieved by way of storytelling, as claimed by van Leeuwen (2007, 2008). In the case at hand, the stories unfolded by the commencement speakers under analysis run mainly along two different lines, which capture two metaphors: LIFE IS A JOURNEY, repeated by every single commencement speaker (92 tokens); and EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER, which — with the exception of George W. Bush and Steven Spielberg— was mainly invoked by speakers belonging to racial minorities to stress the important role of education for having enabled them to travel that far while providing them with the resources to face any challenges they may encounter (15 tokens). Through storytelling, this strategy serves one main function since it bonds the audience with the speaker due to the shared cultural imaginary they tap into.

4.4.1. LIFE IS A JOURNEY

Many of the speakers resort to the common story where characters engage in a journey, which they will find rewarding and whose outcome will mainly lie in the decisions they make along the way. Metaphor becomes one of the most important devices in the legitimation of social action (Hart, 2018). Specifically, LIFE IS A JOURNEY is the metaphor which provides a rich and insightful narrative into the portrayal of their future and past lives.

This metaphor theme is in fact the “preferred pattern of imagery”, using Osborn’s (1967) words, connecting extra-textually the pieces of discourse instantiated in the speeches given by the

15 individual speakers. The centrality of this metaphor reverberates in our Western culture, with many examples such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400), Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) or Montesquieu’s imaginary journeys in his *Lettres Persanes* (1721) —undoubtedly, inspired by the conviction of empiricists such as John Locke for whom the source of all knowledge comes from experience— to mention but a few. There are also many other non-fictional journeys which are also part of our collective memory such as the journey to the moon (Darsey, 2009: 90). All this begs the question of why journeys play such a central role in our culture, whose answer seems to lie in the need of human beings to explore different places to discover and rediscover themselves as a learning experience each time.

The graduating ceremony, as said at the beginning of this paper, is a transition point in that journey where students celebrate the achievements attained through the time spent in college. This special moment is picked up and verbalized in many of the speeches delivered:

(17) They [graduation ceremonies] are a *unique milestone* in our lives, because they celebrate past accomplishments and future possibilities (Madeleine Albright, 2015).

This example touches on the issue of celebration resulting from this social event, but clearly points to the fact that this moment serves as a lookout point from where both directions (backwards and forwards) are visible. In any case, the imagery of a path — favoring the convergence of the past into the future in a day when such compression is so much needed— is clearly invoked when talking about how much progress has been covered by reaching one of the most important stages in life:

(18) Now that you’ve all thawed out, you will soon realize that graduation is *one of the five great milestones of life*; the others being birth, death, marriage and the day you finally pay off your student loans (Madeleine Albright, 2015).

Therefore, a key element of a journey, where some obstacles will be found, is having a certain direction in order to fulfill a goal or as Frye (1985) puts it: a journey is “a directed movement in time through space”. This kind of purposeful activity is part of the general metaphor LIFE IS A PURPOSEFUL JOURNEY (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). As evidence of this metaphor, many different speakers address the issue of finding that certain purpose as it will make their life more meaningful and focused:

(19) Don’t be afraid to fail big, to dream big, but remember *dreams without goals* are just dreams and they ultimately fuel disappointment. So, *have dream but have goals* (Denzel Washington, 2015).

As highlighted earlier, this kind of purpose can sometimes be represented as a kind of spiritual calling where they are given an important assignment which needs to be carried out in this world, since this is what they are here for. This can be seen in the following example:

(20) And what I’ve learned is, when you can do that, and create your work and your life based on an intention *to serve with purpose*, *make it your intention to serve through your life with purpose*, you will have a blessed life (Oprah Winfrey, 2017).

At this stage it may be interesting to wonder whether the journey metaphor is just a cliché in commencement speeches (Darsey, 2009) or if there is more to it in the repeated use of those expressions. In fact, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY instantiates the mapping TIME IS SPACE, where events such as graduation, being born, death, marriage or paying your student loans can be looked at in isolation and evoked at a comparatively low cognitive cost. As stated by some scholars (Coulson and Pagán, 2013), the compression of so much information in just a few relevant elements is successful precisely for two reasons: it reduces the amount of cognitive effort on the individual, and much of the conceptual complexity is left out.

Likewise, it is worth noting that in the case of Spielberg and Jeong, the metaphor they use is not exactly that of LIFE IS A JOURNEY, but LIFE IS A MOVIE/PERFORMANCE. However, this creative metaphor inherits all the structure from the journey metaphor as characters move from the beginning to the end of the movie. Besides, the milestones referred to in the journey scenario become, under the umbrella of this metaphor, 'character-defining moments' or 'acts', which equally touch on the idea of milestones:

(21) [...] what we call in the movies the 'character-defining moment.' [...] Life is one long string of character-defining moments [...] (Steven Spielberg, 2016).

(22) And you guys are finishing up *act one* of your story. [...] What is your *act two*? (Ken Jeong, 2019).

This powerful metaphor does not only connect the speaker with the audience's worldview, building common ground with them, but also persuades them into viewing what follows graduation day as a continuation of the same path of hard work, implying that if relying on hard work has proved to be successful so far following the same road seems to be a guarantee of more success. However, there is one important difference to be taken into account for the way ahead as adults, which is the need to reach out to the community to make the American Dream a reality.

4.4.2. EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER

Through this story line, which fits in perfectly with the merit-based legitimating strategy, education is talked about by several speakers in a number of ways, but they all point to the idea of a power or a habilitating object or path. This means that education works as an element which allows students to climb up the social ladder—very much in line with the STAIR metaphor (Littler, 2018) capturing this narrative—by allowing students to take the enriching walk, by giving them the much-needed push to move up in life or by opening doors into those new spaces:

(23) Public education is *our greatest pathway* to opportunity in America. So we need to invest in and strengthen our public universities today, and for generations to come (Michelle Obama, 2016).

(24) My parents did not have many educational opportunities themselves growing up, but they and especially my mom made education the center value of the lives of my brother and me, who my mom raised alone after I was nine. She repeatedly, just like your mother, told me that education *would open the door of opportunity* (Sonia Sotomayor, 2019).

(25) Education is transformative. It literally changes lives. That is why people over the centuries have worked so hard to become educated. Education, *more than any other force*, can help to erase arbitrary divisions of race and class and culture [...] (Condoleezza Rice, 2015).

The discourse of education as an empowering feature—an essential piece of the rhetoric accompanying the concept of the 'American Dream' (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003)—is a narrative which reproduces the discourse of meritocracy (AEI, 2015).

However, reality denies the feasibility of this meritocratic approach in a society such as the American one, which has been characterized over the last few decades by declining social mobility and rising structural inequality (Wyatt-Nichol, 2011). Further along this line of thinking, Littler argues that "Meritocracy offers a ladder system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community" (2018: 3). In spite of all that, "Politicians on both sides of the aisle celebrate the American Dream, the ideal that talented people who work hard and play by the rules can get ahead, irrespective of their family backgrounds" (Frank, 2016: 145). Nevertheless, the social and educational reality among the different social groups within the country "reveal a great deal about how the crosscurrents of family, economics, ethnicity, and schools influence kids' opportunities" (Putnam, 2016: 138). The decline in

investment in public education over the last few years has jeopardized equality in educational opportunities (Frank, 2016: 88). This is so as a result of the fact that only higher income families are able to compensate for the lower quality and lack of offer in public education programs resorting to either private schools or the so-called Shadow Education—private supplementary tutoring beyond the hours of formal schooling (Buchmann et al., 2010).

This systematic structural inequality—regarding the different educational opportunities depending on social class—is clearly evidenced in the following statement: "[...] high-scoring poor kids are now slightly less likely (29 percent) to get a college degree than low-scoring rich kids (30 percent)". This fact "is particularly hard to square with the idea at the heart of the American Dream: equality of opportunity" (Putnam, 2016: 190). Likewise, the rate of access to higher education, back in 2018, was just 30% for children from the poorest 10% of the United States, and more than 90% for children from the richest 10% (Piketty, 2021: graph 31). Regarding investment in children's education, a huge gap holding between elites and the rest of the population has equally been reported by Putnam (2016: 168–69), Frank (2016: 145) and Markovits (2019: 326).

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored how the rite of passage of commencement speeches constitutes an implicit legitimating act based on a meritocratic worldview of American society, which reflects the myth of the American Dream. In other words, through this ritual, commencement speakers seek to legitimize the trajectory of hard work and self-commitment taken so far while inviting students to stay on the same road, since it has allowed them to come this far. However, when looking into the future—the only time when the dream may come true, graduates are asked to widen the focus to include the community, as can be seen, for instance, in the words by Spielberg (2016) "We have to replace fear with curiosity. 'Us' and 'them'. We'll find the 'we' by connecting with each other. And by believing that we're members of the same tribe. And by feeling empathy for every soul." In fact, commencement speeches resolve the conflictive tension in the American Dream between the principles of 'individualism' and the 'contribution to the community' by blending both elements and making them basic pillars of the graduates' life projects. Relating this analysis to that conducted by Rutherford (2004), it can be seen that the two patterns identified by this scholar in her exhaustive analysis of commencement speeches (from 1900 to 2000) persist in our study: a kind of "rhetoric that takes for granted individual choice" (605), which would match our category of 'self-commitment'; and a concern for "collective morality" (605), which would correspond to our category of 'altruism'.

Four strategies seem to be key behind this social practice when addressing graduating students: authorization, self-commitment, altruism and mythopoesis, as already seen in the analysis section. When accounting for the data, two critical approaches have been adopted: CDA and CMA, together with insights from the discourse of meritocracy. They both work together nicely when creating a narrative which grabs the audience's attention while making the speaker "sound right" (Charteris-Black, 2011, 2018), which goes a long way towards validating their proposals.

In the graduating ceremony, a very stimulating and challenging context is laid out in front of students; firstly, because these students are reinforced in their role as winners since they are the best representation of the meritocratic discourse come true; secondly, because commencement speakers will typically evoke the best version of students in a projected future, when they are expected to become role models themselves for their community.

Looking back at the four strategies analyzed, one of the interesting findings of this paper is that both self-commitment (78 tokens), as an appeal to personal effort, and altruism (64 tokens), as a moral appeal to ethics, permeate every single commencement speech in our corpus, thus revealing themselves as the two defining features of this type of genre. This is so because one's success attains its true significance if and only if it is linked to the community that one is part of. Otherwise, it would be a success *in vacuo* and would not contribute to the advancement of the community. Even though self-commitment is the strategy that epitomizes the conception of the American Dream—in the sense of offering equal opportunities for every citizen (Churchwell, 2021; Schiller, 2017), it is combined with the strategy of 'altruism'—as the needed extension of a community-based perspective—in an attempt to bridge the growing distrust between the graduating students, as elites, and the working classes. The combination of both strategies is likely to sound familiar in the audience's minds.

On the other hand, it is also worth emphasizing the important role of the strategy of mythopoesis, which creates a very strong link with the audience by tapping into very basic and shared human experiences. As claimed by Charteris-Black (2018), the use of language that is colorful and memorable seems to contribute to relating to the audience: (1) LIFE IS A JOURNEY, as a main storyline which gives structure and provides meaning to the students' lives. Within this metaphor, the element of 'purpose' should be also highlighted due to its value as a type of "inner GPS" (Winfrey, 2017); (2) EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER, which presents a very motivating narrative of the powerful dimension of education to make the American Dream come true. At the same time, both story lines sound very persuasive to the audience since they relate to their worldview: both through the path of hard work (and success) and the ladder system of social mobility seen in LIFE IS A JOURNEY and EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER.

The linguistic evidence pointing to the existence of these two conceptual metaphors reveals the following: (a) 'LIFE IS A JOURNEY' simplifies the complexity of what is talked about ('life') by portraying it as a continuous path where there are "start and end points connected by a path and entities that move along the path" (source-path-goal) (Charteris-Black, 2011: 66). This is the result of our embodied experience where we know what is in front of us because we can see it; therefore, forward motion, which is inherently positive as goals are ahead of us, is always valued very positively. Besides, this schema is rhetorically attractive because it makes it easy for addressees to align with the speaker and see

themselves projected on the path making a purposeful journey; (b) 'EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER' emphasizes the positive nature of education by focusing on what it makes possible: graduates are able to reach certain places (in line with the path schema), they feel empowered to go beyond their limits or they are pushed up the social ladder by the force of education. This idea fits in perfectly with the remark made by Larry Cuban in his last book (2021), where he claims that in the USA there is a strong confidence in education both as an escalator to achieve the individual's goals and as a pathway to strengthen the American ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence (Cuban, 2021).

Finally, commencement speeches serve as an excellent channel to tell stories, even if they will be forgotten the day after, as claimed by some commencement speakers—Bush (2015) and Spielberg (2016). It should be mentioned that the graduation ceremony is part of the ritual in which students need to participate, symbolizing admission to join the privileged community of educated people, which obviously is not internally homogenous, owing to differences in social class, gender and race. Hence, telling stories—either through connecting with a shared worldview sustained on the myth of the American Dream (meritocracy and common good) or through conceptual metaphors—does two jobs at the same time: building common ground with the audience and transmitting a persuasive view of what is expected of them on the path that lies ahead.

As Lilla Belle Pitts, professor at Teachers College (Columbia University), wrote several decades ago, "since the founding of our republic" the aim of American education is "namely, to aid in developing intelligent citizens, likely 'to be publicly useful and privately happy'" (Pitts, 1937: 33).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Victoria Martín de la Rosa: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Luis Miguel Lázaro:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix

Appendix 1

Table providing the categories analyzed and number of occurrences for each of the speakers.

	Authorization	Self-commitment "working hard"	Altruism "common good"	Mythopoesis (1) LIFE IS A JOURNEY	Mythopoesis (2) EDUCATION IS AN ENABLER
	<i>Their choice as speakers is evidence that they are all authorized voices</i>	<i>number of tokens</i>	<i>number of tokens</i>	<i>number of tokens</i>	<i>number of tokens</i>
Albright, Madeleine	V	5	4	6	-
Bush, George	V	4	3	1	1
Clinton, Hillary	V	5	4	3	-
Cook, Tim	V	5	7	7	-
Davis, Viola	V	5	6	2	-
Jeong, Ken	V	7	1	7	-
Obama, Barack	V	4	4	8	-
Obama, Michelle	V	7	6	9	2
Romney, Mitt	V	6	6	8	-
Rice, Condoleezza	V	2	2	6	3
Sandberg, Sheryl	V	2	3	7	-
Sotomayor, Sonia	V	5	4	3	8
Spielberg, Steven	V	6	5	8	1
Washington, Denzel	V	8	3	13	-
Winfrey, Oprah	V	7	6	3	-
TOTAL		78	64	92	15

References

- Adams, J. T. (1931). *The epic of America*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- AEI-Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity. (2015). *Opportunity, responsibility, and security: A consensus plan for reducing poverty and restoring the American dream*. AEI-Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/opportunity-responsibility-and-security-a-consensus-plan-for-reducing-poverty-and-restoring-the-american-dream/> Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Albright, M. (2015). Commencement speech delivered at Tufts university. Retrieved from <https://now.tufts.edu/commencement2015/speeches/albright>. Accessed January 23, 2021.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Beach, J. M. (2007). The ideology of the American dream: Two competing philosophies in education, 1776–2006. *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 41(2), 148–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131940701312488>.
- Bell, D. (1972). On meritocracy and equality. *The Public Interest*, 29, 29–68.
- Berger, P., & Luckman, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bhatia, V. K. (2010). Interdiscursivity in professional communication. *Discourse and Communication*, 4(1), 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481309351208>.
- Billingsley, A. (1999). *Mighty like a river: The black church and social reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1979). *The inheritors: French students and their relations to culture*. University of Chicago Press First Edition in French 1964.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: SAGE.
- Brubacher, J. S. (1978). Introduction: The traditions of commencement. In F. H. Horn (Ed.), *Go forth, be strong: Advice and reflections from commencement speakers* (pp. XXV–XXXIII). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Buchmann, C., Condrón, D. J., & Roscigno, V. J. (2010). *Shadow education, American style: Test preparation, the SAT and college enrollment*. *Social Forces*: 89(2) (pp. 435–461). American.
- Budd, L. J. (1956). Altruism arrives in America. *American Quarterly*, 8(1), 40–52.
- Bush, G.W. (2015). Commencement speech delivered at Southern Methodist University. Retrieved from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?325962-1/president-george-w-bush-commencement-address-smu>. Accessed January 25, 2021.
- Cap, P. (2008). Towards the proximization model of the analysis of legitimization in political discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 17–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2007.10.002>.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2004). *Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2018). *Analysing political speeches: Rhetoric, discourse and metaphor* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Chatters, L. M., Taylor, R. J., Bullard, K. M., & Jackson, J. S. (2009). Race and ethnic differences in religious involvement: African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and non-hispanic whites. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32(7), 1143–1163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870802334531>.
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Churchwell, S. (2021). A brief history of the 'American Dream'. *The Catalyst*, 21. Retrieved from <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/state-of-the-american-dream/churchwell-history-of-the-american-dream.html>. Accessed January 8, 2022.
- Clinton, H. (2018). Commencement speech delivered at Yale University. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJFABYAtC4U>. Accessed January 23, 2021.
- Collins, R. (1979). *The credential society. An historical sociology of education and stratification*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Collins, R. (2005). *Interaction ritual chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cook, T. (2017). Commencement speech delivered at Massachusetts institute of technology. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckjkz8zuMMs>. Accessed February 5, 2021.
- Coulson, S., & Pagán, C. (2013). Understanding timelines: Conceptual metaphor and conceptual integration. *Cognitive Semiotics*, 5(1–2), 198–219. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogsem.2013.5.12.198>.
- Cuban, L. (2021). *Confessions of a school reformer*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Darsey, J. (2009). Barack Obama and America's journey. *Southern Communication Journal*, 74(1), 88–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802571151>.
- Davis, V. (2019). Commencement speech delivered at Barnard college. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZDVtT82Os>. Accessed March 6, 2021.
- DeSante, C. (2013). Working twice as hard to get half as far: Race, work ethic, and America's deserving poor. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(2), 342–356. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12006>.
- Dore, R. (1976). *The diploma disease: Education, qualification and development*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Intertextuality in critical discourse analysis. *Linguistics and Education*, 4(3), 269–293. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898\(92\)90004-G](https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898(92)90004-G).
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis. The critical study of language*. London/New York: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse. Textual analysis for social research*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Fopp, R. (2009). Metaphors in homelessness discourse and research: Exploring "Pathways", "Careers" and "Safety Nets". *Housing, Theory and Society*, 26(4), 271–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036090802476564>.
- Frank, R. H. (2016). *Success and luck. Good fortune and the myth of meritocracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Frye, N. (1985). The journey as metaphor. In L. Adamson, & J. Wilson (Eds.), *The secular scripture and other writings on critical theory* (pp. 408–422). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1976–1991.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The poetics of mind-figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, C. (2018). Riots engulfed the city: An experimental study investigating the legitimating effects of fire metaphors in discourses of disorder. *Discourse and Society*, 29(3), 279–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926517734663>.
- Hartman, K. (2008). *The development of a genre: Commencement addresses delivered by popular cultural icons. Master's degree of fine arts*. University of Texas San Luis. Retrieved from <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/3941/fulltext.pdf>. Accessed January 4, 2021.
- Hochschild, J. L., & Scovronick, N. (2003). *The American Dream and the public schools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Campbell, K. (1982). Rhetorical hybrids: Fusions of generic elements. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68(2), 146–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638209383600>.
- Jeong, K. (2019). Commencement speech delivered at North Carolina Greenboro. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1SwwWp6mSo>. Accessed March 6, 2021.
- Johnson, E. (2010). Sculpting public opinion: Understanding the (mis)use of metaphor in the media. In C. Hart, & D. Lukeš (Eds.), *Cognitive linguistics in critical discourse analysis: Application and theory* (pp. 28–56). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Jones, J., & Wareing, S. (1999). Language and politics. In L. Thomas, & S. Wareing (Eds.), *Language, society and power: An introduction* (pp. 31–47). London/New York: Routledge.
- Kecskes, I. (2019). *English as a lingua franca: The pragmatic perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, C. P. (1993). Rhetorical genre: The countercommencement address as jeremiad. In *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the western states communication association* Paper presented at the (64th, Albuquerque, NM, February 12–16, 1993). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED357406.pdf>. Accessed December 12, 2020.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Littler, J. (2018). *Against meritocracy. Culture, power and myths of mobility*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Manning, K. (2000). *Rituals, ceremonies, and cultural meaning in higher education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Markovits, D. (2019). *The meritocracy trap: How American's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite*. London/New York: Penguin Books.
- Martín de la Rosa, V., & Lázaro, L. M. (2017). A cognitive-based approach to President Obama's educational discourse through the lens of his State of the Union addresses (2009–2016). *Ibérica*, 33, 191–211.
- Martín de la Rosa, V., & Lázaro, L. M. (2019). How women are imagined through conceptual metaphors in United Nations Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(4), 373–386.
- Martín Rojo, L. (1995). Division and rejection: From the personification of the Gulf conflict to the demonization of Saddam Hussein. *Discourse and Society*, 6(1), 49–80.
- Miller, P. J. (1995). Personal storytelling in everyday life: Social and cultural perspectives. In R. S. Wyer (Ed.), *Knowledge and memory: The real story* (pp. 177–184). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Musolf, A. (2007). What role do metaphors play in racial prejudice? The function of anti-Semitic imagery in Hitler's Mein Kampf. *Patterns Prejudice*, 41(1), 21–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220601118744>.
- Musolf, A. (2012). The study of metaphor as part of critical discourse analysis. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9(3), 301–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.688300>.
- Ng, C. J. W. (2020). Metaphor. In J. Flowerdew, & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of metaphor* (pp. 215–227). London/New York: Routledge.
- Obama, B. (2016). Commencement speech delivered at Rutgers university. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkCABjFT32A>. Accessed January 28, 2021.
- Obama, M. (2016). Commencement speech delivered at City College of New York. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/03/remarks-first-lady-city-college-new-york-commencement>. Accessed March 8, 2021.
- Osborn, M. (1967). Archetypal metaphor in rhetoric: The light-dark family. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 53(2), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335636709382823>.
- Partch, J., & Kinnier, R. T. (2011). Values and messages conveyed in college commencement speeches. *Current Psychology*, 30(1), 81–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-011-9101-6>.

- Piketty, T. (2021). *Une brève histoire de l'égalité*: 31. Paris: Éditions du SEUIL Chap. 8. GraphRetrieved from <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/egalite> Accessed January 14, 2022.
- Pitts, L. B. (1937). Music education, isolated or integrated. *Music Educators Journal*, 24(1) 33 y 71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3385492>.
- Pragglejaz Group. (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 22(1), 1–39.
- Putnam, R. D. (2016). *Our kids. The American Dream in crisis*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Reyes, A. (2011). Strategies of legitimization in political discourse: From words to actions. *Discourse and Society*, 22(6), 781–807. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511419927>.
- Rice, C. (2015). Commencement speech delivered at College of William and Mary. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVNIYpP3_cM. Accessed February 5, 2021.
- Ritchie, L. D. (2012). Metaphor and stories in discourse about personal and social change. In B. Wagoner, E. Jensen, & J. A. Oldmeadow (Eds.), *Culture and social change: Transforming society through the power of ideas* (pp. 99–118). Charlotte, NC: IAP Information Age Publishing.
- Ritchie, L. D. (2013). *Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ritchie, L. D. (2017). *Metaphorical stories in discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Romney, M. (2016). Commencement speech delivered at Trine university. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgwr77AQ4XE>. Accessed February 5, 2021.
- Rutherford, M. B. (2004). Authority, autonomy, and ambivalence: Moral choice in twentieth-century commencement speeches. *Sociological Forum Volume*, 19(4), 583–609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11206-004-0697-2>.
- Sandberg, S. (2018). Commencement speech delivered at Massachusetts institute of technology. Retrieved from <https://news.mit.edu/2018/sheryl-sandberg-commencement-address-0608#:~:Text=Class%20of%202018%2C%20it%20is,%20would%20work%20in%20technology>. Accessed January 22, 2021.
- Sandel, M. J. (2012). *What money can buy. The moral limits of markets*. New York, NY: Farrar: Straus and Giroux.
- Sandel, M. J. (2021). *The tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?*. London: Penguin Books.
- Schiller, R.J. (2017). The transformation of the 'American Dream'. *The New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/upshot/the-transformation-of-the-american-dream.html>. Accessed January 3, 2021.
- Semino, E. (2008). *Metaphor in discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Semino, E., Demjén, Z., Hardie, A., Payne, S., & Rayson, P. (2018). *Metaphor, cancer and the end of life: A corpus-based study*. London: Routledge.
- Solly, M. (2012). Dialogic monologues: Commencement speeches as an evolving genre. In G. E. Garzone, P. Catenaccio, & C. Degano (Eds.), *Genre change in the contemporary world* (pp. 99–114). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Solly, M. (2014). Giving graduates an earful: Identity and interaction in commencement speeches. In P. E. Allori (Ed.), *Identities in and across cultures* (pp. 165–184). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Sotomayor, S. (2019). Commencement speech delivered at Manhattan college. Retrieved from <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/08/23/commencement-address-at-manhattan-college-may-17-2019/>. Accessed January 25, 2021.
- Spielberg, S. (2016). Commencement speech delivered at Harvard university. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYtoDunfu00>. Accessed February 5, 2021.
- Taylor, R. J., & Chatters, L. M. (2010). Importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic Whites. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 79(3), 280–294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20798349>.
- Vaara, E., & Tienari, J. (2008). A discursive perspective on legitimation strategies in multinational corporations. *The Academy of Management Review*, 33(4), 985–993. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2008.34422019>.
- van Dijk, T. (1992). Discourse and the denial of racism. *Discourse and Society*, 3, 87–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926592003001005>.
- van Dijk, T. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: SAGE.
- van Dijk, T. (2005). Política, ideología y discurso. *Quórum Académico*, 2(2), 15–47.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. Introducing social semiotics. *Discourse and Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Leeuwen, T., & Wodak, R. (1999). Legitimizing immigration control: A discourse historical analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 1(1), 83–119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001001005>.
- Wall, K., & Ferguson, G. (1998). *Rites of passage. celebrating life's changes*. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing, Inc.
- Washington, D. (2015). Commencement speech delivered at Dillard University. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROiNPUwg9bQ>. Accessed January 23, 2021.
- Winfrey, O. (2017). Commencement speech delivered at Smith College. Retrieved from <https://speakola.com/grad/oprah-winfrey-smith-university-2017> Accessed January 23, 2021.
- Wodak, R. (1989). *Language, power and ideology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Wodak, R., Meyer, M., Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory, and methodology. In *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 1–34). London: SAGE.
- Woodriddle, A. (2021). *The aristocracy of talent. How meritocracy made the modern world*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Wyatt-Nichol, H. (2011). The enduring myth of the American Dream: Movility, marginalization, and hope. *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behaviour*, 14(2), 258–279. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOTB-14-02-2011-B006>.
- Young, M. (2017). *The rise of the meritocracy*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Zhu, Y. (2018). An intercultural analysis of personal metadiscourse in English and Chinese commencement speeches. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9(5), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.7575/AIAC.CALLS.V.9N.5P100>.