

Essay based on non-fiction

Analysis and Commentation on "Back to School"

On September 8th 2009 President Barack Obama gave a speech at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Virginia. He talked about the responsibility of students and the importance of education for America. But what made Barack Obama speak on this occasion? How is the first day of a new semester in 2009 different from any other first days of new semesters? What did Barack Obama want to achieve by giving this speech? I will try to answer these questions and look into the President's way of addressing the audience and find out which values he advocates.

The President is the one giving the speech, the message of the speech is that Americans students have to work hard and the receiver of the message is, of course, students. However, giving a speech at the start of a semester is not an annual event. Why does the President find that the subject needs the extra attention the speech adds to it? Why is it not enough that principals, teachers and parents tell students how important their education is? Which circumstances make an extra need to draw attention to the education area? One could say that the subject needs extra attention because of the present economical crisis. The crisis has added pressure on the American economy and on President Obama as well. Some might say that education is the way out of the crisis and that education is the direct way to wealth so that could explain why Barack Obama has chosen to emphasize the meaning of education in a speech like this one.

President Obama is very skilful in reaching his audience. The receivers of the speech are not only the students on Wakefield High School but also pupils from all across kindergarten through twelfth grade, as the president says himself in the first paragraph of the speech. The huge difference in age from kindergarten to high school makes it hard for the president to reach the whole audience. He has to talk on a level that pupils from kindergarten can understand without

Essay based on non-fiction

making the speech boring for seniors in high schools. But that is not the only challenge for the president. He also has to avoid sounding like a know-all and he does not want to sound too professional either. President Obama manages to live up to all these requirements by doing the following: Firstly he uses a colloquial language as in the first line: "Hello everyone – how's everybody doing today". This style of his language here reminds the students of how they greet each other and the President sounds personal instead of professional. The President adds to this by avoiding the use of a very complex vocabulary. This also makes it possible for the younger part of the audience to understand the president. But using an everyday language is dangerous because it could mean that the older part of the audience find the speech boring. However, he avoids this by arousing specific feelings and using specific appeal forms. He adds for example to his likeability and credibility by using the appeal form ethos as it is shown in line 10: "I know that feeling. When I was young, my family lived in Indonesia for a few years,..". This makes the audience like the president more because the narrative paints a picture of normal man who has been through some adversity. He knows that things in life can be hard sometimes. This picture is strengthened in line 71-72: "I made some thing I am not proud of". The President says that he is not perfect and that it is acceptable to make mistakes.

Another feature that makes the speech more enjoyable for both young and old students is the use of repetition as seen on the last half of the first page: "I've talked" is used in the beginning of sentences four times in a row. It adds a nice rhythm to the speech and makes it easier to understand. Another way of reaching the audience of all ages is to appeal to the national feeling that most Americans share. This appeal to American patriotism is shown in lines 147-148: "Because when you give up on yourself, you give up on your country." Patriotism is understandable to all Americans. It is a major part of American culture and therefor a very effective mean in reaching the audience. A final way Barack Obama reaches his audience is by taking to *them*. He uses words such as "you", "your" et cetera.

Essay based on non-fiction

The previous paragraphs deal with how The President addresses his audience. But what does he want to say to them? Which values does he want to promote? The main message of his speech focuses on nationwide solidarity. The quote earlier in this essay concerning the whole "giving up" term underlines this. According to Barack Obama, everyone has to serve their nation and owes to their nation to do their best. This is shown in lines 62-63: "We need every single one of you to develop your talents, skills and intellect so you can help solve our most difficult problems." Liberal values such as working hard, breaking social inheritance and making your own future are also emphasized a lot throughout the speech. In line 89-90 it even says: "You make your own future".

A very distinct quality of the speech is the quality serious. There is no doubt that the subject is very important. This is underlined in lines 52-54: "What you're learning in school today will determine whether we as a nation can meet our greatest challenges in the future". This message is quite serious and maybe it puts too much pressure on the students. However, this is solved by another quality of the speech: It is emotional involving. The important patriotic aspect of the speech is touching people and helping them in the process of accepting the serious message.

The main function is of course to persuade pupils into doing their best. President Obama underlines that the USA needs everyone to work hard in order for the nation to succeed. The speech is also informative because it informs everyone about the fact that they are very important and have to do their best.

President Barack Obama surely does ask for a lot. He wants people to do their best every day and that is without a doubt hard to do for the human kind. The message of the speech may therefore seem a bit utopian and unrealistically hard to fulfil. However, the year of 2009 was a hard year economically and the USA was threatened by their weak economy so one might say that it is an appropriate demand. Especially when the President emphasizes that it is acceptable to fail.