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## **Framing violence in presidential discourse: A study of Barack Obama's speeches**

### 1 Introduction

This paper examines the rhetoric used by Barack Obama in his public reactions to the highly publicized cases of violence against members of the African American community during his presidency, with special reference to the prominent killings of young black men by police officers and the murder of members of a black church committed by a white supremacist. The analysis has a text linguistic orientation and combines the theory of discursive framing (e.g. Kuypers, 1997, 2009; Entman, 2004; Lakoff, 2004) with the theory of linguistic appraisal (Martin, White, 2005). Evaluative frames are defined as emphasis on different elements of conceptualized reality through different kinds of evaluative judgments and expressions of emotions. The analysis also takes into consideration the findings of previous studies which suggest that Barack Obama's rhetoric shows a general tendency towards more implicit rather than explicit references to race (Li, 2012, 3; Plemenitaš, Krajnc, 2018).

Studies of Barack Obama's presidential discourse on the topic of violence against members of the black community are still relevant, not least because of the persistence of racial divisions in the USA, a legacy exacerbated by the deepening political and cultural divides under Donald Trump's presidency. As the first black president, Barack Obama represented the promise of a post-racial America and was welcomed as a fresh political voice in the context of the historical burden of slavery and discrimination. In her book *Signifying without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*, Li observes Obama's tendency to avoid explicit indicators of race in his rhetoric (Li, 2102, 6). Toni Morrison used the concept of "race-specific, race-free language" when she wrote about the need to use explicit language about race without being constrained by it (Morrison, 1997, 9). When Barack Obama was faced with the need to transform into a post-racial symbol of unity while remaining the central voice for the black community, he tried to adopt Morrison's concept to move towards the middle space opened up by "race-specific, race-free language". Different studies have shown that a distinctive feature of Obama's presidential discourse on racial issues was coded racial discourse. Roedinger (2008, 217), for example, observes Obama's tendency towards



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signalling race without using explicit references and concludes that this tendency stems from Obama's desire to transcend race without ultimately succeeding in doing so. The pattern of implicit racial discourse was also confirmed by a study of implicit and explicit references to racial categories in a corpus of Obama's presidential speeches (Plemenitaš, Krajnc, 2018).

In this study, the analysed discourse consists of Obama's reactions to the deadly consequences of public violence against black people. The analysis focuses on the expression of attitudinal meanings from a discourse-analytical perspective. The main emphasis is on the way in which Obama's public discourse constructs the violence and its moral and emotional implications through the linguistic expression of three different kinds of attitudes. Here attitudes refer to lexicalizations of the evaluation of human behaviour (judgments), emotions (affect) and structural-aesthetic evaluations (appreciation). These three types of attitudes are redefined here as evaluative discursive frames, with their targets constituting the discourse topics highlighted by framing. The paper is structured as follows: first some background is provided to the contemporary state of race relations in the US. This is followed by a brief outline of the theoretical framework on which the study of the four speeches is based, i.e. the linguistic categories proposed by Martin and White (2005) and the theory of rhetorical framing (Kuypers, 2009; Entman, 2004; Lakoff, 2004; Dahl, 2015). The section that follows presents a study of four speeches by Obama in which he reacted to the violent deaths of members of the African American community and to the legal decisions concerning these deaths. In three of the speeches the violence addressed involved the killings of young black men by white police officers (or in the case of Trayvon Martin, by a neighbourhood watch coordinator), while in one speech Obama reacted to the mass murder of black church members by a white supremacist. The purpose of the analysis is to determine how evaluative frames are used in Obama's rhetoric about racially based violence. The paper concludes by demonstrating the main patterns of evaluative frames in Obama's rhetoric on race and violence.

## 2 Obama and the topic of race

When Obama became the first black president he was hailed as a symbol of the promise of a new post-racial society, signalling hope that the US would finally be able to overcome racial barriers and the historical legacy of slavery and racism. In the post-election celebrations, it seemed that this election also changed the importance of the concept of race itself, and finally ushered in the era which Martin Luther King spoke about in his 'I Have a Dream' speech. However, it soon became clear that even with a black president, the dream of overcoming the legacy of bias and discrimination remained unrealized. In his presidential farewell address (10 Jan. 2017), Obama





acknowledged the unfulfilled promise of his historic presidency by acknowledging that post-racial America had yet to be realized, and that “(R)ace remains a potent and often divisive force in our society” ([www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com)).

The legacy of slavery still resonates for many Americans. Juliana Menasce Horowitz reports that according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in June 2019 (Menasce Horowitz, 2019), 63% of Americans believe that the legacy of slavery still affects the position of black people in American society, either a great deal or a fair amount. Moreover, the Pew survey shows that black adults are particularly likely to believe slavery continues to have an impact, as more than eight in ten say this is the case, including 59% who say the legacy of slavery affects the situation of black people a great deal. The racial divide is particularly clear here, as only 26% of whites, 29% of Hispanics and 33% of Asians say slavery still affects the position of black people in American society a great deal, though majorities of each group say it does so at least a fair amount (Menasce Horowitz, 2019). Furthermore, *The Guardian's* The Counted project revealed that despite making up only 2% of the total US population, young African American men constituted more than 15% of all deaths logged by an investigation into the use of deadly force by police. In 2015, the rate of police-involved deaths was five times higher among young African American men than for white men of the same age (The Counted, 31 Dec. 2015). To complicate matters further, there are voices, even among some black intellectuals, who claim that the rate of these killings is exaggerated, and who argue that such exaggeration is detrimental for the texture of US society and actually has a harmful effect on the black population.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of Obama's presidency, no one in the White House wanted to talk about race (cf. Shear, Alcindor, 2017). The first time Obama felt it was important to thematize race was in his campaign speech in Philadelphia on 18 March 2008. Obama gave the speech as a response to the controversial remarks by the minister of his church, Reverend Wright. This speech is a bravura rhetorical performance, using Obama's personal mixed racial origin as a symbol of the American social DNA. The speech introduces the message, which was later often repeated by Obama, that all the wrongs of America can be healed by the rights provided by the nation's core values, i.e. the DNA inscribed in the American constitution (cf. Plemenitaš, 2008). This idea took its rhetorical root long before Obama announced his presidential ambitions. In his memorable Democratic Convention speech, which he gave on 27 July 2004 ([presidentialrhetoric.com](http://presidentialrhetoric.com)), he boldly denounced the colour lines: “There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America.”

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1 Wilfred Reilly, for example, writes the following: “When Black Lives Matter wildly exaggerated the rate of police brutality, and ended up causing a backlash ‘Ferguson Effect’ that claimed 3,000 lives, the movement's grad-school radicals could return to bucolic college campuses at will. In the meantime, working class residents of Ferguson had little choice but to stay home and watch their neighborhoods burn” (Quillette, 17 Feb. 2020).





At the beginning of his presidency, Obama chose to focus on common issues and avoided speaking about race. This changed in 2009, when he publicly criticized the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., a well-known African American Harvard professor. Obama's public criticism of a white police officer was accepted with some backlash, and it all ended with Obama inviting both men for a light-hearted reconciliatory beer at the White House. However, the next time Obama was prompted to speak about race, the incident involved the death of an innocent young black man called Trayvon Martin. In very personal remarks about Martin's death (19 July 2013), Obama noted that Martin could have been his son, or even that he himself could have been Trayvon Martin. This time his remarks were met with much more approval, although there were again some negative reactions among the white population.

After the killing of Trayvon Martin, there was a string of highly publicized killings of unarmed black men by the police, for example the killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scot, and many others, which provoked frustration and anger in the general public, especially the black community. These killings also gave rise to the movement Black Lives Matter, whose goal is to fight structural inequality, such as racial profiling and bias in the US criminal system.

When the frustration of the black community erupted in violence and protests, Obama could no longer avoid the issue of race in his public discourse. As Shear and Alcindor (2017) observe, after the killing of Michael Brown and for the rest of his presidency, Obama would try to find a rhetorical balance between his support for the black community and his attempts not to alienate the police, criminal justice system and majority population.

One of Obama's last presidential speeches was the one given on the occasion of the service for the black victims of the shootings by Dylan Roof, which is also known as the 'Grace Speech' (28 June 2015). The race speech of his pre-presidential period and the grace speech at the end of his term thus punctuate his rhetorical presidency. While the race speech was a sign of optimism and hope for the future, the grace speech was a mark of defeat and cathartic closure.

### 3 Evaluative frames

The analysis of the speeches presented below is based on the concept of evaluative discursive frames which combine elements from two models of discourse analysis: 1) the linguistic model of evaluative language proposed by Martin and White (2005), and 2) the theory of rhetorical frames proposed by theoreticians of communication, for example, Kuypers (2009), Entman (1993), and Pan and Kosicki (1993). According to Kuypers (2009), rhetorical frames organize aspects of perceived reality textually by





promoting particular problem definitions, causal relations, moral evaluations or proposed solutions. Entman (1993, 52) gives the following definition:

(T)o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

Framing theories in the field of media communication mostly focus on framing as the advocacy of certain ideas in the news. In some aspects, framing thus overlaps with the theory of legitimation strategies, rhetorical argumentation and topoi (e.g. Wodak, 2017). The theory of framing has discourse-linguistic roots in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example in the work of frame semantics of Fillmore (1976) and Chafe (1977), but the conceptual basis of framing in communication theory lacks clearly defined linguistic indicators of frames. As observed by Skënderi Rakiplari (2020), the theory of framing is very heterogeneous and the linguistic approaches typically focus on the framing effect of lexical clusters, such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (cf. Gamson, Modigliani, 1989). In cognitive linguistics, frames are defined more narrowly as a “coherent region of conceptual space” that has to be evoked for the full encyclopedic comprehension of a word or construction, (Croft, Cruse, 2004, 14 ).

In discourse analysis, a text-linguistic approach to framing is taken by Dahl (2015), who integrates the study of framing with the theory of evaluative language. She suggests that linguistic indicators of framing consist of lexical expressions pertaining to a specific semantic field. Moreover, Dahl (2015) thinks that the notion of evaluation offers a fruitful basis from which to study the framing process. Evaluation of the discourse topics is such an important part of the textual organization of perceived reality that it can be considered the core of the framing mechanism. Expressions of evaluation help to emphasize or omit different aspects of reality by highlighting specific discourse participants and simultaneously signalling how to interpret their significance. In text-linguistic studies of framing it is thus useful to start the analysis with the identification of evaluative meaning in order to demonstrate which aspects of reality are made salient and how. The following study of selected speeches by Barack Obama with the central theme of violence<sup>2</sup> illustrates the way in which the analysis of evaluative lexis can reveal the effect of foregrounding discourse participants through evaluation. In the study, evaluations created through evaluative lexis are referred to as evaluative frames.

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2 The theme of violence in persuasive discourse expressed through graduation is examined by Onič and Prajnč Kacijan (2020).





## 4 Materials and methodology

The analysis includes four speeches in which President Obama addressed the aftermath of the killings of black Americans, including the judicial decisions involving these killings. The following speeches are analysed: 1) Remarks on Trayvon Martin (19 July 2013), 2) Remarks After the Announcement of the Decision by the Grand Jury in Ferguson, Missouri (24 Nov. 2014), 3) Statement on Eric Garner (3 Dec. 2014), and 4) the Statement on the Shooting in Charleston, South Carolina (18 June 2015). All the speeches were taken from the website [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

The evaluative frames manifested in these speeches are determined based on the lexicalizations of the following types of attitudes (cf. Martin, White, 2005, 42-60; Križan 2020): social esteem, i.e. judgments of normality (e.g. natural, unnatural), capacity (e.g. powerful, weak), tenacity (e.g. patient, impatient); social sanction, i.e. judgments of veracity (e.g. credible, deceptive) and propriety (e.g. moral, immoral); affect (e.g. happy, sad); appreciation, i.e. evaluation of aesthetic structural features (e.g. beautiful, ugly)<sup>3</sup>. All these categories can be positive or negative. The purpose of the analysis presented below is to determine which discourse participants are highlighted by different types of evaluative frames, and how different types of evaluative frames are interconnected in order to promote certain interpretations of the divide created through violence. The analysis focuses on explicit expressions of evaluation and evaluations that can be inferred from explicit expressions.

## 5 Findings and discussion

The quantitative findings are presented in tables (Tables 1-8) which show the proportions of different manifestations of judgments and affect in the analysed speeches<sup>4</sup>. The findings for each speech are then discussed in terms of their framing effects.

### 5.1 Speech 1

President Obama gave the speech on Trayvon Martin on 19 July 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Martin, claiming that he acted in self-defence.

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3 It has to be noted that here the analysis of appreciation slightly deviates from the definition proposed by Martin and White (2005), who define appreciation primarily as the evaluation of things. In this study, only evaluati, White, 2005, 56) is categorized as appreciation, while appreciation metonymically associated with behaviour or affect (e.g. a noble speech, a sad letter) is classified under the general categories of judgment and affect, respectively.

4 The few occurrences of appreciation of aesthetic or compositional features are not included in the tables.





Table 1: Evaluation in the Trayvon Martin speech: type of judgment

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. esteem	36	35.6
Neg. esteem	24	23.8
Pos. sanction	21	20.8
Neg. sanction	20	19.9
Total	101	100

Table 2: Evaluation in the Trayvon Martin speech: type of affect

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. affect	4	33.3
Neg. affect	8	66.7
Total	12	100.0

Tables 1 and 2 show that in the Trayvon Martin speech positive esteem stands out as the most significant category of evaluation, realizing the central evaluative frame for the killing of Trayvon Martin. The positive esteem frame presents the black community as knowledgeable and not naïve about their own responsibilities, and directs the attention from the killing itself to the responsibility of the black community for its own improvement<sup>5</sup> (*Now, this isn't to say that the African American community is **naïve** about the fact that African American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system*). Through the frame of positive esteem (i.e. not being naïve), Obama introduces two negative frames: negative sanction (***violence** that takes place in ....black neighbourhoods is born out of a **very violent** past*) and negative esteem (***poverty** and **dysfunction** that we can see in those communities*), which highlight the problems of black communities and their roots (*They understand that some of the **violence** that takes place in poor black neighbourhoods....is born out of a **very violent** past, and that **poverty** and **dysfunction** that we see in those communities can be traced to a very **difficult** history*).

Obama refrains from a direct criticism of the killing itself, framing the incident through negative affect as a tragic situation. At the same time, he focuses on positive frames of social esteem, such as evaluations which highlight the lessons learned from the killing and future progress. Obama uses positive esteem frames to direct attention to the training of the police force and the enabling of young African American men, and interlocks these two frames, suggesting that more effective police work contributes to the empowerment of young black men. In addition, he focuses on the police by using the frame of positive social sanction (*done in a **fair***

5 The evaluative expressions relevant for the analysis are marked in bold.





and straightforward way) and the frame of positive social esteem (*it would allow them to do their jobs **better***), and presents the two frames as interdependent (*And initially, the police department across the state were resistant, but actually they came to recognize that if it was done in a **fair and straightforward** way it would allow them to do their jobs **better**...figure out how are we doing a **better** job helping young African American men feel that they are a full part of this society – that would be a pretty **good** outcome from what was obviously a **tragic** situation*).

The killing itself is labelled as tragic or a tragedy several times throughout the speech, a label which foregrounds negative affect rather than moral judgement and avoids imparting direct blame. Within the category of affect, the speech emphasizes the negative feelings in the aftermath of the incident (*there's a lot of **pain** about what happened here*). The frame of negative affect is then emphasized through Obama's personal account of his own hurtful experience in which he invites the public to identify with him as a young black man (*There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me – at least before I was senator*).

This kind of personal story allows a glance into the President's emotional world and invites identification from the audience. At the same time, Obama calls into doubt the idea of the government calling for a conversation on race, using the frame of negative appreciation for such institutionalized conversation (***stilted** .... talk*). Within the category of appreciation, the Trayvon Martin speech deviates from the other analysed speeches in that it contains several manifestations of appreciation, both negative (***stilted** talk, **ambiguous** messages*) and positive (***clear** expectations, a more **perfect** union*). The speech concludes with a reference to the US "becoming a more perfect union". This frame highlights American ideals through the coding of positive appreciation, also implying positive esteem and sanction. The use of the unusual comparative form of the adjective *perfect* expresses negative evaluation through a positive frame and creates a contradiction: there is still room for improvement in a union that is already considered perfect.

## 5.2 Speech 2

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the analysis of Obama's remarks on Michael Brown (24 Nov. 2014), which he gave as a reaction to the announcement that the grand jury in Ferguson did not indict the police officers responsible for Brown's death.





Table 3: Evaluation in the Michael Brown speech: type of judgment

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. esteem	17	23.6
Neg. esteem	6	8.3
Pos. sanction	26	36.1
Neg. sanction	23	31.9
Total	72	100.0

Table 4: Evaluation in the Michael Brown speech: type of affect

	Frequency	Percent
Neg. affect	7	100.0
Total	7	100.0

The analysis shows that the main evaluative frames in the Michael Brown speech are positive and negative sanction. Obama applies the same two frames to appeal to both sides of the divide, the black community and law enforcement, asking them to avoid violence and remain peaceful and orderly. The positive frame presents the family of the killed young black man as a model of good behaviour (*Michael Brown's parents understand what it is to be **constructive***). The frames of positive and negative sanction contrasting peaceful behaviour with the violence of protesters are closely intertwined throughout the speech. This interplay of negative and positive frames is directed simultaneously at both opposing parties and the police, thus uniting them through the frames of peace and violence (*But I join Michael's parents in asking anyone who protests this decision to do so **peacefully**...I also appeal to the law enforcement officials in Ferguson and the region to show **care and restraint** in managing **peaceful** protests that may occur; there's never an excuse for **violence***). Obama also uses meta-messages when he lectures the media on their own use of framing (*On the other hand, those who are only interested in focusing on the **violence**...need to recognize that we do have work to do here*).

As in the Trayvon speech, the killing itself is framed through negative affect as a tragic event, but also positively as a teachable moment enabling an improvement in the behaviour of the police (*the lessons that we draw from these tragic events*). In the category of affect, Obama first highlights the emotional suffering of the black community, and then unites both sides of the divide by the frame of negative affect manifested as mutual distrust between law enforcement and the "communities of color". But he counters that through unifying the opposing sides in the same frame of positive sanction (*And there are **good** people on all sides of this debate, as well as in both Republican and Democratic parties, that are interested not only in **lifting up best practices***).





### 5.3 Speech 3

Tables 5 and 6 show the results of the analysis of Obama's remarks on the death of Eric Garner (3 Dec. 2014), which followed another decision by the grand jury not to indict the police officers involved in the highly publicized killing of a black man.

Table 5: Evaluation in the Eric Garner speech: type of judgment

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. esteem	7	21.9
Neg. esteem	2	6.3
Pos. sanction	10	31.3
Neg. sanction	13	40.6
Total	32	100.0

Table 6: Evaluation in the Eric Garner speech: type of affect

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. affect	2	22.2
Neg. affect	7	77.8
Total	9	100.0

The speech about Eric Garner is very similar to the one about Michael Brown, in that the evaluative frames are used to highlight the behaviour of the two divided communities – the protesters and police. The reference to the killing itself is marked neutrally with the verb *interact*, which lacks an explicit evaluative frame (*police officers who have interacted with an individual, with Eric Garner*). Negative affect expresses the emotional reactions of the black community after the killing and as a reaction to the proclamation of the verdict, while positive affect signals the trust and confidence that need to be achieved between the divided communities.

The main evaluative frame, however, consists of an interplay between negative and positive sanction, highlighting the behaviour of the two opposing sides. As in the Michael Brown speech, the negative sanction is often inferred through the mention of positive behaviour (*Those who have protested **peacefully** across our great nation*). Positive sanction also points to the nature of the future/hypothetical relationship between the two communities (*we **strengthen the relationship** between law enforcement and communities of color...*), while negative sanction mainly highlights the behaviour of the police (*law enforcement is **not working** with them in a **fair** way*). Here, the frame of negative sanction is conceptualized through the negative affect experienced by the black community as a reaction to perceived bias (*the **concern** on the part of too many minority communities that law enforcement is not working with them in a fair way;*





and minority communities that feel the *bias*). Negative sanction targeting police is expressed in close proximity to the positive frames highlighting the dedication of the government (*we are going to be **scrupulous** in investigating cases where we are **concerned** about the **impartiality** and **accountability***), and the implementation of police training (*we are going to take steps to **improve** the training and the work with state and local governments when it comes to policing in communities of color*).

Interestingly, there is also a high proportion of positive frames attributed directly to the police, using positive esteem to portray them as brave and self-sacrificing (*law enforcement has an incredibly difficult job; every man and woman are putting their lives at risk to protect us*). The speech also makes a causal connection between the frames of positive affect (confidence) and positive esteem (effectiveness), whereby positive affect is seen as a prerequisite for positive esteem (*They're only going to be able to do their job **effectively** if everybody has **confidence** in the system*).

At the end of this speech, Obama uses the frame of negative sanction as a unifying frame by refusing to split it along the colour divide, all the while invoking racial categorizations through negation (*this is an American problem, and not just a black problem or a brown problem or a Native American problem, When anybody in this country is not treated equally under the law, that's a problem*). This conclusion echoes his Democratic Convention speech on 27 July 2004.

## 5.4 Speech 4

Tables 7 and 8 show the results of the analysis of Obama's statement on the shooting in Charleston (18 June 2015), in which he reacted to the mass killing of black parishioners in the Emanuel AME Church by the white supremacist Dylan Roof.

Table 7: Evaluation in the Charleston speech: type of judgment

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. esteem	12	23.1
Neg. esteem	8	15.4
Pos. sanction	18	34.5
Neg. sanction	14	26.9
Total	52	100.0

Table 8: Evaluation in the Charleston speech: type of affect

	Frequency	Percent
Pos. affect	9	42.9
Neg. affect	12	57.1
Total	21	100.0



The incident in Charleston differs from the others in that the killing was clearly motivated by racial hatred. In addition, this speech differs from the other three in that it is a reaction to the killing itself, rather than the judicial decision about the killing. As in the previous speeches, expressions of positive and negative sanction constitute the main evaluative frame. In the speech about the murders in the church in Charleston, the positive frames focus on the church congregation and its role in the black community. Positive sanction and esteem which highlight the members of the church as noble and self-sacrificing are inferred from the positive affect and sanction experienced by the people who turned to them for help (*they opened their doors to strangers who might enter a church in search of **healing** and **redemption***). The frame of positive affect is additionally directed at the church itself as a place of healing (*a place in which we seek **solace** and we seek **peace***), which creates a stark opposition with the deaths that happened in the church. The church is additionally framed through positive sanction as a sacred place based on the wider historical role of black churches in the struggle for freedom (*This is a place of worship that was founded by African Americans seeking **liberty**; This is a **sacred** place in the history of Charleston and in the history of America*).

The negative sanction framing the killings also differs from the other speeches in that the killings are at first framed explicitly by negative sanction as *senseless murder*. They are, however, reframed later through negative affect (*any death of this sort is a **tragedy**. Any shooting involving multiple victims is a **tragedy***), as in the other speeches. Towards the end of the speech, Obama moves on from racial identity to his familiar rhetoric of directing attention away from race with frames that transcend race as the main relevant category. Here he achieves this by focusing on the racially neutral topic of gun control and by using negative affect as a unifying frame which transcends the racial divide (*And we know **hatred** across races and faiths poses a particular threat to our democracy and our ideals*). This speech is also distinguished by a considerably higher proportion of both negative and positive affect compared to the other speeches (*But I don't need to be constrained by the **emotions** that **tragedies** like this raise. Now is the time for **mourning** and for **healing***), and concludes with a paragraph filled with positive affect (*And with our prayers and our **love**, and the buoyancy of **hope**, it will rise again*).

Table 9 shows the raw frequencies and densities of evaluation per 100 words (in brackets) for all four speeches. The proportions show the important role of judgments of esteem and sanction, with positive judgments outweighing negative ones in most cases (with the exception of sanction in the Eric Garner speech). The findings show that affect in general plays a smaller role compared to judgments of esteem and sanction. The only outlier here is the Charleston speech, where affect, both positive (1.02) and negative (1.37), features as prominently as judgment. This is probably because this



speech was a direct reaction to the killing itself rather than a prepared reaction to the judicial decisions related to the killings. Negative affect is more prominent than positive affect in all four speeches.

Table 9: Frequency and density of evaluation in all four speeches

	The Trayvon Martin speech	The Michael Brown speech	The Eric Garner speech	The Charleston speech
Pos. judgement/esteem	36 (1.66)	17 (1.26)	7 (0.67)	12 (1.37)
Neg. judgement/esteem	24 (1.11)	6 (0.44)	2 (0.19)	8 (0.91)
Pos. judgement/sanction	21 (0.97)	26 (1.93)	10 (0.97)	18 (2.05)
Neg. judgement/sanction	20 (0.92)	23 (1.71)	13 (1.26)	14 (1.6)
Pos. affect	4 (0.18)	-	2 (0.19)	9 (1.02)
Neg. affect	8 (0.37)	7 (0.52)	7 (0.67)	12 (1.37)
Total	113 (5.23)	79 (5.87)	41 (3.98)	73 (8.34)

## 6 Conclusion

The analysis of Obama's speeches about the killings of black men shows a certain pattern in evaluative framing: Obama uses negative frames of esteem in pointing to the existing racial divides and their historical roots, and negative frames of sanction in highlighting the unfair treatment of the members of the black community on the one hand, and the violent behaviour by the protesters as a reaction to such treatment on the other. At the same time, Obama tends to juxtapose negative frames of esteem and sanction with positive frames which highlight model behaviour and potential for improvement. In fact, the analysis shows that positive frames of judgment outweigh negative frames in all speeches but one. Compared to judgment, affect plays a smaller role, except in the Charleston speech. The findings also show that Obama tends to use negative affect more often than positive affect, which might indicate that he is more comfortable expressing negativity through emotions rather than judgements.

It is also notable that Obama shows how these evaluative frames are interconnected. For example, positive esteem is seen as a prerequisite for positive sanction in the connection between effective police training and the empowerment of young black men. Another feature of Obama's use of framing is that he often signals negative evaluations indirectly through positive frames. For example, he praises the behaviour of peaceful protesters in order to criticize the behaviour of violent protesters. Similarly, he points out the potential for improvement in order to highlight negative phenomena. His main goal is not to assign blame but to secure unity in calming the opposing sides and preventing further social disruption. Obama often finds ways of unifying the opposing sides under the same positive or negative frames, and is reluctant to split





evaluative frames according to the racial divide (*it is an American problem, hatred across races and faiths poses a particular threat to our democracy and our ideals*). This is consistent with the larger pattern of Obama's presidential rhetoric and reflects his unique role as the first black U.S. president.

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Katja Plemenitaš

### **Framing violence in presidential discourse: A study of Barack Obama's speeches**

**Keywords:** evaluative frames, violence against black Americans, Obama, presidential rhetoric

The paper discusses the characteristics of modern American presidential political rhetoric with special reference to Barack Obama's speeches in which he addressed the highly publicized killings of black Americans. Three of the analysed speeches contain Obama's rhetorical reaction to the judicial decisions not to indict the police officers responsible for the killings, while one speech gives his immediate reaction to the mass murder of black parishioners by a white supremacist. The study is based on the discourse-linguistic analysis of attitudinal





meanings and their functions, which are conceptualized as evaluative frames. Evaluative frames are used to highlight different kinds of discourse participants through judgments of behaviour, attributions of emotions and evaluations of semiotic phenomena and objects. The theoretical framework for the different categories of evaluative frames is based on the theory of news framing and theory of evaluative language within systemic-functional linguistics. The findings of the analysis show that Obama uses an interplay of positive and negative evaluations of different kinds to transcend racial categorizations and avoid a direct attribution of blame. When he acknowledges the continuing relevance of the racial divide in US society, he often applies evaluative frames in such a way that they unify rather than divide the discourse participants on both sides of the divide.

Katja Plemenitaš

## **Okvirjanje nasilja v predsedniškem diskurzu: študija govorov Baracka Obame**

**Ključne besede:** okviri vrednotenja, nasilje nad temnopoltimi Američani, Obama, predsedniška retorika

V prispevku so obravnavane značilnosti sodobne ameriške predsedniške politične retorike s posebnim poudarkom na govorih Baracka Obame, s katerimi se je odzval na uboje temnopoltih Američanov. Trije od analiziranih govorov vsebujejo Obamov odziv na sodne odločitve, ki so zavrnilo obtožbo policistov, odgovornih za uboj, v enem od govorov pa se je odzval na množični umor temnopoltih faranov s strani belega skrajneža. Študija temelji na analizi jezikovnih kategorij vrednotenja, ki so pojmovane kot okviri vrednotenja. Okviri vrednotenja udeležence v diskurzu osvetlijo s presojami vedenja in pripisovanja čustev ter z vrednotenjem predmetov in pojavov. Koncept okvirov vrednotenja temelji na spoznanjih teorije medijske komunikacije in teorije jezika vrednotenja v sistemsko-funkcijskem jezikoslovju. Ugotovitve analize kažejo, da Obama uporablja preplet pozitivnih in negativnih vrednotenj različnih vrst, da bi presegel rasno kategorizacijo in se izognil neposrednemu pripisovanju krivde. Raziskava pokaže tudi, da Obama rasne razdelitve pogosto uokvirja tako, da udeležence na nasprotnih straneh poenoti z istim okvirom.

### **O avtorici**

**Katja Plemenitaš** deluje na Oddelku za anglistiko in amerikanistiko Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Mariboru, kjer poučuje predmete iz angleške slovnice in teme iz diskurzne analize ter jezika in spola. V svojim raziskovanju se osredotoča na povezave med sistemsko funkcijskim jezikoslovjem in kognitivnim jezikoslovjem ter njuno aplikacijo v besedilni analizi, zanima pa se tudi za jezikovne vidike prepričevanja v množični komunikaciji in značilnosti političnega diskurza. Svoje raziskovalno delo je objavila v različnih člankih in v znanstveni monografiji.





### **About the author**

**Katja Plemenitaš** works in the Department of English and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, where she teaches courses in English grammar, discourse analysis and linguistic gender. Her research focuses on connections between systemic functional linguistics and cognitive linguistics and their application in textual analysis. She is also interested in the linguistic aspects of persuasion in mass communication and features of political discourse. She has published several articles in scholarly journals and a monograph.

