

The Stylistic Effects of Human Rights Rhetoric: An Analysis of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2011 LGBT Human Rights Speech

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Contemporary emphasis in the rhetorical community currently privileges invention and delivery as modes of analysis for public arguments, as they are the primary areas of the rhetorical canon involved in tracking meaning shifts between these public arguments and the policy initiatives they influence. As a result, stylistic analysis is largely ignored as a critical approach when the purpose of investigation into public arguments is to apprehend policy changes. Through the implementation of a rhetorical stylistic analysis of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2011 LGBT human rights speech, this paper seeks to call attention to style's influence on policy by locating the stylistic choices of public arguments as frameworks for subsequent policy changes.

On 6 December 2011 U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a speech before the United Nations to declare that "gay rights are human rights." The gathering was held in Geneva to celebrate the sixty-third anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the document setting the standard for human rights across the globe (Wong). Although sexuality is not listed specifically in any of the articles within the UDHR, the declaration does specify that all humans have a right to live free from fear of violent persecution, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or other cultural affiliations. Furthermore, the declaration also specifies that all humans have basic rights to things like freedom of thought, expression, and opinion. Breaking ground in the human rights community, Clinton's speech argues for the full measure of human rights for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals and also challenges the UN to support the LGBT community.

The focus of this paper is on the stylistic choices Secretary Clinton made in her speech. For the intents and purposes of this paper, *stylistic choices* refers to any and all use of rhetorical figures and notable grammatical structures that are implemented to frame arguments and deliver content strategically. The language used in human rights discourse is of vital importance; the UDHR's drafters were painfully aware that this language often perpetuates conflict (Doxtader 359), and of course it also often shapes human rights initiatives and frames policy changes. For these reasons, a stylistic analysis of Secretary Clinton's speech does not merely shed light on her arguments but paints a picture of possible future policy and points to what human rights initiatives for the LGBT community might look like. Thus, style becomes as important as content in situations where the language of public discourse stands as a model for policy.

This essay takes particular interest in the stylistic mechanics that Clinton uses to characterize the LGBT community to a potentially unsympathetic and even hostile audience. How does she go about bridging the gap between entirely divergent perspectives, and what types of definitions do her stylistic choices give to the LGBT community and anti-homosexuality groups? With the technical, stylistic questions in mind, this article also seeks to answer a broader question: What implications do Clinton's stylistic choices have for policy? If the discourse regarding human rights is

accepted as a policy-influencing entity, then what would a human rights initiative inspired by Secretary Clinton's speech be like?

Contextual Background of Clinton's Speech

Complicating an assessment of the effects of Secretary Clinton's speech is that the speech did not occur in a context containing only the UN and Clinton herself. As much as the speech is a call for the UN to take action, it is also a direct response to violent discrimination towards members of the LGBT community prevalent in third world and developing countries, most notably countries in sub-Saharan Africa, like Uganda and Nigeria, where being homosexual is not only socially and culturally unacceptable but is also punishable by law. Specifically, Clinton's speech is a reaction to Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill, known in the West as the "Kill the Gays Bill"—a proposed piece of legislation which, at the time of Clinton's speech, had not yet passed in Uganda's parliament, but if enacted would criminalize homosexuality (Bruner). Under the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, individuals who are HIV positive and/or are "proven" to be homosexuals could be punished by death, and those who know homosexuals—friends, family, and co-workers—could face jail time if they fail to report their knowledge or suspicions.¹ Facing worldwide criticism of the bill, the Ugandan government announced that it would "consider" revising the Anti-Homosexuality Bill to replace the death penalty with life imprisonment. As of May 2011, the Ugandan parliament had adjourned without making a final determination regarding the bill. Clinton gave her UN speech in December 2011. In February 2012 the bill was reintroduced to parliament with the death penalty clause struck out (Kron).

Secretary Clinton's speech, presented two months before the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was brought back before parliament, can be read as a direct message to Ugandan legislators who jeopardized (and continue to jeopardize) UN aid to their nation by pursuing the bill. A similar situation occurred between the UN and Malawi, where homosexuality was also considered criminal until recently, when the country's new president, Joyce Banda, began advocating for progressive policy changes to increase the amount of financial aid that the Malawi government receives from the UN (Bruner). Thus, motivating Clinton's argument is the need to influence not only members of the UN from diverse cultural and intellectual backgrounds, national histories, and political traditions but also the countries represented by the UN and their policy makers, like those in Uganda.

To further complicate the issue, Clinton's argument coincides with long-brewing resentment from Ugandan policy makers over the nation's reliance on Western financial support. During the Bush administration, the United States financially rewarded Uganda for the conservative morals that flourished in the nation as a result of concentrated evangelical Christian missionary work flooding the country from the United States. However, the political context in the United States changed when the Obama administration came to power, and many Ugandan public officials, like David Bahati, author of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, now consider Westerners quite fickle. Bahati has gone so far as to publicly state, "If there was any condition to force the Western world to stop giving us money—I would like that" (Kron).

Stylistic Analysis of Figures and Grammatical Structures

With an audience comprised of so many different perspectives—conservative Ugandan policy makers, UN representatives, and members of the LGBT community from across the globe—the major challenge for Secretary Clinton was how to frame her speech so that all members of her audience would at least listen to her arguments, even if they did not agree with them. Like many human rights policy statements, the arguments in Clinton's speech are focused on a principle originating in Western political thought: that all people deserve the full measure of human rights, regardless of their beliefs or practices. In *The New Rhetoric*, authors Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-

Tyteca refer to the strategy Clinton employs, the act of boiling down arguments to principles that appear highly logical, as delivering arguments to the *universal audience*. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca define the universal audience as a theoretical tool that writers can use in situations where their arguments are addressed to divergent perspectives. Specifically, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca advocate that writers tailor their arguments exclusively to those principles that could be agreed upon by the entire audience, if all members were to behave logically. Although in reality no audience, especially one with such divergent interests and motivations as Secretary Clinton's, ever digests arguments with pure objective reason, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca hope that writers will be able to avoid talking points that are offensive to portions of their audience by focusing on the principles of their arguments that are least controversial (31).

Essentially, the idea of the universal audience requires a writer to imagine the most coherent audience he or she could possibly speak to: an audience convinced by logic, persuaded by the style of the presentation, and not motivated by self-interest, though such an audience has surely never existed. To be clear, where Secretary Clinton's speech is concerned, the value of the concept of the universal audience does not stem from a speaker's ability to generate truly universal arguments as much as his or her ability to generate arguments that *appear* universal or highly logical. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, philosophers often use the universal audience idea because its emphasis on "rational self-evidence" makes it appear as if the proof of an argument rests in its inherent logic, not the style of argumentation (31–32). However, "convinced" might be the key word where the universal audience is concerned, since it is as unlikely that a writer will adhere only to arguments of logic as it is that an audience will be convinced by pure logic alone.

Evidence of the universal audience's impact on Secretary Clinton's speech can be found in the reoccurring use of definition as a rhetorical figure of argument. The entire speech operates off of statements articulating the idea that "Like being a woman, like being a racial, religious, tribal, or ethnic minority, being LGBT does not make you less human. And that is why gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights." The concept that gay people are no less human than any other people and that all humans are entitled to human rights fits a logical/mathematical pattern of proof, making it appear as if the argument is self-evident (Fahnestock 235). From logic, we know that if *a* and *b* are the same, then *a* equals *b* just as *b* equals *a*. Thus, that gay people are humans and all humans have certain rights means that gay people have the same rights that all other people have by virtue of being human.

The use of definition as a figure of argument corresponds to the universal audience's emphasis on highly rational and self-evident arguments. According to Jeanne Fahnestock, author of *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion*, the "double definition" inherent in antimetabole statements like "that is why gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights" "produces a presumably irrefutable identity claim" by employing "both directions of a claim" to reach the same conclusion (236). Audience members who do not believe that gay individuals are entitled to human rights can be disqualified from the discussion by being classified as "stupid" or even irrational on the basis that in order to refute the definition's support for human rights for gays, they must also oppose the concept that all humans are entitled to human rights (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 33). To put it differently, nearly anyone willing to listen to an argument regarding human rights has already accepted that at least some people are entitled to human rights, even if those listeners are members of a religious or cultural body that does not enfranchise the LGBT community; thus, it is unlikely that anyone listening to Clinton's message would be willing to challenge the idea that human rights should be extended to all people because it would challenge their own entitlement to human rights.

There is, however, a problem with viewing Secretary Clinton's speech simply in terms of how it corresponds to the universal audience, aside from mentioning that arguments delivered to the uni-

versal audience tend to be highly rational in appearance. *The New Rhetoric* does not explicitly describe how a speaker or writer's imagined concept of the universal audience can manifest in a text. In contrast, Barry Brummett's discussion of imaginary communities in his chapter "A Rhetoric of Style for the Twenty-first Century" describes the methods in which ideological, philosophical, and even theoretical concepts like the universal audience can be stylistically written into a text to gather an audience. Brummett believes that writers are able to manipulate the relationships between the so-called "real stuff" of life, such as gender, race, or class, and their texts by "imagining who [they] are and who are the others to whom [they] want to speak," and then "through style, construct[ing] the schemes and signs of images that present a representation of [themselves] to others as [they] have image-ined them" (121).

Through the stylistic implementation of "schemes and signs of images," a text "creates its own audience in the sense that people notice and attribute meanings to displayed styles." Brummett considers the "schemes and signs of images" to be like "magnets" floating through the world and pulling in those people "whose own styles seem consonant with the one displayed." In this way, a text does not simply imagine its audience in terms of unanimity but rather imagines the audience *within* the text so that the types of individuals targeted may, in a sense, be attracted to the message by seeing themselves within the text (120). Thus, where Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's notion of the universal audience involves targeting what a certain type of audience will accept, Brummett's notion of imaginary communities goes further to describe how that acceptance can be marketed to an audience.

The emphasis on arguments from definition illustrates that the speech has already decided that its audience is highly rational—or, at least, that it wants the audience to be highly rational. To support the concept of a highly rational audience, the speech also makes direct references to the audience within the text, surpassing the lines of definition as merely appeals of *logos* to also appeal to the audience's sense of *pathos*. Many of the definition statements in Clinton's speech input the audience into the statement to reaffirm the connection between the audience and rationalism. For example, the statement "No matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we are, we are all equally entitled to our human rights and dignity" is in one sense a definition of who is entitled to human rights but it is also a formulation that manifests the audience within the text.

According to Fahnestock, simple manipulations of the pronouns *I*, *you*, and *we* can profoundly affect the distance and relationship between a speaker/text and its audience as well as a speaker/text and its subject. *We* is perhaps the most interesting pronoun for argumentation purposes because within any given text it can have a multitude of meanings. For example, we can refer to "the speaker plus the speaker's group, sometimes to plural authors, and in each case sometimes including or sometimes excluding all or part of an audience" (150). The usage of *we* in this situation places the audience in the line of the statement, making it appear as if the audience is taking part in saying the rational definition.

In Secretary Clinton's speech, *we* typically refers to Clinton herself and the audience as one group. The inclusion of the audience and the speaker into one formal body is a very subtle way to bolster the audience's image of itself. Elevating the audience to the same station as the speaker makes it appear that the audience is in the same league of authority as the speaker, even if the speaker is arguing for a progressive change that the audience may be resisting, thus imbuing the audience members with a level of reason through aesthetic manipulations that might actually exceed what they truly have. For example, in the following passage it is notable that the people who question the connection between human rights and the LGBT community are denoted as "some," residing outside the rational body, while the audience and the speaker, "we," are associated with rational changes.

Some have suggested that gay rights and human rights are separate and distinct; but, in fact, they are one and the same. Now, of course, 60 years ago, the governments that drafted and passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were not thinking about how it applied to the LGBT community. They also weren't thinking about how it applied to indigenous people or children or people with disabilities or other marginalized groups. Yet in the past 60 years, we have come to recognize that members of these groups are entitled to the full measure of dignity and rights, because, like all people, they share a common humanity. (Clinton)

Even though the speech is working to persuade the “some” individuals who suggest that gay rights and human rights are separate, they are already included in the “we” that has recognized that marginalized groups are entitled to the full measure of dignity provided by human rights. Effectively, by separating out the “anti-gay” perspective as “some,” then reincluding it in the argument as “we,” the resistant segments of the audience are recast in a positive light as highly rational and progressive.

An issue that arises from the construction of the audience into a rational body, aside from the fact that it seemingly imbues human rights violators with more reason than they necessarily have, is that it draws a distinct separation between the LGBT community and the audience to whom the speech is addressed. Whereas the audience members, be they pro- or anti-gay, are identified with Clinton herself through “we,” those in the LGBT community are denoted by “they,” outsiders to the group. For example, the following passage separates the gay “they” from the non-gay “we”:

Well, in reality, gay people are born into and belong to every society in the world. They are all ages, all races, all faiths; they are doctors and teachers, farmers and bankers, soldiers and athletes; and whether we know it, or whether we acknowledge it, they are our family, our friends, and our neighbors. (Clinton)

Even though gay people may be “our family, our friends, and our neighbors” they are still not part of the rational audience that Secretary Clinton’s speech constructs.

Part of what distinguishes the rational *we* in Secretary Clinton’s speech is that *we* is frequently implemented with bouts of anaphora to emphasize its importance. Fahnestock argues that “when listeners hear or readers see that a succession of clauses opens with repeated phrasing, they will tend to group those segments in their mind,” so using anaphora can be a particularly useful strategy in a “place of emphasis” where the text creator is having “challenges when it comes to imposing structure on the stream of speech” (231). For example, the following passage, which lists and describes instances of human rights violations against the LGBT community, is interspersed and punctuated by several clauses of anaphora, specifically the phrase “It is a violation of human rights” and the word “we.”

It is violation of human rights when people are beaten or killed because of their sexual orientation, or because they do not conform to cultural norms about how men and women should look or behave. It is a violation of human rights when governments declare it illegal to be gay, or allow those who harm gay people to go unpunished. It is a violation of human rights when lesbian or transgendered women are subjected to so-called corrective rape, or forcibly subjected to hormone treatments, or when people are murdered after public calls for violence toward gays, or when they are forced to flee their nations and seek asylum in other lands to save their lives. And it is a violation of human rights when life-saving care is withheld from people because they are gay, or equal access to justice is denied to people because they are gay, or public spaces are out of bounds to people because they are gay. No matter what we look like, where we come from,

or who we are, we are all equally entitled to our human rights and dignity.
(Clinton)

The resounding repetition of “It is a violation of human rights when . . .” sends a clear message—that discriminatory acts against the gay community are violations of human rights. Discussing the actual types of violations enacted against the LGBT community is a make it or break it step in the human rights argument because the weight of the violations either moves the audience to empathy or incites its support for future violations. Framing the violations with anaphora structures a crescendo into the passage, coming to its peak in the final clauses that emphasize that no one deserves to have their human rights infringed upon, regardless of whether they are homosexual.

As powerful as Clinton’s passage about human rights violations may appear on the surface, it also hides agency to detract attention from human rights violators. First, it is important to note that the repeated clause “It is a violation of human rights” is an instance of what Fahnestock refers to as slot filling. Slot filling is often associated with passive language intended to hide the agency within a sentence. The English language allows for sentence construction even in situations where there is not adequate information to fill the subject’s role in a sentence, typically by replacing the subject with an idiom beginning with the word “it” (152). By repeating the phrase, “It is a violation of human rights,” Clinton’s speech singles out human rights violations without recognizing what body committed the violations referenced. The audience understands from Clinton’s passage that when gay people “are beaten or killed because of their sexual orientation” the action is a human rights violation, but the phrase does not single out who or what groups have committed that violation—the sentence is agency-less for human rights violators.

As a result of the sentence-level camouflaging provided by slot fillers, Clinton’s speech not only masks human rights violations but also renders the LGBT community agency-less, specifically because human rights violations are not attributed to anyone or any group. The areas of the speech that withhold agency from the LGBT community illustrate the fundamental obstacle that Clinton is faced with in her speech—convincing people, like those in Uganda who have associated homosexuality with total immorality, Western corruption, disease, and an overall *otherness*, that despite these opinions LGBT individuals still have an inherent value and deserve certain rights. Certainly, Clinton’s intention was to make her argument palatable for groups harbouring ideological hostility towards the LGBT community, not to purposefully undermine the LGBT community. However, removing agency from the LGBT community linguistically, in a speech that stands to influence policy, relegates the LGBT community to the same powerless position it is put in by discriminatory legislation like the Anti-Homosexuality Bill.

Policy Implications of Human Rights Rhetoric

To briefly summarize the findings of the analysis portion of this paper, the stylistic treatment that Secretary Clinton gives to the LGBT community in her speech seemingly imbues a hostile and violent audience with more reason than it necessarily has, disassociates human rights violators from their crimes, and withholds agency from LGBT community members, all the while reinforcing the concept of homosexuals as something other. Certainly, the stylistic components of Clinton’s speech were intended as tools of persuasion to make the speech’s overall message palatable to Ugandan policy makers and other groups with anti-homosexual views. However, knowing that the arguments in Clinton’s speech have a relevancy that goes far beyond persuading Uganda to drop the Anti-Homosexuality Bill warrants an investigation into what Clinton’s stylistic treatment implies for policy.

Perhaps the best way to analyze what type of human rights rhetoric and policy the stylistic choices in Clinton’s speech contribute to is to compare them to the UDHR. According to Erik

Doxtader, author of the article “The Rhetorical Question of Human Rights—A Preface,” from one perspective (perhaps the one most widely recognized), the specific types of rights listed in the UDHR were chosen in an attempt to protect differences of opinion from escalating into violence (362). The drafters of the UDHR were well aware that language about human rights often “perpetuates the conflict that it claims to resolve” and hoped that creating a list of rights that would protect all people’s ability to view the world they way they choose would enable nonviolent debates (359). Additionally, the UDHR drafters also considered individual rights to be the conditions people need to become “in the highest sense citizens of the various communities to which they belong and to the world community” (362). Thus the goal of human rights is both to prevent violent conflict and to remove the roadblocks that prevent people from being highly active citizens.

Though influencing Uganda’s decision regarding the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was a primary motivator behind Clinton’s speech, she did not directly address Uganda; rather, the arguments in her speech focused on stopping violent acts committed against the LGBT community. However, the stylistic representation of the LGBT community and anti-homosexual audience members was not necessarily conducive to establishing a nonviolent atmosphere. Framing her arguments so that the anti-homosexuality audience members are identified with rationalism while the LGBT community remains separate from the audience’s point of view withholds agency from the LGBT community by removing its voice from the debate. Now, in real-life situations where violence is perpetrated against the LGBT community, there may be no way to hand over control of the situation to the victims, but policy is an arena where the dynamic between oppressed peoples and oppressors can and should be balanced. If legislators approach policy impacting the LGBT community in the same way that the stylistic framework of Clinton’s speech does, then the resulting legislation would perhaps not openly disenfranchise the LGBT community, but at the least would impose a hierarchy of control subordinating the LGBT community to those with anti-homosexual sentiments.

That Clinton’s speech keeps the LGBT community separate from the audience’s point of view in the text also fails to remove the roadblocks in the way of LGBT communities participating fully in the greater communities of their nations. Specifically, in Uganda the roadblock holding back the LGBT community is that homosexuality has been identified as something corrupt and *other*—many of the most radical groups opposing homosexuality do not think it is possible for homosexuals to be friends, family, or really anything aside from criminals. Policy that continues to place homosexuals and non-homosexuals into different categories does nothing to bridge the gap between the groups—rather, it perpetuates the conditions that prevent LGBT individuals from becoming full members of their local communities.

To conclude, the stylistic choices in Secretary Clinton’s speech develop a human rights rhetoric that contrasts with the traditionally liberal, individual-centric views predominate in America. Although LGBT rights activists in the Western world might be less than enthusiastic about the implications of Clinton’s speech for policy change and human rights initiatives, the conclusions reached in this paper should be accepted as an illustration of style’s relevance in policy development more than as a judgment on the bottom-line value of Clinton’s speech. Agency battles most certainly exist as a symptom of all human rights debate, either tempered or proliferated by a writer’s use of style.

Grateful thanks to two people whose work made it possible for this paper to see the light of day: William FitzGerald, for informing my entire concept of rhetoric as well as of style; and Rachel Riedner, for wonderful insight into the relationship between style and public policy.

Note

¹ Full text versions of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill put before Uganda's parliament in September of 2009 as well as of the revised bill, which was brought back before parliament in February 2011, can be found on the Internet, but the origins of these documents are unclear. Currently, full text versions of the bill cannot be found on the websites of Uganda's state house and Uganda's parliament. The Uganda Printing and Publishing Corporation (UPPC), often working in cooperation with the *Uganda Gazette*, has printed and issued bills for the Ugandan government in the past, but although the company lists many bills from 2009 on its website, traces of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill are also absent from the UPPC's public records.

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