

Searching the Origins of Political Discourse – An Intertextual Analysis of Ronald Reagan’s Farewell Speech

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Abstract: The aim of the investigation is to present the relation between political and religious discourse on the basis of intertextual elements linking the two types of discourse. A presidential speech by Ronald Reagan, delivered in the Oval Office at the White House on January 11, 1983, constitutes the material for the research. The emphasis of the study is placed on the fragments referring to “the shining city upon the hill”, *i.e.* to the most frequently used metaphor by the president. The roots of the afore mentioned parts belong to religious discourse. They can be found primarily in a sermon by John Winthrop – one of the Puritans – who came to America in 1630. Nevertheless, it is not the sole source of references. While preparing his “Modell of Christian Charity”, John Winthrop referred to the Bible. Words considering “the city upon the hill” are to be found in the Gospel (Mt 5, 14). The analysed fragment of the “Sermon on the Mount”, *i.e.*, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden (...)” deals with advice on the lifestyle of Jesus’s followers and obviously serves as an example of religious discourse as well.

Keywords: discourse analysis, intertextuality, hypotext, intertext, hypertext

Evolution can be seen as “a process of change in a certain direction”¹. It denotes a gradual development from simpler to more sophisticated forms which takes place within some time. In this article intertextuality is treated as a tool enabling an exploration of the evolutionary aspects of discourse. The aim of the investigation thereby is to present the interrelationship between political and religious discourse by focusing on intertextual elements linking the two types of discourses. The material analysed comprises a selected fragment of Ronald Reagan’s speech delivered in the Oval Office at the White House on January 11, 1983. Based on brief theoretical considerations on discourse, as well as the phenomenon of intertextuality, an intertextual analysis of the address shall be conducted.

1. An Understanding of Discourse

Beginning their considerations on discourse analysis, Brown and Yule state that this discipline “has come to be used with a wide range of meanings which cover a wide range of activities. It is used to describe activities at the intersection of disciplines as diverse as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophical linguistics and

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>. Retrieved March 10, 2014.

computational linguistics” (Brown, Yule, ([1983] 1987, p. viii). Researchers working in these areas approach the notion of discourse from different perspectives and focus on different aspects of it. Consequently, a proper understanding of discourse requires interdisciplinary research involving linguistics and other areas like psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural and communicational studies.

Out of the whole range of different definitions of discourse¹, the one provided by Deborah Schiffrin ([1994] 1997) seems useful for this analysis. She understands discourse in terms of utterances being contextualized units of language production. In this manner, the researcher combines the elements of two basic approaches to defining discourse, *i.e.* formal and functional. As she states “[d]iscourse is often defined in two ways: a particular unit of language (above the sentence), and a particular focus (on language use (...)). These two definitions of discourse reflect the difference between formalist and functionalist paradigms” (Schiffrin, [1994] 1997, pp. 20-21). Whereas in the first situation emphasis is put on linguistic code and its structural analysis, in the second it is the use of language with its specific purpose that plays the leading role. As neither of the paradigms can provide a complete description of discourse, Schiffrin ([1994] 1997, p. 41) suggests a definition which “sits at the intersection of structure and function.” She further explains that “[t]his view captures the idea that discourse is “above” (larger than) other units of language; however, by saying that utterance (rather than sentence) is the smaller unit of which discourse is comprised, we can suggest that discourse arises not as a collection of decontextualized units of language structure, but as a collection of inherently contextualized units of language use” (Schiffrin, ([1994] 1997, p. 39). Therefore, understanding discourse as utterances denotes treating discourse as a group of linguistic units that are embedded in context. According to Schiffrin ([1994] 1997, p. 41) those “units of language production” can be both spoken and written. As long as they are communicative, we can treat them like texts. Consequently, discourse becomes an entity consisting of texts and their nonverbal environment in the form of context.

The relation between text and discourse may be depicted in the following way: texts, “being singular realization[s] of a particular discourse,” constitute the core of each discourse (Chruszczewski, 2011, p. 205). They occupy the central position in any kind of discourse and determine the type of this phenomenon. They can function as a series of utterances, not necessarily related by the same time or place, yet connected by some common feature, such as register or situation (Chruszczewski, 2000, p. 82). Based on this feature one can distinguish, for example, religious, political, educational, medical, literary or military discourse. If we consider political discourse, we will see that it consists of different texts concerning the economy, education, medical treatment etc. Nevertheless, as long as these texts are parts of various speeches delivered by politicians, e.g. during an electoral campaign, they will be treated as elements of

¹ see for example: Foucault ([1969] 1972), Fairclough (1995), Kalaga (1997), van Dijk (2007, 2012), Labocha (2008), Witosz (2009).

political discourse. Similarly, different texts, produced by different people in different conditions, but referring to issues of theology, denomination, worship or the *sacrum* in general will represent religious discourse.

2. The Notion of Intertextuality

The term intertextuality, coined by Julia Kristeva ([1967] 1986), although primarily connected with literary studies, has become widely recognized within the linguistic tradition. In "Introduction to Text Linguistics," Robert-Alain de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Ulrich Dressler enumerate intertextuality as one of the preconditions for creating a text. They perceive it in terms of "the factors which make the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts (de Beaugrande, Dressler, [1981] 1986, p. 10). In other words, texts do not exist in a vacuum, and in order to "utilize" or simply to understand them, we have to refer to knowledge of preceding texts. This knowledge, however, can be graduated and described by the process of "mediation". According to de Beaugrande and Dressler ([1981] 1986, p. 182), mediation is increasing, together with the difficulty of processing activities and the increasing time span between a particular text and texts encountered earlier. On the other hand, it gets much smaller when quoting or referring to widely recognized texts. Finally, it is the slightest while summarizing, reporting or e.g. evaluating other texts (*ibid.*). Therefore, while thinking about political discourse, it is easier for the reader to associate a text (e.g. a headline in a nationwide newspaper) with the recent utterance of a well-known politician than to find similarities between such a headline and a text uttered by a local activist some time ago.

While considering intertextuality, one cannot omit the central notion of intertext. Anna Duszak (1998, p. 220) suggests an etymological explanation, defining intertext as "a text situated **between** other texts." What interests her, is the meaning of the word "between," the signals of being "between" and constituents of intertextual knowledge of language users. Finally, she states that "intertext is a sign – and similarly to any other sign – it undergoes a semiotic analysis, encompassing the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic spheres. Thus, in order to understand the semiotic nature of intertext, it needs to be referred to by the users (pragmatic aspect), other intertexts (syntactic aspect) and the reality expressed by them (semantic aspect)" (*ibid.*)¹. To put it differently, any intertext (containing traces of a previous text) is surrounded by other intertexts, depends upon (the knowledge of) the users and represents a particular reality.

¹ „ (...) intertekst jest znakiem i – podobnie jak każdy inny znak podlega analizie semiotycznej obejmującej płaszczyznę syntaktyczną, semantyczną i pragmatyczną. Oznacza to, iż dla zrozumienia znakowej natury intertekstu potrzebne jest odniesienie go do użytkowników (aspekt pragmatyczny), do innych intertekstów (aspekt syntaktyczny) i rzeczywistości przez nie wyrażanej (aspekt semantyczny)”.

In order to emphasise the idea that a single intertext is situated between other texts, I refer to the terminology introduced by Gérard Genette ([1982] 1997). According to him, a preceding text (hypotext) is transformed or “grafted” (Genette, ([1982] 1997, p. 5) onto the following one, *i.e.*, to hypertext¹. Although these terms have a literary background, as they were primarily used for literary studies, I consider them useful for this analysis. The relationship between hypotext, intertext and hypertext can be depicted in the following way (Figure 1):

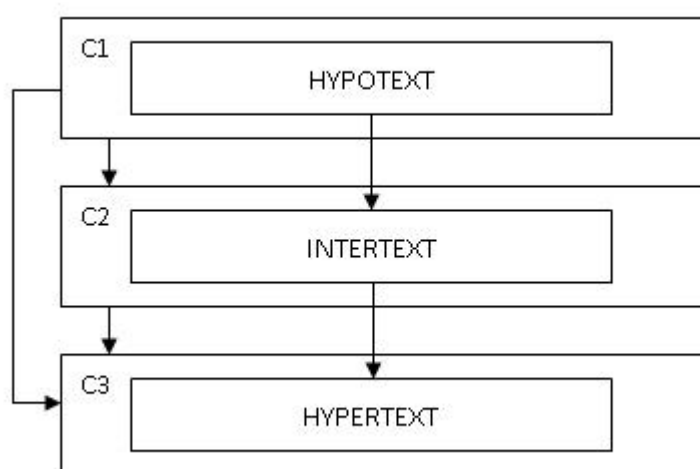


Figure 1 A schematic illustration of the relationship between hypotext, intertext and hypertext²

Hypotext constitutes the first source of references for the two remaining texts. There is a direct connection between hypotext and intertext, which is further transformed into a hypertext. Each of these texts is embedded in a particular context (C1, C2, C3), that also influence one another. The arrows show the direction of transformations in a chronological way. However, from the perspective of a hypertext, the sequence of textual references is opposite. It is the hypertext that directs the receiver to the intertext with its context and then to the hypotext (also with its contextual embeddings). Direct connection between a hypertext and a hypotext is possible in the situation where there is a lack of knowledge of the intertext. Based on this model, an intertextual analysis of political discourse shall be conducted.

¹ Both hypotext and hypertext result from the concept of Genette’s hypertextuality (which next to intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality and metatextuality are covered by the general term of transtextuality). For the whole discussion of the problem, see Gérard Genette ([1982] 1997). Compare the illustration of the relation between intertextuality and hypertextuality in Głowiński ([1986] 2000).

² Compare it with an illustration of intertextual references provided by T. Górski (2004, p. 105).

3. An Intertextual Analysis of Ronald Reagan's Speech

In our case, the hypertext is the final fragment of the farewell speech by Ronald Reagan. Delivered in the Oval Office on January 11, 1983, after eight years of presidency, it involves a sort of summary of this time. The fragment selected for analysis refers to "the shining city upon the hill"¹, *i.e.* to the most frequently used metaphor by the president. The roots of the aforementioned part can be found in the intertext, *i.e.*, a sermon by John Winthrop – a Puritan leader – who came to America in 1630. As Reagan explains, "[t]he phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined."² Entitled "Modell of Christian Charity" and prepared on board the ship Arbella, it was delivered to the passengers just before disembarking and entering this new land³. Finally, the examination of the hypertext and intertext leads to the hypotext, namely, to the Bible. Words concerning "the shining city upon the hill"⁴ are to be found in Matthew (Mt 5, 14). They function as a fragment of the "Sermon on the Mount"⁵ and deal with advice on the lifestyle of Jesus' followers.

The hypertext⁶ can be divided into the following five arguments that constitute closed entities, developing a single thought of the author:

1. *And that's about all I have to say tonight, except for one thing. The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the "shining city upon a hill."*

The quotation above provides an introduction to the discussion of the metaphor. The speaker familiarizes the receivers (gathered before TV screens throughout America) with the situational embedding. The window that he mentions comes from his apartment⁷. The fact of looking out of it gives him an opportunity for reflection.

The text constitutes the first reference both to the intertext and the hypotext. The "shining city upon a hill" from the hypertext refers to "a city upon a hill"⁸ in the intertext and "[a] city built on a hill (...)" (Mt 5, 14) in the hypotext. The adjective "shining," used as a constituent of a noun phrase, appears only in the presidential address. In the hypotext, the above mentioned noun phrase is preceded by a sentence: "You are the light of the world" (*ibid.*) and followed by two verses: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may

¹ <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

² <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

³ <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>, Retrieved March 18, 2014

⁴ <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

⁵ see the linguistic analysis of the "Sermon on the Mount" in the text of A. Wierzbicka (2001)

⁶ The text of the speech: <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

⁷ compare with the text of the whole speech

⁸ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/winthmod.html>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5, 15–16). As both parts refer to light, they can be associated with an image of a shining city.

The idea of light is also used in Winthrop’s speech. A direct quotation from Isaiah 58 (6–10) mentions it twice:

Is not this the fast I have chosen to loose the bonds of wickedness, to take off the heavy burdens, to lett the oppressed go free and to breake every yoake, to deale thy bread to the hungry and to bring the poore that wander into thy house, when thou seest the naked to cover them; and then shall thy light brake forth as the morning and thy healthe shall growe speedily, thy righteousness shall goe before God, and the glory of the Lord shalt embrace thee; then thou shall call and the Lord shall answer thee (...). If thou power out thy soule to the hungry, then shall thy light spring out in darkness, and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfie thy soule in draught, and make falt thy bones, thou shalt be like a watered garden, and they shalt be of thee that shall build the old wast places (...)¹

The fragment above comes from an earlier part of Winthrop’s utterance and provides a set of guidelines on how to make one’s “light spring out in darkness” (*ibid.*). Although it does not accompany the words considering the city upon a hill, it describes a desirable lifestyle of the citizens-to-be. By enumerating various task to perform, it reflects the preconditions for creating “the shining city upon a hill.”²

2. *The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.*

The speaker limits the source of reference to the intertext. He indicates Winthrop’s address as the origin of the metaphor. In the hypotext, Jesus directs his words concerning light and the city upon a hill to all his followers. They should be like a city situated on a mount and function as a light for the world, indicating the way for others to behave. In the intertext the receivers of the message are narrowed to the inhabitants of America. However the task that is given to them, is similar. They have to be aware that “[t]he eies of all people are upon [them]”³ and consequently follow the rules specified in “Modell of Christian Charity.”

By referring to historical information, Reagan submerges the addressees into the context of the intertext and provides information on its situational, social and cultural aspects. The text was created in the 17th century among those who journeyed to

¹ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/winthmod.html>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

² <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

³ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/winthmod.html>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

America in the search for freedom. They were Puritans trying to avoid persecution and travelling on a ship from England to New England. The author presents his vision of the new land and, based on the Bible, states that it is supposed to be as “a city upon a hill” (*ibid.*).

3. *I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.*

This part constitutes a development of the idea set both in the intertext and the hypotext. Whereas John Winthrop states: "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us (...),"¹ in the Bible we can read: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden (...)" (Mt 5, 14). Neither of the two texts includes the suggestions considering the appearance of the place. However, in the hypertext there is a detailed and emotional description of the speaker's vision of the city. The theme taken from Winthrop's address functions as a basis for the explanation of Reagan's words.

The president refers to his own earlier usages of the metaphor, *i.e.*, to other examples of intertexts situated between his farewell speech and Winthrop's utterance. He describes the city as a fortress built on a firm ground and with stable foundations. At the same time he directs the receiver to other biblical sources, which can be treated as further examples of intertexts (compare e.g. Luke 6, 48, Matthew 7, 24-25 and Matthew 16, 18). The city resembles the biblical house, which, in order to fulfil its role, should be founded on rocks instead of sand. Its inhabitants live in peace and in a state of harmony. The ports are free and hum with activity. The doors are open and invite everyone to come in. Because of the stable foundations, even natural powers are unable to disturb the idyllic life of its citizens. The city, although windswept and exposed to the oceans, seems to be a divinely blessed fortress with happiness spreading all around.

4. *And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.*

¹ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/winthmod.html>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

The explanation of the metaphor is followed by its use to describe America. The “city” becomes an equivalent of the USA. By posing the first question, the speaker aims at assessing the condition of the country. He starts with the context of the hypertext, delivered on 11 January, 1989, at the final moment of his presidency. In order to indicate the progress that has taken place over an eight year span, Reagan juxtaposes the situation at the beginning and at the end of presidency. He concludes that the city has become “[m]ore prosperous, more secure, and happier.”¹ Despite the history of two hundred years, America still performs the role of “the shining city upon a hill” (*ibid.*). As the author reflects: “she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm” (*ibid.*).

Due to the intertextual links and clear references both to inter- and hypertext, the speaker emphasizes the vision of America as a chosen, perfect nation, being a guiding light for the world. According to him, America is like a beacon for pilgrims seeking home. In other words, it signals the right direction for all those who might be lost in darkness. Having treated a beacon as a fire, placed in the past on top of the hill, we obtain an image which is again associated with the metaphor discussed of the shining city, and refers to the religious discourse of the Bible and Winthrop’s speech.

5. *We’ve done our part. And as I walk off into the city streets, a final word to the men and women of the Reagan revolution, the men and women across America who for 8 years did the work that brought America back. My friends: We did it. We weren’t just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger, we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands.*

The final fragment continues the previously undertaken topic. The “city” (or the USA), in Reagan’s opinion, is stronger and freer than eight years ago. Highly emotional tone of the argument results in the use of the first person plural which includes the author to “the men and women of the Reagan’s revolution” (*ibid.*). The speaker turns to his “friends” and continues “We did it. We weren't just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger, we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands” (*ibid.*). He comes back to the idea of the city (either from Winthrop’s intertext or the Biblical hypotext) in order to show the change that has been made. Due to “the Reagan revolution,” the city seems to be more powerful, freer and ready for future challenges.

4. Conclusions

Discourse, understood in terms of contextualized units of language, can be classified into different categories. The presidential farewell speech delivered by Ronald Reagan at the White House and summing up his two terms, constitutes an example of political

¹ <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>, Retrieved April 3, 2014

discourse. On the contrary, John Winthrop's address, uttered by a protestant, and concerning the relationship between humans and God, belongs to religious discourse. Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount, delivered by Jesus and incorporating advice about Christian lifestyle, also functions as an instance of religious discourse. The search for intertextual elements leads to the two types of references, namely, to intertext and hypotext. As the hypertext refers to the inter- and hypotext, the political discourse which it represents interacts with religious discourse. Although the relations between them can be either intentional or unintentional, direct or indirect – in the discussed example – religious discourse functions as an important source for the political one.

The author uses the phrases originating in religious discourse in order to fulfil political goals. He presents America as the "shining city upon a hill," being the guiding light and example to follow for the rest of the world. At the same time, he sums up the period of his presidency and emphasizes positive aspects of his own political activity. Due to the revolution that he started his city seems to be more powerful and still resembles the city from the intertext as well as the hypotext.

Since the suggested model for intertextual analysis focuses only on the investigation of the metaphor of "the shining city", it does not extend to the topic of all intertextual connections between political and religious discourse. In fact, it is possible to find more examples of Biblical references in the analysed fragment, e.g. the idea of storm, light, darkness or rock. Additionally, as the Bible comprises of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we can treat the former as the source for the latter. Consequently, a thorough investigation of all intertextual links would require an analysis of the whole net of interdependent intertexts and hypotexts. As this exceeds the scope of this article, it may constitute a good starting point for further research.

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