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# Rampage Shootings in the United States

**A Visual and Discourse Analysis of Obama and Biden's Speeches Concerning Two of the Deadliest Elementary School Shootings in the USA.**

**Supervisor**
Ch. Prof. Daniela Cesiri

**Assistant supervisor**
Ch. Prof. Giulia Bencini

**Graduand**
Ilaria Gherardi

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# INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, political discourse has been studied and analyzed according to different approaches and in many different disciplines, from political science to rhetoric to sociology (Wodak & Flowerdew, 2014; Dunmire, 2012). People's interest in political discourse dates back to ancient times: Aristotle, for instance, traced a link between politics and language and reflected on the human faculty of language, and its power to indicate what is just and unjust, good and evil, and harmful and useful in his work *"Politics"* (Wodak, 2012; Kampf, 2015, Chilton, 2004). Nevertheless, political discourse analysis obtained popularity and became a widespread approach only during the second half of the twentieth century, when scholars started to recognize the significance of the context in which texts appeared and perceive language not just as an informative medium, but also as an instrument to socially construct ideas and beliefs (Kampf, 2015).

Since then, a great number of scholars have focused on American political discourse and the social and power dynamics enacted through language by American Presidential candidates or politicians in their speeches (see, e.g., Kadim, 2022; Wang, 2010; Beshara, 2018, Sarfo & Krampa, 2013). Most studies have focused on Presidential inaugural speeches (Horváth, 2009; Chen, 2018; Viberg, 2011), or speeches that were delivered during Presidential campaigns or debates (Rachman & Yunianti, 2017; Gornostayeva, 2016; Mohammadi & Javadi, 2017), yet little research has examined political speeches given by American Presidents in response to rampage school shootings.

Páralová (2017) conducted a discourse analysis of some of Barack Obama's speeches concerning mass shootings, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks with the purpose of identifying and describing the linguistic strategies and devices employed by the speaker to address the audience, influence them, and comfort them, as well as the structure that characterized each speech.

As far as the mass shootings-related speeches are concerned, the findings of the research (Páralová, 2017) suggested that the most frequently employed rhetorical devices were parallelism, three-part-lists, and contrastive pairs, which were used to achieve three main goals: share the pain and grief people in the audience were feeling,

give strength to the survivors and foster union and solidarity. The structure of the speeches, in addition, revealed that Obama tends to start his speeches by acknowledging the actions that have been taken by police and security forces and continues by denouncing the gravity and seriousness of these crimes.

Kirk (2018), similarly to Páralová (2017), considered and analyzed Obama's speeches, but in his research, he specifically focused on gun violence and, especially, on three eulogies given in response to shootings occurred in Tucson, Newton and Aurora that can be considered significant in the President's campaign on gun control. In this study (Kirk, 2018), the main goal was to examine the President's linguistic choices in order to determine how they contributed to the speech's efficacy and to the speaker's failure to accelerate the implementation of new gun reforms. Results showed that, despite the positive reaction from the public following the second and third speeches analyzed, the rhetorical influence of the President in all three cases was undermined and blocked by interest groups, that prevented the passing of new firearms legislations.

A study that, on the other hand, specifically examined American Presidents' speeches delivered in response to school shootings was conducted by Aracil, Svendsen, Alstrup, and Clausen (2014). These authors analyzed three speeches given by Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama with the aim of determining patterns in terms of rhetoric, content, and gesture and by performing a move analysis. The results suggested the presence of different patterns in different parts of the Presidents' speeches, but a common pattern among them is the use of breaks for emphasis, and hand gestures realized by Obama and Clinton with the same purpose.

Beside the little research that has been conducted on American Presidential speeches delivered following rampage school shootings, it appears that previous studies in this field have also failed to thoroughly consider the multimodal communicative strategies employed by the American Democratic Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden in speeches given in this context. For this reason, the present study's main purpose consists in contributing to the research field of political discourse analysis by identifying and examining the meaning-making resources employed and the linguistic choices made by Obama and Biden in their speeches addressing the issue of rampage school shootings. A secondary aim is to compare the semiotic resources

and rhetorical devices the speakers make use of in order to notice possible similarities and differences.

In order to investigate the multimodal communicative strategies used by the speakers, a visual analysis and a discourse analysis were performed of Obama and Biden's recorded speeches (The Obama White House, 2012; The White House, 2022) in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting, which occurred in the United States in 2012 and 2022. The rationale for choosing these videos and speeches was based on their similarities, which contribute to a more equal comparison between the two Presidents' communicative strategies. Indeed, both speeches were delivered by Democratic Presidents and, most importantly, they followed two elementary school shootings carried out by young former students of the schools attacked and that led to the death of numerous victims comprising children and adults.

The visual analysis reported in this research paper follows Baldry and Thibault's (2006) multimodal systemic functional linguistics approach with the purpose of determining how meaning-making resources are employed in order to convey a message to the audience, what functions they serve, and how their combination affects the listener and contributes to the effectiveness of the overall message. In addition, the results of the visual analyses of both speeches are compared in order to notice similarities or differences between the semiotic resources employed and integrated by the speakers, and how these possible distinctions differently affect the audience or produce a different result.

The discourse analysis was performed applying Gee's (2014) toolkit and, more specifically, five of the 28 tools he describes in his work: the Deixis Tool, the Fill In Tool, the Identities Building Tool, the Vocabulary Tool and the Significance Building Tool. The purpose of the analysis consists in examining the speakers' linguistic decisions, their intentions, as well as the effects they possible have on the audience. Particular attention is paid to consider how both Presidents use language to achieve certain goals and how they attempt to engage and influence the audience. Finally, the speakers' linguistic decisions are compared in order to observe similarities or differences and examine the possible reasons.

This study comprises five Chapters, preceded by the present **Introduction** and followed by the **Conclusions** Section. **Chapter One** illustrates the history and development of rampage school shootings in the United States, it describes their characteristics and the reasons for their notoriety, and it provides a significant example of this type of shootings. The probable causes and effects of rampages are also presented in this Chapter along with their impact and influence on the gun debate, which is discussed and explained in relation to the American gun culture and US politics. **Chapter One**, in addition, clarifies the role that the NRA plays in the American political field and in the development of the gun culture, and finally provides details concerning the two videos and speeches object of this research paper.

In **Chapter Two**, the theoretical framework of multimodality is described in detail and four of the main multimodal methodological approaches are delineated. As a result, an overview of the social semiotics approach, the systemic functional linguistics approach, interaction analysis and the cognitive approach to multimodality is provided and followed by the explanation of Baldry and Thibault's (2006) systemic functional linguistics approach, which is then applied to conduct the visual analysis of Obama and Biden's videos. The last part of this Chapter is dedicated to the Methodology Section, which illustrates how the multimodal visual analysis was performed.

**Chapter Three** presents the visual analysis of Barack Obama and Joe Biden's recorded speeches. It opens with the description of the semiotic resources employed by Obama and proceeds with the examination of Biden's video. The last part of this Chapter consists in the Discussion Section, where, in light of the existing literature, the modalities recognized in each video are analyzed and discussed in terms of the functions and effects they have on the audience, and their contribution to the effectiveness of the speakers' messages is considered. Moreover, the meaning-making resources employed by each President are compared and their overall communicative success is assessed.

**Chapter Four** illustrates the theoretical background of discourse analysis by firstly providing the definition of this term and identifying all the elements that play a significant role in this approach and, then, by introducing political discourse analysis and outlining its characteristics. The Chapter proceeds with the description of Gee's

(2014) toolkit on how to do discourse analysis and, more specifically, of every one of the 28 tools he elaborated in his work, five of which are applied in the following Chapter to the discourse analysis of Obama and Biden's speeches. Alike **Chapter Two**, the last part of **Chapter Four** is reserved to the Methodology Section.

**Chapter Five** presents the discourse analysis performed of the Presidents' speeches and illustrates it according to the tools selected from Gee's (2014) toolkit. The analysis, therefore, is structured in five Sections that focus respectively on the Deixis Tool, the Fill In Tool, the Identities Building Tool, the Vocabulary Tool and the Significance Building Tool. The last part of this Chapter discusses the findings of the discourse analysis, finds possible correlations to previous studies and compares the communicative strategies employed by the two speakers as well as their intentions.

The **Conclusions** Section constitutes the last part of this research paper. It provides a summary of the visual and discourse analysis findings highlighting the most significant and relevant results and it reveals some of the potential limitations of this study while offering ideas for future research.

# CHAPTER ONE

## School Shootings and the Use of Firearms in the United States

### 1. Rampage School Shootings

During the 1990s the United States witnessed what has been defined by the media as a school shooting 'epidemic', a period of terror and shock caused by the rapid succession of school-related violent incidents that reached their peak in 1999 with the Columbine school shooting (Muschert, 2007; Newman et al., 2004). These violent incidents are not recent phenomena as they date back at least to the 1970s, yet the term school shooting became popular only at the end of the twentieth century, when the occurrence of these attacks became more frequent, and they started being widely reported in the news generating panic and fear in the public (Rocque, 2012; Langman, 2009b; Muschert, 2007). Fifteen fatal school shootings were reported only in the year 1997 for instance, and some of them occurred just a few weeks apart (Riedman, 2022).

Despite the common and generalized terror related to school safety that these incidents provoked, they remain rare events when compared with other instances in which children and teenagers can be fatally injured (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Wike & Fraser, 2009). In the school year 2004-05, 21 students' homicides and 7 students' suicides were reported; these numbers are higher than those recorded in 2000-01, but, when considered over the total number of students enrolled in school that year, they still refer to a probability of one victim per 2 million students: a relatively small percentage (Dinkes et al., 2006). Furthermore, according to Fox and Fridel's research (2018), the probability of students being killed at school is not only low, but it also keeps decreasing year after year. Various scholars (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Muschert, 2007), noticed that the imbalance between people's perceptions and reality seems to be strictly connected to the media coverage of these attacks that brings them into the homes of every American and reminds every one of the circumstances and the brutality of these attacks even after weeks from their date of occurrence. After the Columbine massacre on April 20, 1999, for instance, the media kept informing people with new updates about the actions of the shooters and the circumstances that led to that day for months on national television, and for much longer on local cables (Larkin, 2007). The

school shootings' constant presence in the news contributed to the diffusion of panic, anxiety, and the state of alarm in which people started living from the late 1990s, but mostly to the vision of school shootings as a social problem that needed to be solved (Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014).

The fact that these attacks became a national and social problem starting since the 1990s was also due to their changed nature. During this period, school shootings and gun violence incidents became more extreme, they resulted in more than one victim and did not seem to be related to the existence of gangs, as instead had happened in the past (Rocque, 2012). As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 1990s, the presence of gang-related violence in school, more particularly in urban middle schools and high schools, had led the US Congress to declare schools 'gun-free zones' and to establish serious repercussions for those who carried or owned a firearm close to school (Fox & Fridel, 2018). The rise in the number of victims during this period as a result of school shootings has been supported by a study carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008). According to this study, school-associated homicides with multiple victims increased between 1992 and 2006, while single-victim homicides showed a significant reduction. The increasing number of victims could be a key factor in the magnification of these incidents, as studies have shown that the number of fatalities is strictly related to media exposure. Indeed, shootings with multiple victims tend to receive more media attention than single-victim attacks and this also applies to the total number of students shot but not necessarily killed in a single shooting. The high media coverage of school shootings in the late 1990s therefore confirms the proposition 'if it bleeds, it leads' followed by the media, since more violent shootings, such as those occurring at the end of the twentieth century, tended to be reported in the news far more than previous and less fatal ones (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2018; Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002).

Another difference from past school shootings was the location in which the 1990s attacks took place, that is, rural and suburban towns that up until that moment had always been considered safe and had never been stricken by such violent crimes (National Research Council, 2003; Rocque, 2012). In fact, the new setting was not the only aspect that contributed to Americans' perception of school shootings as disturbing and shocking, as these feelings of terror and panic that spread throughout the nation

were also due to the apparently random victims the shooters killed (National Research Council, 2003).

Finally, what ultimately made these attacks different from previous ones was the identity of the shooters. The murderers were not gang members or adults who randomly opened fire towards a school; they were kids, teenagers, and students who were killing their classmates, school mates, teachers and people they spent years with. They were kids who became killers (Langman, 2009b).

Scholars decided to call these school shootings 'rampage school shootings' because of their specific characteristics and violence (Muschert, 2007; Langman, 2009b; Newman et al., 2004). Rampage school shootings are defined as being carried out by students or former students of the educational institution in which the attack takes place, perpetrated on multiple people, and their purpose is usually based on a higher concept, such as damaging entire institutions. In other words, shooters use violence for symbolic purposes, and they do not have a specific target: victims are chosen randomly, or they represent specific symbols (Langman, 2009b; Newman et al., 2004). These young shooters use violence to send a message and create a new identity for themselves, that is, a new narrative they want to portray in front of the whole community. In order to reach their goal, perpetrators execute their plans at school and usually in suburban or rural environments, settings that have always been considered safer than urban ones (Newman et al., 2004). Rampage school shootings are just one of the different kinds of shootings that have been classified by scholars; Muschert (2007) differentiates them from other school-related shootings, such as mass murders, terrorist attacks, targeted shootings, and government shootings. This classification is based on different factors, for example the identity of the shooter and their motive. Rampage shootings are the type of attack that has attracted more attention from the media (Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2011). This is not a coincidence, as they are usually very violent, tragic and sensational.

The Columbine school shooting is one of the most exemplary cases of rampage shootings and the one that received more media attention (Muschert, 2007; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2011). This violent incident was subject to extreme media coverage; 53 stories were aired only in the first week by ABC, CBS and NBC, for an equivalent of four hours of duration, and it was the largest news story of 1999 in the US (Maguire,

Weatherby, & Mathers 2002; Muschert, 2002). This rampage shooting constitutes a watershed event in the history of school shootings in the US for the number of fatalities and injuries it produced, and the violence shown by the shooters recorded on school cameras (Larkin, 2007; Muschert, 2002). The word Columbine has been marked in history as the symbol of this violent and notorious attack and has become a reference point for any other school shooting that occurred in the following years (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two high school senior students, decided to carry out their carefully formed plan by placing two propane tank bombs in the cafeteria of their high school in Jefferson County, Colorado. They had also positioned two other bombs in a field quite distant from school with the purpose of attracting police forces there and have more time to execute their plans, which also included the shooting of all the people who would have escaped from school once the bombs exploded. Harris and Klebold's project changed the moment in which the devices revealed to be defective and did not explode at the set time; for that reason, they decided to improvise. They entered the school and started shooting towards anyone they found on their path, they killed a total of 13 people and 24 were injured. The SWAT team managed to enter the school almost an hour after the attack had begun and, not long after that, the two shooters decided to kill themselves (Larkin, 2007; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019).

Due to its gravity, the Columbine high school shooting was largely covered by the news networks; the case became the secondly most discussed story of the 1990s decade in the news and a cultural referent that left millions of people in a state of insecurity with no certainty left (Muschert, 2002; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). One of the aspects that shocked the nation and contributed to the consideration of Columbine as a collective memory was the realization that something of this caliber could indeed happen at school, and especially at any school (Muschert, 2019). It is not a coincidence that news networks focused only initially on the facts of April 20, 1999, but then covered the reactions of people all over the country and how they were coming to terms with the possibility of a similar event happening in another school (Muschert, 2009).

This rampage shooting had numerous effects; among the few positive consequences there is what is called the 'Columbine effect', which scholars have

explained as students' increasing willingness and motivation to inform authorities about possible threats or violent plans they hear of (Larkin, 2007). While before this event students did not pay much attention to the words of their classmates or did not take them seriously, after the Columbine shooting, numerous threats and attempts were thwarted thanks to the tips of uninvolved students, or because the attackers had revealed their plans on the Internet (Larkin, 2009). However, the negative effects outweighed the positive ones, starting from the loss of students and teachers' lives to the contagion effect caused by the idealization of the shooters, who had taped themselves before the attack and who became notorious among the entire nation because of their actions (Larkin, 2007). The goal they had set for themselves was that of starting a revolution, in the name of all of those who felt unseen, mistreated and misunderstood. As a result, numerous other students felt inspired and found the courage to take action too (Larkin, 2009). The Columbine school shooting set the pace for many other rampages that followed throughout the years, such as the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in 2012 in Newton, Connecticut, which resulted in the death of twenty kids and six educators, and the Parkland school shooting in 2018 in Florida (Riedman, 2022; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Ten years after the Sandy Hook Massacre, the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, was the setting of a similar and equally tragic attack that took the lives of nineteen students and two teachers (Kellner, 2022).

## 1.1. Probable Causes of Rampage School Shootings

Violent incidents such as rampage shootings have always left, and still leave, the nation wondering why and how something like this can happen. Numerous studies (e.g., Rocque, 2012; O'Toole, 2000; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000) have been conducted with the aim of answering this question as well as giving an explanation for these shootings; in order to do so, various factors have been taken into consideration.

Part of the conducted research in this field has focused on recognizing determining characteristics of the supposed future killers in order to prevent them from executing their plans (Rocque, 2012). During the 1990s, when rampage shootings were frequently covered by the media and had become a social and national problem, the

Federal Bureau of Investigation presented a report with the purpose of helping professionals involved in school safety recognize and prevent another attack by identifying the seriousness of a threat according to different factors and knowing how to respond (O'Toole, 2000). The model introduced was formulated by the National Centre for the Analysis of Violent Crime and it consisted of a systematic approach to threat assessment and the four-pronged assessment model. While the former described the different types of threats (direct, indirect, veiled and conditional threats) and the factors that could be useful in recognizing them, the latter allowed professionals to judge the seriousness of a threat based on four aspects related to the person who made it (personality of the student, family dynamics, school dynamics and the student's role in those dynamics, and social dynamics). In addition, the report listed several traits and characteristics of possible threateners that should be considered warning signs when all of them or most of them were present (O'Toole, 2000). This model did not provide a guide to identify future murderers, but it still recognized aspects of the threatener's life that could be revealing in terms of their willingness to carry out an attack.

Other scholars focused, instead, on the mental health of the shooters and often recognized it as the main reason for their actions. Different case studies of school shootings recognized common traits and mental health problems in the shooters, such as schizophrenia, depression, personality disorder, uncontrolled anger, and threatening violence (National Research Council, 2003; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). Langman (2009a), on the other hand, analyzed ten cases of school shootings and classified three different types of shooters: psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized. Psychopathic shooters are defined as narcissistic, they cannot understand and share others' feelings, they put themselves and their needs first and they do not have the ability to feel remorse for their actions. Psychotic shooters suffered from schizophrenia or other related disorders, while traumatized shooters suffered emotional, physical and or sexual abuse before the attack and came from a very difficult home life. Besides these typologies, the author also recognized the influence of other factors that could explain the actions of these young shooters, for instance the presence of negative role models in the family, peer pressure, the illegal use of firearms by people close to them and family dynamics that could have caused anger and resentment.

Furthermore, many school shooters had been bullied and had suffered social rejection by their peers prior to the attack. Negative interactions, humiliation and peer rejection, therefore, could represent another explanatory element for the shooters' actions. Harris and Klebold, for instance, were tormented by the athlete groups in school, they were at the bottom of the peer structure and considered nerds by their schoolmates (Larkin, 2007). Therefore, through the assault, they wanted to get revenge on those who humiliated them and inspire others to do the same. According to the Safe School Initiative (Vossekuil et al., 2002), 71% of the attackers at the time of the study felt harassed, bullied or teased by others before the shooting. In a case study conducted in 2014 (Sommer, Leuschner, & Scheithauer) on thirty-five school shootings, 88% of the perpetrators had suffered some type of negative interaction prior to the attack, ranging from conflicts with teachers to peer rejection or bullying. Similar findings resulted from research carried out by Leary, Kowalski, Smith and Phillips (2003) on fifteen school shootings. The authors discovered that twelve out of the fifteen violent incidents were related to episodes of social rejection, humiliation and bullying suffered by the shooter.

Another element that could play an important role in school shootings is the large school's dimension. American public schools can present a high enrollment rate that does not allow counselors and teachers to really have a close relationship with their students and, consequently, notice possible warning signs or particular behaviors that could indicate the potential for violent actions (Fox & Fridel, 2018). The School Survey on Crime and Safety (Miller, 2003) conducted on the 1999-2000 school year found that smaller schools were less likely to experience crime and violence, while bigger schools had a higher probability of witnessing a violent incident. This finding also applied to school enrollment rates; 10% of schools with less than 300 students reported an attack, while 36% of schools with a higher enrollment rate reported a violent incident.

An additional frequently identified explanation for the actions of school shooters refers to cultural theories. Violent media are often blamed for children and teenagers' aggression and various case studies suggest that school shooters often enjoyed playing rough video games. The implication would be that the exposure to violent videogames and films could lead to increased aggression and violence. Harris

and Klebold, for example, used to play 'Doom', a violent video game (Larkin, 2007); while Adam Lanza, responsible for the Sandy Hook school shooting, played a variety of videogames, some of which presented violent contents (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014). Indeed, research (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Zhang, Cao, & Tian, 2021) shows that playing violent video games increases children and young adults' levels of aggressive behavior and cognition, while it decreases levels of prosocial behavior.

Finally, school shootings always spark the debate concerning gun control. One of the most discussed factors that is often presented as the cause of rampages is the accessibility and availability of guns. As Muschert (2007) points out, without firearms school shootings would not be possible; many other elements may contribute to the shooters' decisions to carry out an attack, yet the only device that makes it possible and the only prerequisite is the possession of guns. Banning firearms in the United States would not be a feasible solution, as the possession of guns is protected by the Second Amendment, but what many people, especially Democrats, have attempted and are still attempting to do is implementing restrictions and more thorough background checks for those wishing to purchase a gun (Philpott-Jones, 2018).

Nevertheless, of all the factors identified as possibly contributing to the occurrence of rampage school shootings, there is none that is solely responsible for these violent incidents. It is impossible to trace a simplistic connection of cause and effect when taking into account these troubled students and their violent actions, since these actions appear to be the result of a personal combination of factors that is not universal, but different for every school shooter (Langman, 2009b; Muschert, 2007). Owning a gun does not make a person a murderer; having a mental illness does not categorize someone as criminal; and neither does the exposure to violent films or brutal videogames or being subject to bullying and social rejection.

## 1.2. The Effects of Rampage School Shootings

The string of school shootings that characterized the 1990s produced numerous effects, ranging from the creation of new school policies to the idealization of shooters and their consequent imitation by students all over the country. One of the immediate consequences that rampages had in the school context was the change and hardening of school policies. Security cameras were added, school access was restricted, random

locker inspections and hallway supervision were allowed, metal detectors were installed in various schools and lockdown drills were put into place (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Snell et al., 2002; Wike & Fraser, 2009; Rocque, 2012).

Many of these security measures were introduced after the Columbine school shooting and responded to a climate of fear and terror heightened by the media; school administrators and policy makers needed to implement new systems of threat response in order to reduce the risk of violent attacks (Wike & Fraser, 2009). While these new measures seemed necessary at first and responded to the public's concern regarding school safety, they were doubtfully efficient in preventing another attack and they generally contributed to the diffusion of the perception of schools as unsafe place by students, who were reminded every day of the imminent danger their lives were in (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Snell et al., 2002). Lockdown drills represented an instance of measures that negatively impacted the school climate; they were introduced after the Columbine school shooting and put in place to prepare students in case something similar happened again. Nonetheless, lockdown drills can be very frightening and traumatizing for kids and they contributed to instill in the students feelings of uncertainty and fear related to the school context (Fox & Fridel, 2018).

Besides video surveillance, in the late 1990s, more armed security was introduced in schools as President Bill Clinton's response to the string of violent school shootings of that period; one year after Columbine, the then-President Clinton pledged $60 million to schools with the purpose of hiring more police officers as school resource officers (SRO) (Juvonen, 2001). This decision was part of the 1999 program COPS in School promoted by the Department of Justice; the purpose of this program was that of decreasing the amount of time required for officers to respond to violent incidents or attacks, deterring students from the idea of carrying out a shooting, and answering to the general fear and concern by providing a sense of security to teachers and parents (Fox & Fridel, 2018; Juvonen, 2001). According to Addington's (2009) research, the employment of security guards and surveillance cameras are among the measures most largely introduced in school policies after the Columbine school shooting. Despite the large support that this measure has received, its efficacy remains doubtful.

In past school shootings SROs were often present and did not manage to stop the attack, while in other cases their contradictory actions have been denounced by administrators, parents and the American population (Fox & Fridel, 2018). During the Parkland school shooting school resource officer Peterson fled to a nearby building while the shooting was happening, letting seventeen people be shot to death; during the Uvalde school shooting, on the other hand, SROs waited outside the door of a classroom for over an hour before entering and confronting the shooter (Oppel & Sinha, 2019; Kellner, 2022). Despite the proclaimed usefulness of additional security guards in preventing attacks, the introduction of SROs could have a negative impact on school climate. Students may not perceive police officers as allied but rather as someone who is there to supervise them, generating fear and feelings of mistrust (Juvonen, 2001). In addition, the presence of cops in schools could lead to a criminalization of students' actions which in normal circumstances would just be punished by the school and would not be processed by the criminal justice system (Fox & Fridel, 2018).

The zero-tolerance approach is another measure implemented in schools in response to rampage school shootings that generated numerous discussions. The zero tolerance approach dates back to the 1980s and it was a program created in order to prevent ships from carrying drugs across the border (Skiba, 2000). It became widely known in the educational field as part of the Gun-Free Schools Act, signed in 1994 by Clinton, and it consists in the expulsion from school of any student carrying a firearm on campus and the communication of their violation to the criminal or juvenile justice systems (*ibid.*). Initially, this policy only included guns, but, since the bill left decisional freedom to each state, throughout the years various states decided to increase the number of potentially dangerous and illegal objects students could not bring to school, such as alcohol, drugs, knives, nail files, scissors, and even mind-altering substances (Pinard, 2003 cit. in Fox & Fridel, 2018: 25). Expulsion was not the only punishment that students could receive; with the expansion of actions that were considered prohibited in school, for instance, swearing and threatening, also the kinds of punishments increased including students' suspensions or transfers (Skiba, 2000). The main purpose of this preventive approach was to deter students from carrying dangerous objects to school by threatening them with the certainty of

suspension or expulsion, and consequently achieving a more peaceful school climate, decreasing the risk of attacks or violent incidents (Fox & Fridel, 2018). The name of the approach itself suggests its rigidity and strictness, which are portrayed in the fact that, when applying the predetermined punishments, there is no possible consideration of mitigating circumstances or situational context that could change the student's outcome, that is, expulsion or suspension (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Throughout the years, numerous problems related with this approach have emerged. Firstly, the fact that each school has its own policies concerning expulsion, sanctions and banned objects or actions makes it impossible to create consistency in the disciplinarity of students, who worst-case scenario might just transfer to another educational institution (Skiba, 2004; Wu et al., 1982). Secondly, the lack of consistency can also be found in the students that teachers tend to punish. Research shows that African American students are suspended two or three times more often than other students; differences that appear to have risen since the Gun-Free Schools Act (Skiba, 2014). Furthermore, the rigidity in the application of this policy can sometimes lead to its overzealous implementation, even in cases where students have no harmful intent or may have expressed themselves in a way that is misinterpreted by teachers and school personnel (Fox & Fridel, 2018). In 2013, a seven-year-old boy was suspended for having bitten his pop tart in the form of a gun, while in 2001 a high school senior with straight As was arrested and suspended for having a kitchen knife in her car that had probably fallen out of a box during a recent move (CBS News, 2014; Turco, 2001). In addition, while it has always been assumed that a zero-tolerance approach and therefore the removal of problematic individuals from school would improve the school climate and decrease the disruption of school activities, it appears that it may have the opposite effect, leading to a poorer school climate and lower academic achievement (Skiba, 2004; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008 cit. in Fox & Fridel, 2018: 26). After more than ten years since its introduction in schools, there is still no consistent proof that this measure ensures school safety and a positive school climate; on the contrary, students who receive these hard sanctions appear to be more likely to be suspended again in the future and eventually dropout of school (Skiba, 2004; Arcia, 2006; Fisher, Wiley, & McGlynn-Wright, 2021).

A negative consequence of the 1990s rampages was the diffusion of copycat murderers that took inspiration from notorious school shooters and started to threaten the nation. This phenomenon was largely influenced by the extreme media coverage of school shootings at the end of the twentieth century, which made shooters popular throughout the country and gave the public a great amount of information related to the planning and carrying out of the attacks (Fox & Fridel, 2018). Research shows that media coverage and sensationalized reports of rampages and gun violence led to an increase in the probability of another similar incident occurring in the following 13 days. It appears that these events have a contagious effect and that their popularity reached through media exposure influenced other vulnerable people and inspired them to do something similar (Towers et al., 2015). The contagion effect consists in the fact that a certain event leads to the occurrence of more events of the same type (Langman, 2017). This also applies to school shootings; after 1999 and the Columbine massacre, for instance, a rise in the number of school shooting attempts inspired by Harris and Klebold was reported (Larkin, 2007). The immediate day after Columbine, a student was shot and killed by another at W. R. Myers High School, and one month after Columbine, Anthony B. Solomon started shooting at Heritage High School in Georgia wounding six students (Larkin, 2007; Sullivan & Guerette, 2003). According to Langman (2017), the contagion effect presents various facets and can be explained in different ways. On the one hand, there is a general contagion effect, which consists in the normalization of an incident that until a certain moment in time represented something not socially acceptable, and that leads to an increase in its frequency. In the case of school shootings, once they become popular and more frequent, they result in the loss of other students' inhibition which leads them to act on their impulses and become murderers more easily. This contagion can also be induced by peers who have the same interests, and, because of this, it becomes acceptable to talk about taboo topics, for example, mass murder. On the other hand, it is possible to recognize a specific contagion effect, especially when school shooters are influenced and inspired by other school shooters and see them as role models. Seuing Hui Cho, who is responsible for the Virginia-Tech shooting, defined Harris and Klebold 'martyrs' and was inspired by them in his attack (Langman, 2018).

The identification of murderers with role models sometimes derives from the fame acquired by these shooters, who become in the eyes of others admirable and iconic, pushing them to do the same (Langman, 2017). This type of contagion could be based on various aspects, from the recognition of similarities between a past school shooter and the present one, which could lead them to reflect on themselves and their beliefs, to the imitation of their clothing, types of firearms used, or linguistic expressions (Langman, 2018). Both Jason Hoffman, who opened fire in his school and injured five people in 2001, and Adam Lanza, who is responsible for the death of 20 people during the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting admitted their source of inspiration: Harris and Klebold (Langman, 2017). Another instance of the contagion effect is the rampage carried out by Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson, responsible for shooting four students and a teacher in 1998, who seemed to be inspired by Joseph Todd, shooter in the attack at his school in Arkansas in 1997.

## 1.3. The Gun Debate

One of the topics that are mostly mentioned and discussed when a rampage attack occurs is the availability of guns, their purchase and the national and state control policies that need to be put in place in order to prevent another violent incident from happening again (Goss, 2006; Philpott-Jones, 2018).

The use of firearms in the US has a very long history and people's right to own, carry, and use guns is protected by the Constitution, more specifically by the Second Amendment. According to two Pew Research Center surveys conducted in 2021 (Van Green, 2021), four out of ten Americans live in a household with one or more firearms and three out of ten US adults admit owning a gun. In addition, the percentages change based on various aspects, such as people's political affiliations and gender. Democrats are much less likely to own a gun than Republicans, and more men appear to own a firearm compared to women. The possession of a firearm is related to American gun culture, which is shared by people who love or own guns for different reasons, such as hunting, collection purposes, shooting both recreationally and competitively, self-protection and home defense (Kohn, 2004).

Gun culture is also supported by the consumer culture, which applies to anything related to firearms, for instance, equipment, clothes, guns accessories,

makeup, and videos on this topic. As any other culture, gun culture is maintained through cultural practices that, in this case, include the use of firearms, for example, hunting with the family, going to the shooting range, shopping for guns together, or training and meeting with other people who have the same interests (Schwartz, 2021).

The formation of this culture dates back to the American revolution, when guns were idealized as the symbol of American freedom, and to the formulation of the Bill of Rights in 1791 (Melzer, 2009). The Bill of Rights includes the first 10 amendments of the Constitution, which were written by James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.). The Second Amendment, which states that "A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed" (U.S. Const. amend. II), along with its different interpretations are at the basis of the political and social debate about gun control (Shalhope, 1982). Firearms, then, played a fundamental role in the nineteenth century with the conquest of the West and the defeat of Native Americans (Melzer, 2009). However, the idealization of guns derived mainly from Western films, pulp magazines and novels produced at the beginning of the twentieth century, which recounted the adventures of cowboys who fought to tame the Wild West and catch outlaws, and the encounters between settlers and native Americans. The entertaining representation of guns continued with other genres such as science fiction and the action genre in the 21st century (*ibid.*).

Nowadays, despite the great number of people who own guns for recreational purposes, most gun owners carry a gun for protection, which is probably the result of the various policies enacted in the past years concerning the liberalization of gun control in favor of the Second Amendment and gun rights activists (Yamane, 2017). According to the National Firearms Survey (Azrael et al., 2017), 63% of the participants who owned a gun admitted that the main reason for their decision was for protection against people, and 76% of those who owned a handgun purchased it for self-defense. According to Carlson's research (2015), self-protection is not the only reason why people own guns, as it seems that gun possession is also related to other factors, such as civic duty, a shortage of police officers, and social disorder, which results in people carrying guns to maintain safety and social stability in their city. Therefore, gun possession starts to represent people's answer to feelings of insecurity

and anxiety generated from lack of police protection and socio-economic decline (Carlson, 2015).

The circulation of guns in the United States has highly influenced gun violence, which represents a national problem (Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2013). In the year 2022, 44.364 deaths were caused by gun violence; this illustrates a steep rise from 5 years before when the deaths caused by firearms amounted to 15.749 (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). In addition, in 2022, 177 gunfire incidents on school grounds were reported, which resulted in the death of 57 people while 149 were injured (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2023). In terms of finding a solution to this issue, the American population presents two different perspectives: on the one hand, gun rights supporters believe that, since there is already a great number of gun carriers and owners, it is necessary to have a firearm in order to defend themselves from possible danger; on the other hand, gun control activists argue that the only possible solution is the implementation of more background checks on those who want to purchase a firearm and restrictions or bans on the types of guns that can be sold to civilians (Carlson, 2015).

This debate revives every time a mass or school shooting occurs. According to Gallup's poll data (Brenan, 2022), nearly a month after the Uvalde attack and shootings in grocery stores, 66% of Americans were in favor of stricter gun laws, and 55% would also support the formulation of new gun policies. These data showed a rise in the amount of support towards stricter gun laws compared to the previous two years, which were characterized by a lack of high-profile shootings. Despite this strong consensus for new gun control policies that reappears after every violent incident, no striking new legislations have been formulated or passed (Goss, 2006). After the Columbine school shooting, 800 bills related to firearms were introduced, yet only 10% of these passed and half of them concerned gun owners' rights and their protection (Soraghan, 2000). What has been noticed by Goss (2006) is that there seems to be no real gun-control movement; people demand new gun laws immediately after a shocking incident, but after some time everything goes back to normalcy. On the other hand, gun rights supporters seem to form a much stronger movement guided by groups of gun-owners, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), which manage to influence and convince people to become involved in politics in order not to lose

their rights. Indeed, gun carriers appear to be united by the fear of the loss of gun rights, they feel threatened and scared to lose their freedom. Because of this constant fear of being taken away individual and fundamental rights, such as the right to own and carry a gun, gun owners feel the need to vote, to make their voice heard, and to do everything possible to prevent this from happening (Melzer, 2009).

The gun debate does not affect only American citizens, but especially politicians who, based on their political party, tend to react differently to episodes of school or mass shootings. While Republicans are inclined to respond to gun violence by focusing on the mental health of the shooter and how this aspect must be the cause of these terrible incidents, Democrats believe that the issue relies on the availability of firearms and the lack of necessary restrictions and background checks that should prevent these people from purchasing guns (Philpott-Jones, 2018). Furthermore, a common reaction to school shootings and gun violence from the Republican party is the suggestion of arming school personnel in order to prepare them for this type of attack (Pérez, 2017). After the Uvalde school shooting, Texan Republicans insisted on introducing more police officers and firearms in schools and train teachers to use them. On the other hand, the Democratic President Joe Biden expressed the need for stricter laws regarding gun control (Fechter, 2022).

### 1.3.1. The NRA

The NRA is an organization that was founded in 1871, it is one of the strongest interest groups in the United States with nearly five million members, and its initial objective was to improve people's ability to use guns and help training gun owners on how to employ them safely (NRA, n.d.; Musa, 2016). Since 1903, the association became involved with the promotion of shooting sports and competitions, which were held at Sea Girt, New Jersey, a rifle range owned by the NRA. However, shooting competitions were not the only field in which this association was involved; the NRA also constituted a reference point for the hunting community, it was responsible for law enforcement training, and it still is the institution in charge of educating and training civilians in the use of firearms (NRA, n.d.). The group's goals started expanding with the beginning of the political discussion related to firearms possession

and carrying, which led to the foundation of the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) in 1975, known as the lobbying arm for the NRA (NRA, n.d.; NRA-ILA, n.d.).

The ILA was created with the aim of protecting the Second Amendment and ensuring people's right to bear arms. In order to do so, lobbying is a common employed technique, which consists in finding ways to influence or persuade politicians into making certain decisions (Holyoke, 2021). In the 2022 election cycle, the NRA's affiliates spent $7,550,000 on lobbying, most of which was directed at Republican candidates or committees (OpenSecrets, n.d.). The money the association spends on lobbying derives from various sources, such as memberships fees, NRA's magazines and tv shows, and gun clubs (Musa, 2016). Among the different lobbying techniques that are usually employed, one of the most effective is that of hiring former legislators or policy officials that can take advantage of their personal connections to influence policy makers and, therefore, the passing or stopping of a bill (Holyoke, 2021).

The NRA has managed across the years to impact numerous voting patterns and election results thanks to its lobbying efforts. In 2016, the Presidential election of Donald Trump was strictly connected to the $30.3 million the NRA spent on his election campaign and the advertisements that targeted the voters that seemed to have made the final difference (Spies & Balcerzak, 2016). The NRA's decision to support Trump was based on his beliefs and goals, in particular his promotion of gun rights and defense of the Second Amendment. The NRA's influence on politics has also been analyzed by Price, Dake and Thompson (2002) in relation to firearm control legislation and Congressional voting. The findings of their study showed that, during the Congressional sessions on firearm control legislation from 1993 to 2000, the NRA donated a great amount of money to Congress members. In addition, the authors discovered a strong link between the money received and congressmen's voting decisions: who received the donations from gun supporters was more likely to vote for gun rights.

Because of its political efforts, nowadays, the NRA is generally seen as a gun rights organization supporting the Republican party (Melzer, 2009). Nevertheless, the NRA is also a cultural institution as it has played an important role in the development of gun culture, especially by influencing political decisions about firearm legislations

and changing policies concerning gun carry, which allowed and led to an increase in the number of gun owners and carriers throughout the years (Carlson, 2015).

**1.4. Primary Sources**

The videos and speeches analyzed in this study were selected with the purpose of assessing their effectiveness from a visual and discursive point of view and examining the communicative strategies employed by Barack Obama and Joe Biden in their speeches concerning gun violence and, more specifically, school shootings. Both Presidents belong to the Democratic party and have spent part of their political career attempting to reinforce gun laws. In addition, the current President Joe Biden served as the 47th Vice President under Barack Obama from 2009 to 2017, which could explain possible similarities or links between the two speeches (Levingston, n.d.). The school shootings discussed in the videos occurred in American elementary schools almost ten years apart one from the other and can be considered two of the deadliest school shootings in the United States.

The first video shows former President Barack Obama making a statement in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The film text was recorded on September 14th, 2012, day of the rampage that led to the death of twenty children and six adults (Ray, 2023). The shooting was carried out by Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old who was a former student at Sandy Hook Elementary School and who was familiar with firearms as he played violent video games and used to go to shooting ranges with his mother (Breslow, 2013).

On the other hand, the second video portrays President Joe Biden, the First Lady and an ASL translator in similar circumstances, on May 25th, 2022, almost ten years after the Sandy Hook School shooting and a day after the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas. This rampage resulted in the murder of nineteen children and two adults by the hands of 18-year-old Salvador Ramos, a former student of the school, frequently bullied and interested in firearms (Levenson et al., 2022). In this film text, the President gives a speech commenting the recent tragedy, honoring the victims and delivering remarks on the gun situation in the USA.

Both film texts were watched on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com), the first video on the Obama White House account, and the second on the White House

account, while the transcription of the Presidents' speeches were found on the White House website (https://www.whitehouse.gov).

Overall, the speeches portrayed in these videos show and represent an example of how politicians, in this case Democrats, respond to school shootings, what is their reaction, how they comfort the nation and what they intend to do in order to solve the issue of gun violence in schools.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Multimodality

## 2. What is Multimodality?

Multimodality refers to the integration and use of different semiotic resources to make meaning (Van Leeuwen, 2014). It is a framework that originates from linguistics and that started being developed around the 1960s when linguists recognized that communication is multimodal, language is not necessary for a message to be conveyed, and that meaning-making can be realized through various modes (*ibid.*). Scholars, therefore, started applying linguistic methods to study and analyze non-verbal communication and all the different semiotic resources used and combined in texts or communicative events to create meaning, such as images, layout, typography, etcetera (*ibid.*).

However, according to Adami (2017) and Djonov and Zhao (2013), the term multimodality was coined only in recent years, more specifically around the 1990s. The discovery and introduction of new technologies and new ways of creating meaning was one of the main reasons that led many scholars to focus on multimodality and to distance themselves from the analysis of language alone. This decision was also the result of the publication of two important studies: "*Reading Images*" by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and "*The Language of Displayed Art"* by O'Toole (1994). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), and O'Toole's (1994) contributions represented a groundbreaking moment as they followed Halliday's theories of social semiotics concerning language and extended them to other semiotic resources, with the purpose of drawing attention to the way in which different modes combined to make meaning (O'Halloran, 2011).

Non-verbal forms of communication had already been studied and analyzed in various disciplines, but no attention had been drawn to how these modalities integrated and merged together in communicative events (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016; Bezemer & Jewitt, 2018). Each discipline had specialized in the study of a semiotic resource that pertained to its research field, and new research areas were created to study their related meaning making mode, for instance, visual sociology was

introduced, and it focused on the study of photography and other visual products (*ibid.*). Therefore, what the term multimodality introduced was the need to take into consideration whole texts and all the modalities employed to make meaning, not separately, but focusing on their integration (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016).

Scholars who coined the term multimodality also emphasized the fact that there is no hierarchy between modes, each modality presents its own potential and limits. Language does not have priority over other semiotic resources, and its use is not necessary to communicate, as all modes are equally effective in making meaning (Kress, 2012; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that multimodality is based on three main principles: meaning is created through different semiotic resources that are socially and culturally shaped, in order to analyze and study meaning we need to consider all the modes used to express it, and meaning making consists in the combination of modes to produce a message (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016).

Multimodality can be interpreted both as a field of study and as a new interpretation of communication, which consists in the combination and integration of different semiotic resources to make meaning in texts or communicative events. Initially, multimodal studies tended to focus on devising new theoretical approaches and tools that could allow to systematically analyze how non-verbal forms of communication create meaning (Adami, 2017). The analysis and investigation of multimodal texts that started rather recently, towards the end of the twentieth century, has taken the name of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) and it refers to the examination of texts whose meaning depends on the interrelation of different semiotic resources, which combining with each other in specific designs lead to the generation of a multimodal communicative event and to the creation of a message (O'Halloran, 2011).

During the second half of the twentieth century, scholars started applying different linguistic approaches to multimodal texts, which led to the development of some of the main multimodal methodological approaches that can be grouped into four categories: social semiotics, systemic functional linguistics, interaction analysis and cognitive theory (Van Leeuwen, 2014; Adami, 2017; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016; Bezemer & Jewitt, 2018). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and O'Toole (1994),

who could be considered the founders of multimodality, followed Halliday's (1978) theories but, while O'Toole (1994) focused on very specific multimodal texts, such as paintings and sculptures, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) applied a more contextual approach (O'Halloran, 2011). This led to the creation of two different approaches that O'Halloran (2011) referred to as contextual and grammatical, also known as social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics.

## 2.1. The Social Semiotic Approach

Social semiotics is based on the idea that meaning is shaped and formed according to the social structure, hierarchy and social values of participants (Adami, 2017). It is an approach that derives from the work of Hodge and Kress (1988) in the 1980s and aims to analyze how meanings are created as well as how power relations are established through semiotic resources (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016).

The social semiotics approach is based on the concept of the sign as the combination of a signifier and a signified, that is, of an aspect that can be experienced or observed, and the meaning attributed to it (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The sign is not predetermined, as its meaning depends on the context and purpose for which it is being used, for this reason scholars prefer to use the term resource instead of sign (*ibid.*). Semiotic resources, therefore, are signifiers, in other words, forms or actions that allow meaning-making and that have potential to create meaning based on their past uses and the uses that these resources acquired in a particular context, culture, setting or situation (*ibid*.). Semiotic resources might include images, sounds, gesture, layout, colors and proxemics, among many other elements, all of which can have a communicative function and convey information about the world, processes, participants and circumstances (Adami, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Sign-making is not arbitrary; the selection and use of a semiotic resource is based on reason and on the function the user wants to serve, as well as the meanings they want to create.

The social semiotics approach, therefore, challenges De Saussure's (1998) vision of the union of a signifier and a signified as arbitrary and conventional. The selection of a specific mode to produce a message is not random, as people make decisions regarding meaning-making and communicate with specific semiotic resources based on their social position, their identity, their available resources and the

meaning they want to convey (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). In fact, according to Halliday (1978), semiotic resources are culturally and socially formed, they are shaped by the culture and society in which they are created, and they cannot be analyzed without taking into account the context of culture and of situation in which they appear. As a matter of fact, the meaning potential that different modalities have highly depends on the social context in which they are being used. Each resource can have different meanings, which can be analyzed only when considering also the context where the resources are employed. The meaning potential of semiotic resources is made by people, and it changes over time, but it is also based on various factors, such as people of authority, role models, traditions or even fashion (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Finally, the social semiotics approach recognizes that meaning-making resources carry out the three metafunctions described by Halliday (1978) as ideational, interpersonal and textual, just as language does (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

## 2.2. Systemic Functional Linguistics

Similarly, systemic functional linguistics is an approach that derives from Halliday's (1978) theories. It was initially elaborated by Halliday in the 1960s and applied to language and later explored by other scholars, such as Baldry and Thibault or Halloran, who applied this theory to multimodal discourse (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016). Halliday's linguistics framework presented language as an instrument to serve functions, shaped and organized based on those functions and how to perform them. Systemic functional linguistics, therefore, stemmed from the goal of analyzing how language was modeled and shaped to perform different social functions (Halliday, 1978; Adami, 2017).

With the development of multimodality, the purpose became to analyze how different semiotic resources combine and integrate to make meaning and to serve functions (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016). According to Halliday (1978), language and, consequently, semiotic resources can serve three different metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The **ideational** metafunction can be divided into an experiential metafunction and a logical metafunction (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2009). While the experiential function refers to how people perceive and interpret the external world and their internal feelings and thoughts, therefore including

processes, for example, material, mental or verbal, and people's modes of participation, for instance, goal, medium and receiver, the logical function expresses relations between various aspects through linguistic structures, such as AND, and OR, and other linguistic or non-linguistic elements that can contribute to creating links in a text (*ibid.*). The **interpersonal** metafunction relates to the interaction between speaker and addressee, their social roles, hierarchy and how they are enacted through speech; it can therefore refer to the verbal forms employed, to how questions are being formulated, or to the form in which the information is being presented to the receiver (*ibid.*). The **textual** metafunction refers to the creation of a message and the organization of information by the speaker so as to share ideational and interpersonal meanings with the addressee; for instance, the speaker could present information as given or new based on how they structure their text or they could guide the listener in its interpretation (*ibid.*).

O'Toole (1994) was one of the first scholars to employ the systemic functional linguistics as a multimodal approach to investigate multimodal discourse, in particular displayed art and paintings. He created new categories for the functions that images and paintings perform, transforming the linguistic metafunctions indicated by Halliday into modal function, representational function and compositional function. Other two authors who applied a systemic functional linguistics approach are Baldry and Thibault (2006). These scholars consider all the different semiotic resources combined to create meaning in the analyzed text and they carried out a macrotrascription and a microtranscription, by tracing the phases of the text in metafunctional terms but also identifying the semiotic resources employed and combined to create meaning.

## 2.3. Interaction Analysis and the Cognitive Approach to Multimodality

Starting from the current century new approaches developed such as, for example, interaction analysis and cognitive approach (O'Halloran, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2014). Interaction analysis aims to analyze interactions between different participants to examine how people create meaning in collaborative and mutual exchanges. It can be considered a multimodal approach as communicative interactions are not carried out only through language, but other semiotic resources play a fundamental role in communication too (Norris, 2004). The purpose of this approach, therefore, remains

that of identifying the different modes that are actively employed in interactions and recognize the meanings they create. Norris (2004) elaborated a multimodal interactional analysis framework with this aim, taking into consideration the different organizational structure each mode presents and what people express or react to.

The interactional analysis approach derives from mediated discourse analysis, which concentrates on the social actions carried out by participants and objects (O'Halloran, 2011; Scollon, 2001). The focus of mediated discourse analysis consists in the interaction between social actors in a real context or situation. Meanings and discourses are created by participants in a specific moment in time and in a specific social space called site of engagement. Scholars in this field of study investigate mediated discourse, that is, discourse that is mediated through material means, such as space, objects, movements, sounds, etcetera (Scollon, 2001).

The cognitive approach to multimodality, moreover, draws on the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), from cognitive linguistics (O'Halloran, 2011). CTM explains how human beings tend to use conceptual metaphors to make sense of abstract concepts, as concrete phenomena appear much easier to understand than abstract notions. However, for years, most scholars focused only on verbal metaphors without taking into consideration the fact that metaphors are generated also through other modes, such as sounds, or visual images (Forceville, 2006). Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009), therefore, focus their analysis and their study on multimodal metaphors, the modes employed to create them and what meanings they produce. In their research, they draw attention especially to multimodal metaphors created in advertisement and commercials, as well as in political cartoons.

## 2.4. Baldry and Thibault's Systemic Functional Linguistics Multimodal Approach

As already mentioned in Section 2.2., Baldry and Thibault (2006) follow a systemic functional linguistics approach to analyze multimodal texts and the semiotic resources employed to create meaning. They provide a toolkit to examine multimodal texts belonging to different genres, carry out texts transcriptions and analyze the combination of different meaning-making resources. In addition, the authors show

practical examples of applications of their functional and meaning-based approach, by focusing on cartoon narratives, the printed and web page, and films.

According to Baldry and Thibault (2006), a multimodal text is a meaning-making event which is created and organized based on its function and purpose in a particular context, and that draws on a number of different semiotic resources with the aim of producing and conveying a message. Its meaning depends on the combination of the specific modalities employed, each of which has its own characteristics and peculiarities. The authors specify that "the meaning of the text is the result of the various ways in which elements from different classes of phenomena - words, actions, objects, visual images, sounds and so on - are related to each other as parts functioning in some larger whole" (Baldry & Thibault, 2006: 21). For this reason, it is important to identify the sources of a text's meanings by examining the combination of the different semiotic resources employed; Baldry and Thibault (2006) refer to this as resource integration principle. The resource integration principle suggests that semiotic resources, called by the authors resource systems, once selected and integrated in the text, affect each other and, ultimately, influence the generated meanings, which are the result of this complex combination of specific forms of semiotic systems.

Furthermore, following Halliday's (1978) systemic functional theory, Baldry and Thibault (2006) believe that also semiotic modalities can carry out different functions and serve a purpose; for this reason, they extend the three metafunctions carried out by language also to other forms of communication, such as gesture, gaze, sounds or images. When transcribing a multimodal text, therefore, it is important to identify the functions that semiotic resources serve and, especially, the results of the combination of two or more modalities.

### 2.4.1. Macrotranscription

In order to transcribe and analyze a multimodal text, and more specifically a film text, it is necessary to determine its phases. A phase is "the basic unit of textual sequencing and, hence, of global or 'macro' level organization of a text" (Baldry & Thibault, 2006: 47), and it is characterized by homogeneity and consistency in the forms and choices of semiotic resources employed. The type of modalities used, and their overall

functions, allow the researcher to distinguish one phase from another, as well as to identify its boundaries and the presence of transition points, subphases or macrophases in the text. Dividing the text into different phases enables the researcher to trace its metafunctional organization and determine the meanings created by the integration of the semiotic resources used in each phase. The significance of metafunctions in a film text can particularly be observed through the performance of a macrotranscription, which allows to identify the underlying overall structure of the text and recognize the relations between each phase and the functions realized by its elements and modalities.

The macrotranscription of a text, therefore, consists in the division of the text into phases, and in the subsequent consideration and identification of every phase's employed semiotic resources and the role and function they play in the creation of meaning. This is made clearer by the identification of transitivity frames, that is, "functional semiotic units in which the relations between participants, process and circumstances are realized" (Baldry and Thibault, 2006: 167) by a certain modality, and whether this occurs simultaneously with other meaning-making resources. Gaze, for instance, can realize experiential, interpersonal or textual meanings; Baldry and Thibault (2006) recognize three main aspects to take into consideration when examining gaze as a semiotic resource: control, direction and distance. These concepts refer to the fact that gaze can express a reaction to a phenomenon or a search for engagement, indicate the social position of a participant based on the direction of their look, or even catch the viewer's attention when a participant looks directly in the camera. Gaze can also be accompanied by gesture, body movements or other semiotic resources that interact together and contribute to the creation of meaning (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

### 2.4.2. Microtranscription

Differently from a macrotranscription, a microtranscription has the purpose of looking more into detail at the meaning-making resources and the effects of their combination in every block of the text. In order to do so, Baldry and Thibault (2006: 174-222) take into account six different aspects: time, visual frame, visual image, kinesic action, soundtrack, and metafunctional interpretation of phases and subphases.

### 2.4.2.1. Time and Visual Frame

First of all, time refers to the length of the video or film text, and it provides the researcher with time references that allow to consider the co-deployment of different semiotic resources at a specific moment in time and whether they collaborate to create meaning.

Time is followed by visual frame, which consists in the representation of film frames as time progresses, clearly showing the different units and structure of the text. Visual frames do not correspond to visual shots, as the latter can last for several seconds. In fact, a shot refers to "a filmed visual sequence in which there is no spatial displacement of the camera" (Baldry and Thibault, 2006: 187). Visual frames, therefore, allow to observe the changes between different shots, but also the transitions occurring within one shot, and analyze the information structure of the text.

In terms of information structure, the authors abandon the given-new paradigm of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) to analyze the visual frames according to the concepts of informational salience and newness in contrast with informational invariance. In other words, what can be considered given or new does not depend on its position in the visual frame, but rather on its constant presence and lack of change in the case of given elements, or its transformation into focal during the shot in the case of informationally salient aspects. Finally, visual frames enable researchers to consider the relations of interdependency between different shots and how these are construed. This aspect refers to the logical metafunction and it reveals how the text's creator moves from one shot to another and designs transitions (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

### 2.4.2.2. Visual Image

The third element considered in a microtranscription is the visual image, which includes the analysis of the most salient visual characteristics of each shot of the film text. In terms of visual image, there are several elements that need to be taken into account, for example, camera position, color, perspective, distance, visual salience and collocation, coding orientations or gaze (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

Camera position can have various effects on the viewer, for instance, making them feel included or excluded from the ongoing processes, but it can also mark a

transition from a previous shot. A camera can be moving or stationary; if the camera is moving, it is important to transcribe the type and the direction of the movement, which could be from side to side, tilting or sagittal, or perpendicular. Movement from side to side is called panning, but if the camera is mounted on a vehicle the most appropriate term would be dolly shot; on the other hand, if the movement is perpendicular, the camera could be moving forward or backward. Colors also play a fundamental part in visual image and in the creation of meaning, yet they cannot be analyzed singularly as their significance depends on the contexts of culture and of situation in which the text is embedded and on the other semiotic features to which they are related (*ibid.*).

Another visual aspect to examine is perspective, which could be vertical or horizontal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Vertical perspective indicates power and social relations, as well as status, and it can be interpreted in three different ways: the viewer could be positioned at a higher level than the depicted world looking down on it, in a position of power, or instantiating a detached and objective perspective in the viewer; they could be represented at the same level portraying equality and solidarity; or the viewer could be at a lower position and, therefore, feeling inferior to the depicted world. Horizontal perspective, on the other hand, affects the viewer's perception of complicity and empathy towards the participants of the film text. These feelings are enhanced when the depicted world is presented directly in front of the viewer. However, when the multimodal text is portrayed obliquely, the viewer tends to feel detached and excluded from the events that are taking place in the text (*ibid.*).

Involvement and detachment can also be instantiated in the visual semiotic system by gaze, which through direct eye contact can express and suggest intimacy between participant and viewer, nearly creating a dialogic relationship. On the other hand, the lack of direct eye contact can result in the exclusion of the viewer and their adoption of the role of an outsider looking in. The visual focus of a participant's gaze can also become a vector with other participants or objects, it can be directed at some parts of the body or at the horizon, and suggest numerous meanings as well as realize experiential, interpersonal, or textual functions, as mentioned in Section 2.4.1. (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

Another aspect that can have effects on the viewer is the virtual distance between the viewer and the depicted world. Virtual distance depends on the camera position and its vicinity to the objects or participants portrayed and needs to be transcribed and categorized, from maximally close to maximally distant. Closeness to what is being represented in the text fosters empathy and involvement, while distance causes detachment and depersonalization in the viewer. The viewer's perception with regards to the significance of the elements of the depicted world, on the other hand, depends on visual salience. Visual salience refers to those visual elements that appear to the viewer as more significant than others. This could be subjective, but the usually perceived salient aspects tend to be smaller than the background, more nitid and vivid, and characterized by more distinguishable features (Kanisza, 1980; Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

The last two semiotic forms playing a role in the visual semiotic system identified by Baldry and Thibault (2006) are visual collocation and coding orientation. Visual collocation refers to the identification of secondary elements that specify the social role, status, role, or that simply characterize the text's participants, processes or circumstances. Examples of secondary items that could visually characterize and collocate participants are profession, physical appearance, gender, or even location.

Coding orientation, on the contrary, is a concept that has been used by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and that refers to the reality portrayed in the film text and its similarity or difference to the reality of the viewer, also known as ambient visual perception. It is possible to distinguish three types of coding orientations: naturalistic, sensory/sensual, and hyperreal. The naturalistic coding orientation is very similar to the viewer's everyday reality, the sensory/sensual coding orientation comprises colours and settings that appeal to the viewer's senses, while the hyperreal coding orientation is related to the world of dreams beyond reality with its consistent features. These coding orientations can coexist within the same multimodal text, or even within the same shot (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

### 2.4.2.3. Kinesic Action
Kinesic action is the fourth element that needs to be considered in a microtranscription and it is one of the most complex aspects to analyze as it comprises many different

meaning-making forms, such as smiling, moving, gesture, etc.; the meanings they realize are hardly ever universal as they depend on the context of culture and of situation in which the text was created. Therefore, when analyzing kinesic action, it is fundamental to take into account four criteria in order to justify the attribution of a specific meaning to one of the instantiations of this semiotic resource system (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). Firstly, different parts of the body present different meaning potential, for instance, facial expressions usually refer to the manifestation of affect, proxemics to social status and hierarchy, and posture to the defensive or open attitude of participants. Secondly, kinesic action and its different forms tend to be associated with other semiotic resources, working together and creating patterns resulting in the joint creation of meaning. Thirdly, bodily actions cannot be analyzed per se as they usually instantiate a relation between two or more participants and, for this reason, can be interpreted as dialogic acts. Finally, kinesic units often reoccur throughout the text producing a semantic commonality between different participants, generating ties and links and providing cohesion to the film text (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, when transcribing kinesic action, it is essential to analyze the movement observed in the text and consider its direction, type, duration and meanings it produces, as well as the location in which it occurs. In terms of direction, a movement can consist in the distancing or approaching of one participant to another, consequently indicating indifference or intimacy, and ultimately resulting in a conjunction or disjunction. Whereas, as far as movement types are concerned, an action can result from another action and therefore represent a reaction or be the initiating action that causes a movement in the Reactor. Bodily actions can, therefore, not only carry out experiential functions, just as language does, but also interpersonal functions as movement often expresses interaction among participants. In addition, kinesic actions can indicate the participants' attitudes, feelings, or states of mind; the change and modification of movement in order to portray participants' thoughts and emotions or to convey different meanings is defined as interpersonal modification of movement. This modification can be carried out in three main ways: by various parts of the body, such as the head, smile, eyebrows, cheeks, etc.; in terms of force, expressed through gesture; or in terms of amplification, through the reiteration and enhancement of movement (*ibid.*). Researchers finally need to take into account the possibility that

movements from different participants could occur in the same shot and the significance of the relations they instantiate between them, as well as their similarities or differences.

### 2.4.2.4. Soundtrack

An additional aspect to consider in microtranscription is the soundtrack, which includes any background sound, music, or language (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). Sounds of the film text can occupy different positions with respect to the listener, they can interact with one another and, consequently, generate a dialogic relationship, even with the listener, and they can also be a source of text cohesion when, for instance, they accompany the actions or events that occur in the text. The soundtrack also plays an essential role in meaning-creation, in portraying the depicted world and in affecting the viewer of the film text (*ibid.*).

When considering soundtrack, there are several aspects to take into account, such as the degree of loudness, the duration of the sound event, tempo, continuity and pausing, dyadic relationships and vocal registers. The degree of loudness refers to the intensity with which sounds are pronounced and can be categorized along a continuum from very soft to very loud. The duration of a sound event can be applied to single syllables or words and its increase may indicate the significance of an element in the text, especially if it is associated to the employment of also other semiotic resources. The third aspect to consider is tempo, which, besides soundtrack, can be related to kinesic action, and it can be classified as slow, median or fast (*ibid.*). Another significant element is the possible presence of pauses in the soundtrack; they could express the end of a phase with a falling melody, or its open-enedness if the music ends with a rising melody. A text could also be characterized by the co-existence of many voices and types of sound which would inevitably result in the formation of relations between them that need to be identified by the researcher, along with the meanings each of them creates. It is possible to distinguish between four types of dyadic relationships: sequential, simultaneous, initiating, and responding. The last soundtrack-related aspect to consider is vocal registers, which can express the speaker's emotions and be easily interchanged according to what message the speaker wants to convey (Abercrombie, 1967, cit. in Baldry & Thibault, 2006: 222).

Finally, the microtranscription of a film text is completed with the metafunctional interpretation of each semiotic resource identified (Baldry & Thibault, 2006).

It is important to remember that multimodal transcription is not an objective method and that it will not always present the same results, it is rather a subjective process that focuses on identifying the most salient and significant semiotic features of a multimodal text that contribute to the creation of meaning.

> The analyst is concerned with the identification of units that are perceptually and semiotically salient for the members of the culture in question. This is a consequence of the fact that multimodal transcription *is meaning based*. Given that meaning is always relative to an observer or participant - an agent - it follows, of course, that the *meaning-making patterns* in the text can be construed in different ways by different *participant-observers (*Baldry and Thibault, 2006: 183 – italics as in the original).

## 2.5. Methodology

The present work examines the videos of Obama and Biden's speeches concerning school shootings that occurred in elementary schools in the USA. The videos were analyzed following Baldry and Thibault's (2006) multimodal systemic functional linguistics approach. Each video was examined separately and, only after having identified the different semiotic resources employed to create meaning by the speakers and the characteristics of the film texts, they were compared in order to recognize possible similarities and differences, as well as to determine whether one of the two speeches was more effective in conveying their message.

The approach was applied equally and following the same passages for each video. After having watched the film texts numerous times, the possible phases in which the videos could be divided were identified, according to the different semiotic resources employed by the speakers and by the texts' creators and whether they showed variations throughout the film texts. Due to the genre of the videos considered, one of the aspects that was mostly taken into account to determine the possible division into phases was the verbal system, that is, the words and the general message conveyed by the Presidents.

The next step consisted in performing a microtranscription in order to identify the semiotic resources employed in the video and by the speaker, as well as their functions and the meanings they realized. The purpose was not just to describe each modality used in the text, but also the effects it had on the viewer and how it combined with other semiotic resources in order to produce a complex and whole message. For this reason, the length of the film and the visual frame were the first aspects of the text to be considered. While time was transcribed to examine its possible effects on the viewer especially when combined with other modalities, such as tempo and movement, the visual frame allowed to recognize salient and invariant elements in the text based on their appearance or movement in the camera shot, and the variations from one shot to another.

The second semiotic resource analyzed was the visual image. The camera position and the possible reasons for the choice of a stationary or moving camera, as well as the effects it had on the viewer were initially examined. The moments in which the camera moved were also recorded with the purpose of noticing whether they occurred randomly or concurrently with other elements of the visual frame, or during the employment of a specific modality. Finally, the camera position was also considered in relation to the film genre as its position could simply be the result of a rigid convention. Perspective was also taken into account and, more specifically, both vertical and horizontal perspective. In terms of vertical perspective, the position of the viewer compared to that of the speaker and its consequent results were assessed, especially in regard to social and power relations and how these could affect the feelings of the viewer towards the speaker. On the other hand, horizontal perspective was considered in terms of direct or oblique angles and their consequences in the viewer's involvement or lack thereof and, thus, in the effective conveyance of the Presidents' message. Additional visual elements analyzed were the colors present in the film text and their possible universal and specific meanings in the American culture, and the visual collocation. Firstly, the colors of the president's suit, of the background and of the other salient elements of the text were described, and then the different ways in which they could directly affect the viewer and the audience were determined. In terms of visual collocation, on the other hand, all those elements that contributed to the identification and categorization of the participants and of the

context of situation and of culture were identified and the effects they had on the viewer's perception of the film text were described. The next visual semiotic forms analyzed were the visual distance between the speaker and the viewer and the visual salience, which revealed which aspects of the text were more informationally prominent than others based on movements, colors and dimensions. Virtual distance is strictly correlated to camera position and was described in the visual analysis from maximally close to maximally distant. Its effects on the viewer were also taken into account, as well as its possible functions and the meanings the text's creator wanted to realize. Finally, the possibility the virtual distance, along with other modalities, could instantiate experiential, interpersonal or textual relationships with the viewer was considered. The last two visual semiotic forms examined were coding orientation and the participants' gaze. Coding orientation was categorized based on the genre, colors and characteristics of the film text and following Baldry and Thibault's (2006) distinctions between naturalistic, hyperreal, and sensory/sensual. The participants' gaze, on the other hand, was analyzed taking into account its direction, orientation, distance, and most importantly, the meanings it realized. Furthermore, the possible presence of direct eye-contact between the speaker and the viewer and how the President's gaze affected the observer along with the conveyance of his own message were examined.

After having analyzed the visual image, the kinesic action present in the film text was considered, in particular the movement and gestures of the participants. Firstly, the speaker's position during the video and its changes were examined; his actions were then described in terms of type, direction, orientation with regards to the viewer, and duration. The speaker's movements were also studied in order to recognize whether they were connected to another participant's actions, being initiating or reacting to someone else's movements, and consequently, realizing one of the three metafunctions. In addition, the ways in which each movement affected and influenced the viewer, whether it occurred in conjunction with another semiotic resource, and the meanings and functions it realized were considered. Gestures were also analyzed, as they can reveal a participant's emotions or state of mind and can have an impact on the observer and on their perceived engagement in the film text (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). For this reason, gestures were described, and the moment of their employment

was also considered in order to recognize a pattern or the combination of other modalities. The effects of gesture on the speech and its effectiveness were also analyzed, along with the participants' facial expressions that could interpersonally modify the Presidents' speeches and the meanings they realized.

Finally, the last semiotic resource considered was the soundtrack. The soundtrack included speech, voices, music or other background sounds, which could influence the viewer's perception of the film text and reveal new information about the video and its topic. All these elements were described taking into account the text genre, their degree of loudness and the tempo. The speaker's verbal communication and its continuity or possible pauses were also examined, as well as the meanings they realized and the reaction they could have on the viewer.

After having analyzed every semiotic resource employed, a general metafunctional interpretation of the film texts was performed in order to recognize how single and integrated modalities could carry out different functions, just as language does, and whether these realized functions had an impact on the meaning-making process. This step was finally followed by the comparison and discussion of the two videos analyzed and of the effectiveness of the Presidents' speeches.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Visual Analysis

### 3.1. Obama's Speech

The video shows the speech given by former President Barack Obama in 2012, after the occurrence of a school shooting that resulted in the murder of 26 people at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut.

The video can be divided into four main phases: introduction, development, conclusion and closing title. This division is mostly based on the verbal communication of the speaker rather than other semiotic resources due to the text genre, that is, a political speech, which does not usually involve many shots or modality variations that can signify the end of a phase and the beginning of another one. For this reason, it was not possible to perform a thorough phasal analysis of the film text.

The video lasts three minutes and 57 seconds, during which the visual frame presents only few variations. In the course of the introduction, a caption at the bottom of the visual frame appears and remains on the screen for a few seconds, describing what the film text is about and the date of occurrence. As Figure 1 illustrates, the words are written in a white font over a blue background, and they are presented with the symbol of the President of the United States.



Figure 1. Caption appearance.

The same font can be observed at the end of the video, during the closing title, which provides the viewer with some information concerning the source of the video and its related reliability. Figure 2 shows how during the last eight seconds of the film text, the visual frame completely changes as the speaker and the setting disappear and the viewer is faced with a light blue background, the link to the website where the video can be found and the symbol of the White House.



Figure 2. Closing title.

Besides these temporary changes, the visual frame remains mostly invariant throughout the film text. The only living and, therefore, moving element present and visible in the video is the speaker, who only moves his upper body, in particular his hands and head.

The camera remains generally stationary, it hardly ever changes position as it remains fixed throughout the film text, focusing on the speaker. The only camera movements recorded occur at different moments throughout the film text; at the beginning of the video, in the first sequence, the camera moves very quickly perpendicularly and, more specifically, forward, zooming in on the President, who becomes the most salient element of the visual frame. This movement marks the beginning of the speech, the identification of the main participant and it can represent a call for attention to the viewer. During the second phase, on the other hand, the camera slightly tilts upwards probably to create more even proportions of the speaker at the center of the visual frame, and, in doing so, the image of the White House in the background becomes more clearly visible. This camera movement is followed, after twenty seconds, by another perpendicular movement towards the President. The camera zooms in very slowly for about ten seconds on the speaker who remains the

most salient feature of the visual frame and whose facial expressions become more evident now; this camera movement occurs when the President starts talking about the victims and their young age.

As far as perspective is concerned, the speaker appears to be at a higher level than the people present at the event, even though they are not shown in the film text. His bodily superiority is seemingly due to the fact that the President looks down when he speaks towards the audience and his position behind a lectern is physically superior compared to the crowd he is talking to. The viewer outside of the depicted world, on the other hand, appears to be at the same level of the speaker. Vertical perspective can, therefore, be indicated as median, while in terms of horizontal perspective, the viewer is positioned directly in front of the speaker at a direct angle.

The general color that characterizes the film text is blue. Indeed, the background is colored with different shades of blue and, while the colors of the President's attire are conventional, they still follow this color scheme as the suit is dark blue, which is accompanied, in this case, by a white shirt and a striped tie. As was mentioned above, blue also appears on the initial caption of the video and in the closing title. In addition, the clothes of the speaker are one of the secondary elements that reveal his identity, along with the background, the lectern, and his position. The suit and tie display the formality of the event while the little flag on the President's suit reveals his identity and the context of culture in which the participant is speaking. The lectern contributes to the image of high social status of the speaker as well as his importance and general recognition among people, which is explained by the plaque on the lectern that gives the viewer the necessary information concerning the identity of the participant by saying President of the United States. The background also contributes to the revelation of the speaker's role by stating the setting of the event, which is The White House, and the State in which the speech takes place, that is, Washington. The background also includes two widely recognized flags, on the right of the visual frame there is the flag of the President of the USA, while, on the left, the national flag. Finally, the position of the speaker expresses his central role in the text, as he is represented standing up in the center of the visual frame behind a lectern.

Furthermore, the lectern covers part of the President's body, which can only be seen from the torso and above. For this reason, the virtual distance between the speaker

and the viewer, which also depends on the camera position that in this case is zoomed in on the President, can be classified as a medium close shot. Moreover, the camera focus on the speaker is one of the aspects that make the President the most salient element of the film text; in addition, he is positioned at the center of the frame and is the only participant in the video. Consequently, the attention falls on him, as he is the only partially moving element of the film text in front of a still background.

As far as gaze is concerned, the speaker often looks down on his notes and written speech, without establishing a direct eye-contact with the viewer, as can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. The speaker looking down.



Figure 4. The speaker looking at his sides.

Because of the speaker's constant downward look, it appears clear that he is reading from some documents placed on the lectern, from which, at times, he raises his gaze to finish words or sentences. When this occurs, the President's gaze is usually directed at his sides (Figure 4), probably indicating the presence of an audience, but never at the camera.

Due to the text genre the video belongs to, no extravagant or sudden movements are recorded, and, for the same reason, the coding orientation of the film text can be defined as naturalistic as it consists in a reproduction of a real event and a real speech made by the real President of the United States. As a video displaying a political speech, it accurately reproduces the events and actions carried out on that day. In terms of kinesic action, the speaker remains in the same position throughout the speech and the film text. In the first sequences, he is already positioned behind the lectern where he remains until the end of the video. He presents a rigid posture and he slightly moves his head up and down when looking at the audience, especially at the end of sentences. One of the most salient gestures he makes is the raising of his left hand to touch the corner of his eyes, seemingly to catch a tear that does not seem to be there. This movement is repeated six times throughout the film text, four times in the left eye and twice in the right, which leads to the idea that the speaker did not need to scratch his eye, as the gesture was carried out in both of them (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Figure 5. Speaker's right-hand gesture.

Figure 6. Speaker's left-hand gesture.

During the video, the participant also anxiously moves his hands, yet this movement is very subtle and not clearly visible by the viewer; it seems directed at following the written words of the documents on the lectern, holding onto the lectern or just clasping his hands in front of him and resting them on the lectern.

The film text does not present any background music as the recorded event is a political speech. However, the viewer can hear the sound of cameras taking photos in the background, which confirms the idea concerning the presence of an audience. There are various moments of silence during the speech where the speaker takes a moment to pause and reflect; these quiet moments highlight the sound of cameras taking pictures, which seems to increase when the President is looking at the audience, while it tends to diminish as soon as the speaker looks down at the lectern. The speaker's facial expressions do not reveal much of his emotions; the only subtle facial movement recognized is illustrated in Figure 7 and it consists in the tightening of the corners of the President's mouth every time he pauses.



Figure 7. The speaker tightening the corners of his mouth.

These pauses do not occur randomly, but they tend to take place immediately after the revelation of the age of the victims and other aspects related to the children killed during the shooting. In addition, the emphatic pauses are accompanied by a slow tempo as the participant speaks at a very slow pace and with a normal degree of loudness; he articulates every word clearly and his tone of voice appears assertive and serious.

## 3.2. Biden's Speech

The second video under analysis represents the speech given by the current President Joe Biden in 2022 in response to the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, which led to the death of nineteen students and two teachers.

Due to the text genre and similarly to the previously analyzed video, it is not possible to complete a phasal analysis following Baldry and Thibault's (2006) example. The video, however, can be divided into three sections identified by considering mostly the verbal communication of the speaker rather than other semiotic resources employed. The first phase can be titled introduction as the speaker announces the topic of his speech and his feelings towards it, giving the viewer a general idea of the theme that will be elaborated throughout the film text. The second phase consists in the speech itself, while the third and last section is indicated by the last words of the speaker and his exit from the conference room.

The film text lasts seven minutes and twelve seconds and it is characterized by the presence of two videos in one. Indeed, the visual frame is formed by a rectangular frame that includes the President and the First Lady and a smaller squared frame with a woman translating everything the speaker says into ASL (American Sign Language). The frame displaying the President is the one we will be focusing on, and it does not change much throughout the film text. As illustrated in Figure 8, one of the most salient variations of the visual frame corresponds to the conclusion of the film text, when the speaker finishes his speech and leaves moving towards the door, opening it for his wife.
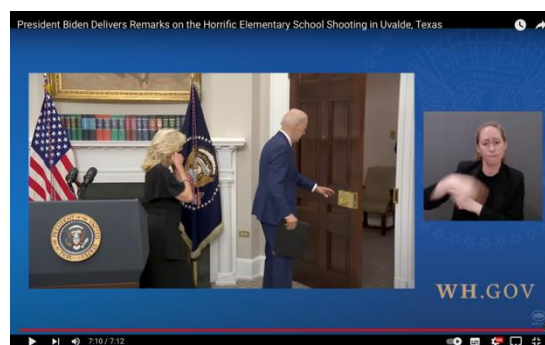


Figure 8. President's exit.

This moment also represents the biggest movement in camera position in the film text as, once the speaker finishes his speech and moves away from the lectern towards the door, the camera follows him, panning until he leaves the room followed by his wife. Besides this movement, the camera remains stationary for most of the film text; it only lightly pans from left to right during the speech probably just to include in the camera shot a greater portion of the flag of the President of the United States. The stillness of the camera throughout the film text complies with the conventions of this type of genre, that is, political speeches, which tend to occur in front of an audience and without much movement on the part of the speaker who usually speaks from a higher point. The text genre also explains the naturalistic coding orientation since the film text is supposed to accurately portray the President's speech as it was given on that day to the limited audience present in that setting. For this reason, there is no filter or modification that the film text undergone before being published or posted online and the colors present in the visual frame are conventional and regular.

Moreover, as far as perspective is concerned, the video is characterized by a median vertical perspective; the viewer is at the same level of the President. On the other hand, in terms of horizontal perspective, the viewer is positioned directly in front of the speaker as if they were a spectator seated in the front row. This applies to both text frames.

The two frames of the film text are placed on a light blue background, whose color can be found again in Biden's suit and tie. However, the President is not the only participant in the visual frame. He is accompanied and supported by a blonde woman wearing a black dress who is standing on his right side and slightly behind, close to the wall (Figure 9). Her identity can be determined by taking into consideration the visual collocation, which includes her position, the fact that she is present in the visual frame, as well as her vicinity to the President as secondary elements that can help the viewer realize that she is the First Lady. This conjecture is confirmed by her presence in the film text, despite her silence and her lack of active participation in the speech.
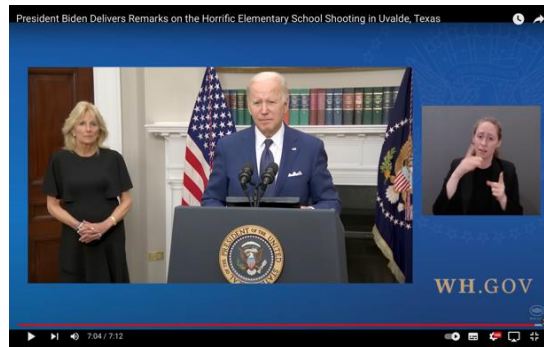
Figure 9. Visual frame.

The speaker and the First Lady, therefore, are the only elements in the video that present a change and that do not remain invariant throughout the text. While the woman only moves her hands, shifts her body weight from one leg to the other and alternates her gaze from the speaker to the camera and, sometimes, also towards the audience, the speaker appears as the main salient element. Firstly, the President stands out from the background for the color of his suit and because of his position of authority behind a lectern and two microphones; secondly, he moves his hands while he speaks, and, most importantly, he is the subject and protagonist of the film text. Consequently, the speaker contrasts against the background, which remains invariant and less significant, less nitid.

The viewer sees the President quite close and, for this reason, the virtual distance between them can be categorized as a medium close shot. The camera shows the speaker behind the lectern from his waist up and, consequently, the viewer can observe the speaker from a vicinity and discern his facial expressions. The identity of the speaker is disclosed by the two flags that can be seen on his both sides, the flag of the USA on his right and the flag of the President of the United States on the left, as well as from the plaque on the lectern that says President of the United States and the little pin representing the national flag on his suit. These secondary elements also determine the context of culture. In addition, the social role of the speaker is highlighted by his position, that is, at the center of the visual frame and, most importantly, behind a lectern in front of an audience giving a speech.

In terms of gaze, the President rarely looks down at the written documents on the lectern, instead he often looks at the audience and the camera, establishing direct eye-contact with the observer; in certain moments, as shown in Figure 10, his gaze

appears so steady and directed over the camera that it can make the viewer wonder whether the speaker is reading his speech from a teleprompter. Nevertheless, the President's facial expressions are in complete accordance with the words he says. Furthermore, during the speech, the speaker also turns around and looks for a moment at his wife in the eyes (Figure 11), while he pronounces "so many crushed spirits"; this interpersonal relation created through gaze is reciprocated by the woman, who, besides looking at the speaker, also raises her eyebrows and closes her eyes as to confirm and affirmatively respond to his interaction.
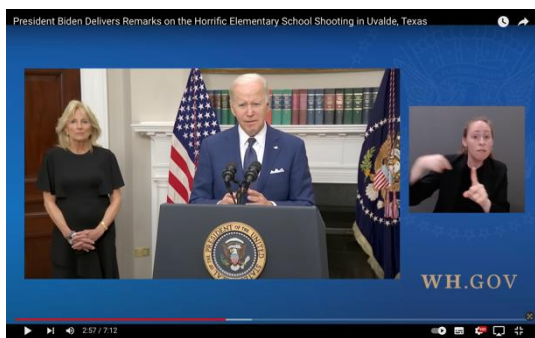


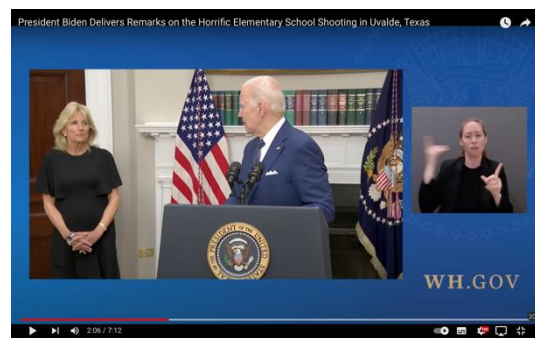Figure 10. Speaker looking at the camera.

Figure 11. Speaker looking at his wife.

As far as the First Lady is concerned, her gaze interchanges between the speaker and the camera. In addition, she remains stoic throughout the text and does not let any emotion transpire from her face.

During the film text, the speaker remains overall still behind the lectern. This is consistent with the text genre and with the viewer's expectations as the text already starts with the participant in this position and the presence of a lectern indicates that the speaker will be standing on it usually in front of an audience rather than moving around the stage. The two fixed microphones can also be perceived as a hint that the speaker will not move during his speech. The only three movements realized by the participant are the moment in which he turns his body to his wife and looks at her, the moment in which the speaker closes his black binder on the lectern, and the moment in which the speech is finished and the speaker turns and walks towards the door to leave. The former is an initiating movement on the part of the speaker who is at the center of the visual frame and who turns on his right, creating an oblique perspective, in order to look at his wife, who is slightly behind him. While he turns to look at the

First Lady, the President keeps his shoulders open and facing the camera as well as the audience, while the biggest movement is carried out by his head. This motion only lasts two seconds and then the speaker faces the camera again and reconnects his gaze with the viewer. The second movement is a very brief motion during which the President closes a black binder on the lectern, probably containing notes concerning the speech he is giving, and rests both his hands on it while he goes on to finish his speech. It can be considered an initiating movement that does not seem to create a reaction in the other female participant. The last movement, on the other hand, occurs at the end of the film text. Similarly to the first one, it is initiated by the speaker and, in this case, imitated by the First Lady, who follows him while putting a mask on and who can be considered a reactor, as her movement is a response to the speaker's action. It can be said, therefore, that the two participants move in immediate succession one from the other and that their movements are concord in terms of direction, orientation, type and speed. The speaker turns left and starts walking confidently and steadily towards the door, instantiating again an oblique perspective, yet, in this case, the President does not look back at the audience or the viewer. He walks while ignoring the possible questions of the audience, whose voice can be heard, and, finally, he opens the door for his wife and waits for her to leave the room before doing the same.

The speaker's words and movements are often accompanied by hand gestures throughout the film text. There are various types of hands movement that he makes. First of all, in the introduction, the speaker opens and lightly raises his arms twice, in a repeated motion, with the palms of his hands facing each other and slightly turned upwards as he pronounces "beautiful, innocent" (Figure 12).
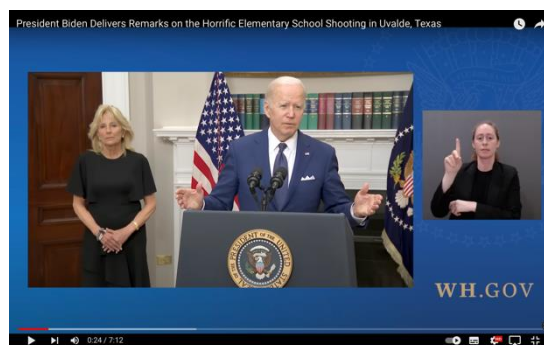


Figure 12. Speaker's open hands.

Another gesture carried out by the speaker already from the first passages of his speech is the holding of the lectern; this gesture is repeated numerous times throughout the film text and in various formats. As Figure 13 illustrates, sometimes the hands are holding the lectern by the sides, sometimes from the top.



Figure 13. Speaker holding lectern from the top and from the sides.

Some of the gestures carried out by the speaker represent what is being said through the verbal semiotic resource. An example is when the speaker says: "Losing a child is almost like having a piece of you ripped away", this sentence is pronounced with great pathos and emotion, which is highlighted by the gesture of the speaker who motions with his hand the action of ripping his own soul. Similarly, the President enacts and interprets also other sentences of his speech, such as the hands movements realized while pronouncing "there's a hollowness in your chest you feel like you're being sucked into it". In this case, the speaker brings his hands up at the same level of his chest and then closes them into fists to imitate his words and the action of something full being shrunk and diminished. Additional gestures that imitate words include the lowering of the speaker's right hand with the index finger pointing down to match the statement that "mass shootings went down", and the raising of the same hand to indicate that "mass shootings tripled". Hands gestures continue throughout the film text, especially in conjunction with powerful words which tend to be pronounced with a higher voice and always following the rhythm of the speaker's voice accentuating important statements. Among these hand motions, there is the raising of both hands facing each other and at a shoulder distance followed by their steady and controlled lowering following the words' rhythm. This movement is usually performed when the speaker incites the viewer to take action and be outraged at what is happening and has happened in the country, as can be seen in Figure 14.
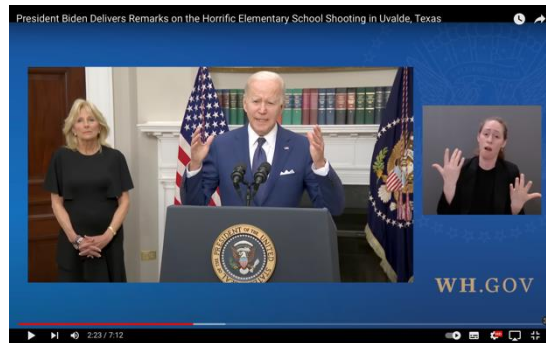
Figure 14. The speaker incites the viewer.

An additional hand movement realized is the lowering and widening of both hands with the palms facing the audience (Figure 15) when the speaker mentions the innumerable other incidents involving guns and shootings.
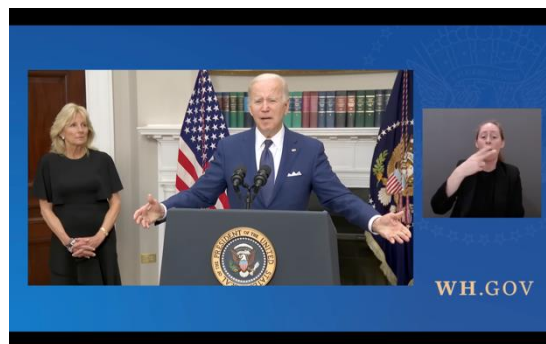


Figure 15. Speaker's lowering and widening hands.

The First Lady, on the other hand, keeps her hands crossed in front of her. The film text does not present any type of background music. The attention is on the speaker's words and, even if the President's gaze makes the viewer wonder and think that there is an audience attending the event, no other sound other than the speaker's words is audible before the end of the speech, when the viewer can hear numerous loud voices. These voices and their register can be associated to those of journalists, who could be present in the film text as this is consistent with this type of texts, where questions usually are asked at the end of the President's speech. The speaker uses a varied intonation. Indeed, he raises his voice especially at the end of a reasoning to emphasize the conclusion, while he slows down and clearly articulate his speech when mentioning high numbers and he lowers his tone of voice when expressing grief and sadness for

the victims. Throughout his speech, the President also makes short emphatic pauses, in particular after rhetorical questions directed at the viewer, often accompanied by the closure of his eyes, a loud sigh or frowned eyebrows, and after having addressed and discussed some topics. The degree of loudness, therefore, varies from normal to loud, while the tempo is slow; the speaker does not rush in his speech and leaves time to reflect, letting words sit before moving on to the next point to discuss.

## 3.3. Discussion

The two videos present some similarities, but also numerous differences, and they produce different effects in the viewer due to the distinct semiotic resources employed. The effectiveness of the message conveyed highly depends on these modalities and on the functions they realize in each video.

Firstly, in both speeches, the camera remains generally stationary and pointed at the speaker without any significant changes in visual shots, which indicates that the purpose of the text is to convey information especially through a verbal semiotic resource realized by the speaker. This is confirmed by the fact that the President remains at the center of the visual frame throughout the entire film text and he is the element that the video revolves around. Nevertheless, there are other modalities that affect the viewer's perception and understanding of the message, for instance, the speaker's gaze, gestures or his movements.

While Obama rarely looks at the camera and establishes a direct eye-contact with the viewer, Biden highly leans on this semiotic resource and is able to create interpersonal relations with the audience and with the viewer outside the depicted world. By looking directly at the camera and, consequently, at the observer, the speaker appears genuine and honest, and his speech does not seem a rehearsed performance, but a heartfelt discourse. Furthermore, he manages to personally engage the viewer, who feels compelled to keep watching and listening to the speech until its end. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), the direct eye-contact between participant and viewer can represent a demand or an offer; in this case, it appears that the President is demanding the observer, on the one hand, to take action and be outraged at what is happening in the country and, on the other hand, to come together in unity and solidarity and grieve the victims. These demands are expressed through

the speaker's facial expression, which reveal anger and frustration in some parts of the speech and sadness in others. The display of these emotions is consistent with Ekman's (1971) analysis of universal facial expressions, according to which, anger is shown through low eyebrows that point inwards and an open mouth with raised lips, and sadness is revealed by corners of the mouth that point downwards and outer corners of the eyes that present a similar position. Besides gaze, these facial expressions are accompanied by the speaker's words, which seem to make the viewer sympathize with him. Although Obama does not visually connect with the viewer leading to possible feelings of detachment and disinterest, he does look at the audience when raising his gaze from the lectern. In doing so, gaze realizes an interpersonal function as the speaker addresses his audience directly making them feel involved in his speech.

Obama's gaze leaves the researcher wondering about the reason why he avoids looking at the camera. Direct eye-contact with the viewer is one of the most powerful semiotic resources available to the speaker, yet the former President does not use it, appearing distant and as if he was carrying out a planned performance while being personally detached from the situation.

Obama's lack of involvement of the viewer through gaze could be compensated by the perspective of the film text, which can instantiate vicinity between participant and observer. In both film texts, the viewer outside of the depicted world appears to be at the same level of the speaker; this portrays equality between the speaker and the viewer who may feel less intimidated and allowed to have different opinions, free to agree or disagree with the President. In addition, the median vertical perspective allows to perceive the speaker not as someone who is superior but rather as a normal person who is grieving. The perceived vicinity between President and observer is enhanced by their virtual distance and the direct horizontal perspective, which, according to Baldry and Thibault (2006), fosters empathy in the viewer and, at the same time, it also manages to catch their attention as they are not looking at the film text from a corner but facing the speaker, who appears turned in their direction.

Another difference between the film texts analyzed consists in the participants' movements and gestures. Both participants remain overall still behind a lectern during the film texts, which is consistent with the text genre and, consequently, with the expectations of the observer; there are only few movements that are worth discussing.

In the first video, Obama slightly moves his head up and down when looking at the audience and especially at the end of sentences; this could be interpreted as a strategy to seem more convincing and to give more emphasis to the words he pronounces and, therefore, to have a positive effect on the viewer who receives his message. Biden, on the other hand, moves slightly more as he is filmed when he leaves the conference room and when, during the speech, he turns around to look at his wife. This last action produces an oblique perspective that partially excludes and distances the viewer while conveying the idea that this is an intimate moment just for the President and the First Lady, which makes the speech more personal and creates a connection between the two participants. However, the speaker does not completely ignore the viewer as his shoulders remain open and facing the camera as well as the audience. The same cannot be said for the speaker's exit from the room, when, in that case, the generated oblique perspective completely excludes the viewer and conveys the idea that there is nothing more to be said, consequently, ending the connection that had been established between speaker and viewer. Despite the end of this interpersonal relation, the President's decision to open the door for his wife and wait for her to leave the room before doing the same portrays an image of gentlemanliness and politeness that can still positively affect the viewer.

Another semiotic form that can influence the observer, create meaning and interpersonally modify discourse is hand gestures. Biden employs this meaning-making resource to engage the viewer and convey his message more convincingly; he employs different motions to accompany the words of his speech and emphasize them. The gesture illustrated in Figure 12, for example, seems to realize an interpersonal function with the audience and with the viewer as the open arms portray inclusion, but they may also remind the viewer of a priest during a sermon. Figure 13, on the other hand, shows how the different position of the speaker' hands can convey different meanings to the viewer. While the hands on the side of the lectern seem to portray this element as a form of support for the speaker who leans on it seemingly to find strength and stability, and to prepare himself for what he has to say, the hands on top of the lectern show authority, power, seriousness and readiness to take action. This position seems also to convey confidence and determination and, especially when realized simultaneously as the direct eye-contact with the viewer, it instantiates vicinity with

the observer as if the speaker was talking directly to them. In addition, the hand gestures that imitate the words pronounced by Biden appear very emphatic and to a certain extent dramatic, yet they seem to catch the attention of the viewer and keep them engaged throughout the film text. These last hand motions are called illustrators and they are produced willingly by the speaker usually with the purpose of maintaining the attention of the observer (Ekman & Friesen, 1974). Obama, on the contrary, does not make emphatic hand gestures during his speech, his hands are mostly hidden behind the lectern and moved without an apparent reason probably as an anxious response to the situation. The only explicit gestures that the former President makes, shown in Figures 5 and 6, appear ambiguous as it is difficult to recognize whether they have a physical purpose, such as wiping a tear or scratching an eye, or an emotional one in portraying a grieving image of the President and foster empathy in the observer. This gesture could also fall under the label 'adaptors' created by Ekman and Friesen (1974) to indicate all those movements that are learned to satisfy physical needs, but that can also be triggered by particular situations, such as the one displayed in the film text. Furthermore, Obama presents a rigid posture that, on the one hand, expresses formality, solemnity and also conventionalism, while, on the other hand, could represent the speaker's discomfort and difficult in this situation, or even his emotional response to the national tragedy he is referring to. His general stillness is, indeed, another aspect that is not usually expected of people with his social role; one would assume the speaker's use of hand gestures or other body resources to amplify the message he is conveying to the viewer, yet this does not happen.

Meanings can also be realized through secondary elements present in the film text, such as the participants' attire, the setting or also the participants' position. In both videos analyzed, the speakers are placed behind a lectern, at the center of the visual frame and in the middle of two national flags. Their position characterizes them as highly relevant people, who play a fundamental and crucial role in the American society and who are looked at as leaders having the power to speak to the nation. Moreover, the flags at the speakers' sides seem to express solemnity and importance while indicating the gravity of the situation and the seriousness of the film text. The flags could also remind people to have faith in their country as they represent symbols that usually lead to stronger feelings of patriotism and nationalism (Kemmelmeier &

Winter, 2008). Colors also play a role in the film text, as they can have an effect on the viewer and realize different functions. One of the colors that mostly characterizes both videos is blue. Blue is the color of the democratic party in the USA, of which both Presidents are part of, but it is also a color that tends to give calming feelings to the audience and decrease levels of anxiety (Madden, Hewett, & Roth, 2000; Clarke & Costall, 2008). For this reason, its use does not seem to be random, on the contrary, it might be a strategy to promote the speakers' political party and, at the same time, calm and portray tranquility to the observer. In both cases, the ultimate function is that of influencing the viewer. Another color that, however, appears only in one video is black. In the second video analyzed, the current President is not the only participant present in the visual frame as he is accompanied by the First Lady, whose presence at the side of the speaker conveys the idea of familial unity and solidarity, support towards her husband and a united front against those who may oppose the words of the President. The First Lady is wearing a black dress which probably has the function of honoring and respecting the victims of the tragedy and, therefore, of indicating the mourning of those who were killed during the shooting and their families. Indeed, black is usually associated with death and considered a strong and powerful color (Adams & Osgood, 1973; Clarke & Costall, 2008).

Furthermore, the soundtrack reveals additional differences between the two videos analyzed. While in both film texts there is no background music and the attention is completely focused on the speakers' voice, the participants have different vocal registers and intonation. In the first video, Obama makes numerous and long pauses, often accompanied by closed eyes, which seem to foster empathy in the viewer and make them perceive the President as emotionally involved and shaken by what happened and the topic of his speech. The pauses could also have the purpose of making the speech clearer for the audience and portraying the speaker as more assertive, yet their length could also suggest discomfort or hesitation in moving forward. In addition, during the film text, the President speaks at a slow pace, probably for clarity purposes or to give more emphasis to certain words, yet his slowness of speech accompanied by a monotone voice, no hand gestures and no direct eye-contact with the viewer could easily lead to their disengagement and loss of interest. On the other hand, Biden employs a varied intonation, measuring his voice and managing to

keep the viewer involved in his speech; the varied intonation allows him not to lose the audience and viewer's interest and attention, as well as portray authenticity in relation to what he is saying. The tempo is slow, but, in this case, the slowness of speech seems to portray the President's feelings of grief and mourning, yet also indignation and anger for the situation, while letting the viewer reflect and ponder on his call for action in order to find a solution.

The difference between the two speakers and the film texts they appear in lies in the integration of distinct semiotic resources that produces a specific and unique final message and meaning, which is then perceived by the public. In the second video analyzed, for instance, soundtrack, kinesic action and gaze are combined to create an effective message and they seem to be the modalities that have a stronger impact on the viewer; the combination between voice and gestures, as well as facial expressions appears to capture the attention of the observer, who feels directly addressed and engaged by the speaker as he looks directly into the camera. Every single modality and semiotic form previously analyzed realizes a specific function and plays a fundamental role in meaning-creation, which overall seems to be more effective in the second video analyzed. Its effectiveness is not the product of single semiotic resources, but the result of the integration of distinct modalities that combined together form a complex and meaningful message. The first video, on the other hand, despite presenting some semiotic modes that could have a positive impact on the viewer, fails to completely engage the observer due to the lack of direct eye-contact, the general rigidity and stillness, as well as the monotone voice. All of these semiotic parameters could be the characteristics of Obama's usual way of giving speeches, the result of emotional distress or the instructions that he was given by his collaborators. In any case, they do not appear effective in the successful conveyance of the film text's message.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Theoretical Framework of Discourse Analysis

### 4. What is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis is usually defined as the study of language in use (Johnstone, 2018). It is an approach that stems from linguistics, but that also belongs to the social sciences and consists in the study of language used for specific purposes and connected to the social, cultural, historical, and political context in which it appears (Gee & Handford, 2012). For this reason, it can be said that discourse analysis also draws on pragmatics as it does not take into consideration only the linguistic forms employed, but also the contextual information concerning the analyzed text (Brown & Yule, 1983).

In order to fully grasp the principles behind this approach, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by discourse. Discourse is whichever fragment of language or text taken from a conversation, a written text or other instantiations of communication; it is language in action, which means that it consists of real instances of communication in a real context of situation where language is used according to the purpose of the speaker (Johnstone, 2018; Gill, 2000). Discourse does not comprise only written and spoken language, but also every other media through which communication is possible, such as images, sounds, movements, etc. and the connections between these media and verbal language (Johnstone, 2018). In addition, discourse depends on various factors, for example, people's cultures and ideologies, their belonging to a particular discourse community, their purposes, the interpersonal relations they enact, and how they identify themselves through language (*ibid*.).

Discourses can be grouped under the category of genre. "Genres are typified forms of discourse – that is, forms that arise when responses to a specific need or exigence become regularized" (Tardy, 2011: 54). Genre, therefore, indicates groups of texts presenting similar characteristics and responding to similar communicative goals that can be recognized by specific social groups (*ibid*.). The social groups that share interests, beliefs, and social practices and, consequently, the linguistic norms to talk about them are usually called discourse communities and need to be considered in discourse analysis (Gee & Handford, 2012). Indeed, meanings are not created by

individual people who live in an isolated state and who are not influenced by others on their ideas and opinions; on the contrary, people form part of social groups and, as such, create and modify the world through language, portraying their ideals and rejecting others (*ibid.*). In other words, discourse communities are groups of people who share interests and goals and that use language to achieve those aims (Borg, 2003). A discourse community is characterized by six different factors: common public goals, forms of intercommunication between its components, such as conversations and meetings, specific vocabulary, one or more genres to communicate their interests or goals, participation of his members and a threshold level of components with discoursal expertise (Swales, 1990).

Another element that plays a fundamental role in discourse analysis is context. Context can be defined as the physical space in which discourse occurs and which includes all the participants, objects, movements and all the aspects involved in this setting, including the shared knowledge, culture, social practice and what has been said or done before the considered discourse occurred (Gee, 2014). According to ethnolinguistics, context is characterized by eight different elements: the setting in which discourse takes place, the participants involved in the communicative event, the goals of the speaker, the content and form of the message, the medium through which it is transmitted, the key, the norms of interaction and interpretation, and the genre the text belongs to (He, 2001). All these elements allow the researcher to understand the type of discourse they are examining and to form certain expectations based on that. In discourse analysis, the concept of context also derives from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (1985) and, in particular, from Malinowski's (1923) notion of context of situation; according to Malinowski (1923), a text cannot be analyzed without considering the setting in which it occurs. Halliday (1985) describes context in terms of field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the social action framing the discourse, tenor to the social relations enacted among participants, and mode to the role of language.

The minimum unit of analysis in discourse analysis is text (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004). Text can be seen as an autonomous unit which includes the linguistic choices, structure, and meaning organization of a communicative event (*ibid.*). It differs from discourse as this term is usually used to indicate the realization of a text

in its ongoing communicative environment (*ibid.*). A text, on the other hand, can be described as language that is functional and that plays a specific role in communication (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In addition, a text is strictly related to the environment in which it occurs as the text's linguistic characteristics highly depend on its context and, at the same time, the context is created and realized by the text (*ibid.*). When considering context, it is important to recognize the situational context in which a text is realized, as well as the more external communicative environment that comprises the context of situation and that influences the linguistic choices of the speaker, typically known as the context of culture (*ibid.*).

Discourse analysis, therefore, allows to identify the meanings expressed by language, the cultural and social connotations it presents and its links to the context in which the text appears (Johnstone, 2018). Moreover, this approach does not focus on language as an abstract system, but rather on how speakers manipulate and shape their linguistic knowledge in order to achieve different functions or express emotions and ideas (*ibid.*). It also highlights the speaker's choices in terms of words, vocabulary, grammar or register and the reason behind them, as well as the intended listener they seem to be addressed to (*ibid.*). In addition, every linguistic decision is taken into consideration with regards to communicative norms and conventions and change that may have occurred throughout time (*ibid.*). Since language is not only used to make meanings, but also to do things in the world, discourse is examined in terms of social practice, constructivism, and from a rhetorical point of view (Gill, 2000). Firstly, discourse as social practice refers to the fact that language is employed and shaped in order to achieve different functions in a specific context, which highly influences the linguistic choices people make, changes the meaning of certain words and could also indicate the actual goal of the speaker (*ibid.*). Secondly, discourse can be seen as having a constructive power as it is through language in use and through the choices a speaker makes that people's cultural, social and interpersonal worlds are created (*ibid.*). Finally, discourse is also examined from a rhetorical point of view, as language reflects the conflicts present in social life and represents them through the linguistic structures employed by speakers (*ibid.*).

Discourse analysis is often described as a broad category that comprises different approaches to the analysis of text and language (Gill, 2000; Gee & Handford, 2012).

What unites these methods is the fact that discourse is seen as a product and a creator of social life. There are probably more than 57 discourse analysis approaches, which differ one from the other mainly based on their theoretical perspectives and background; some of them focus more on grammar, linguistics and the functions realized through language, while others underline the themes represented by the linguistic choices of the speakers and their links to the text's context (*ibid*.).

## 4.1. Political Discourse Analysis

One of the approaches deriving from discourse analysis is political discourse analysis. Political discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that was initially categorized as a subdiscipline of humanities and social sciences and that originates from the study of rhetoric and politics (Dunmire, 2012; Kampf, 2015). Rhetoric and people's interest in political discourse date back to ancient times; the first reflections on the relation between politics and language can be found in Aristotle's *Politics* (Kampf, 2015; Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2012). Nevertheless, political discourse analysis became popular and widespread only during the second half of the twentieth century, when two great changes occurred in the research field of linguistics and other disciplines (Kampf, 2015). Firstly, scholars started to move beyond the clause and consider text as the unit of analysis, as well as include the communicative context in the linguistic analysis (*ibid*.). Secondly, language was starting to be seen not just as an informative medium, but also as a social instrument in various contexts, capable of constructing ideas, identities and ideologies (*ibid*).

These changes led to the emergence of the subdiscipline of political discourse analysis, which developed into three different traditions: German, French and Anglophone (Kampf, 2015). While the German tradition dates back to the 1950s and focused on the language related to Fascism and the Third Reich, the Anglophone tradition sees its origins with George Orwell during the Second World War and the Cold War and was also influenced by "Language and Control" (Fowler et al., 1979) (Kampf, 2015). Orwell was one of the first modern writers to highlight the link between politics and language and the power of language to manipulate meanings and the representation of the world, consequently affecting the public (Wilson, 2001). Political discourse analysis expanded to the rest of the world towards the 1990s and,

nowadays, it is an approach used globally and in many different cultural contexts (Wodak, 2012; Kampf, 2015).

This approach can be considered interdisciplinary as it is based on different frameworks deriving from various disciplines and the discourse analysis is combined with the consideration and examination of the political, social and cultural context in which the text under analysis appears (Dunmire, 2012). Nonetheless, the primary objects of study remain language and politics. Politics is a complex term to define as it can simultaneously indicate a social group or individual's attempt to control, dominate and gain power, or the collaboration of different social groups or political parties with the purpose of solving issues and maintain peace (Chilton, 2004). According to Chilton (2004), politics can be divided into two groups: politics at the macro level and politics at the micro level. While the former refers to conflicts or collaborative relations between political institutions, the latter represents positive or negative interactions between single individuals and social groups (*ibid.*). Despite their differences, both macro and micro level politics are enacted and realized through language (*ibid.*).

The ambiguity of the term 'politics' is also underlined by Kampf (2015), who provides two additional meanings this term can realize. On the one hand, politics could refer to communicative relations among politicians or other people related to that professional field and to the semantic concepts of power, dominance and hegemony; on the other hand, it could also indicate the different strategies employed by people during social interactions, for example, in order to portray politeness (*ibid.*). Anyway, when associated to the theoretical field of discourse analysis and in this study, political discourse indicates texts produced by political actors or institutions (Van Dijk, 1997) and can be described "as talk and text produced in regard to concrete political issues (language in politics) or through the actual language use of institutional political actors, even in discussions of nonpolitical issues (language of politicians)" (Kampf, 2015: 3).

Politicians are a group of people who have been elected and paid to carry out political actions (Van Dijk, 1997). They are not the only participants in political discourse as discourse recipients also need to be taken into consideration, despite their active or inactive involvement in the communicative event (*ibid.*). In the case of

political discourse, recipients can include large portions of the population, from politicians themselves, reporters or journalists, to the masses who may listen or watch a political debate on television, for instance (*ibid*.). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that politicians cannot always be considered participants in political discourse as they are not constantly talking about politics or trying to accomplish something from a political point of view every time they make an utterance (*ibid*.). For this reason, the identity of the participants in the communicative event is not enough to consider a discourse political, context should also be examined (*ibid*.). Indeed, context plays a fundamental role in political discourse analysis as it helps identify the participants and the reasons behind the speakers' linguistic choices (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002). As it has been said in Section 4. of this Chapter, text depends on the context in which it is realized and its norms, but it also creates and establishes a context (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In the case of political discourse, the expected contexts are usually debates, political rallies, elections, meetings, and other settings where politicians, journalists or the public may produce, react, or report a political text (Van Dijk, 1997). Overall, in order to define and delineate a political text and differentiate it from other types of discourse, there are various properties that could be taken into consideration, such as societal domain, political system, political values and ideologies, political institutions and organizations, political groups and actors, political relations, political process and actions, political discourse and political cognition (*ibid*.).

As far as politics and, especially, political discourse, are concerned, Wodak (2012) differentiates between 'backstage politics' and 'grand politics'. While the former indicates what happens and what is said by political actors behind closed doors and not in front of an audience, the latter refers to political speeches, debates, and all those instances of organized political communication directed at the public (*ibid*.). By also considering backstage politics, scholars have the opportunity to understand and describe political practices and the intricacies of the world of politics (*ibid*.).

Political discourse is present in nearly every public sphere and influences people's decisions, opinions and ideas concerning society, values and the ideal representation of the world (Kampf, 2015). Because of this, politics and language have been the object of study of many disciplines, such as sociology, political science and

journalism, all of which, despite presenting different theoretical frameworks, rely on interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches in order to analyze political communication (Wodak, 2014). Some of these approaches can be defined as source-centered, media-centered, message-centered, or audience/citizen-centered, based on the aspect they focus on (*ibid.*).

In the analysis of political discourse, politics and language are strictly linked and tied one to the other because, in order to do nearly any political action, such as convincing, debating, or protesting, language is necessary (Van Dijk, 1997). In addition, political discourse is usually characterized by the presence of persuasive strategies, which are often employed to influence audiences and masses, gain consent and affect public opinion, shaping people's ideas towards the same ideals of the political actor who is speaking (*ibid.*). These strategies can include a specific choice of vocabulary that could also be related to the specific type of text and action the author is realizing, which dictates norms that are typical of political discourse (*ibid.*). For this reason, persuasive strategies employed by political actors to gain consent and support by their voters, or the general public are one of the aspects of political discourse that political discourse analysis often tends to focus on. This approach also examines other characteristics of political discourse, such as the political actors' ideologies reflected through language, the linguistic representation of the speaker and others, as well as political events or actions to influence the public's opinion, and the typical characteristics of the different political discourse genres (Kampf, 2015).

As far as topics are concerned, politics is the most common theme represented in this genre, which makes this type of discourse often reflexive as political actors usually talk about themselves, their actions and their programs (Van Dijk, 1997). Actions tend to have a positive connotation when they are future-oriented as participants often make promises or talk about the changes they will implement, and they usually have a negative connotation when they are past-oriented as they often refer to previous mandates or issues that emerged and that need to be addressed (*ibid.*). Consequently, political discourse also includes polarized evaluations, which contribute to the dichotomy of us VS them, where the former is associated with positive meanings and the latter with negative attributes; this is also reflected in the choice of words and lexicon (*ibid.*). The persuasive strategies often employed in political discourse lead to

the manipulation of all textual levels, including syntax, as the change in word order or the choice between active or passive form can also influence the audience and the meanings the speaker conveys (*ibid*.).

Therefore, political discourse analysis takes into consideration all these aspects and aims to make explicit the meanings realized through language, which are related to the intentions of the speaker as well as the social and political context in which the text is produced (Van Dijk, 1997). In other words, this approach has the purpose of assessing how language is used to realize certain political functions and deciphering the reasons behind the linguistic choices of political actors (Wilson, 2001; Kampf, 2015).

## 4.2. Gee's Toolkit to Perform Discourse Analysis

In 'How to Do Discourse Analysis', Gee (2014) elaborates a practical guide to help researchers perform discourse analysis. For this reason, he provides 28 tools, along with their explanation and practical examples of use for the readers. Each tool can be applied to written or oral texts and consists of a series of questions the researcher is supposed to ask themselves concerning the text they are analyzing. Every question has the purpose of guiding the researcher during the analysis and making them reflect on how language is being used and for what purpose, its functions, and the meanings it realizes. Tools do not have a fixed order as their employment depends on the text type, the participants and the context in which discourse is produced. Researchers, therefore, have the freedom to decide which tools to use and what order to follow.

In his book, Gee (2014) divides the 28 tools in four units, which are presented in a specific order, that is, from the unit including tools that focus more on language and linguistic aspects to the unit that highlights the connections between language and the real world to the unit that comprises more general tools.

## 4.2.1. The Language and Context Unit

The first unit of Gee's (2014) toolkit illustrates the concepts of language and context. In real world communication, as well as in discourse analysis, context plays a fundamental role because it dictates communicative and social norms, consequently influencing people's linguistic choices. What people say in communicative interaction

or in a text highly depends on what they expect their listeners to know and understand based on the context they are in. This can be seen through the use of deictics, for example, such as her, there, before, etc. Deictics are words that link language and context together and whose comprehension strongly depend on the communicative environment in which they appear. They can be divided into three categories: person, place, and time. In real language even non-deictic words can have deictic properties as the same term can indicate two different things depending on the context in which it is said. For this reason, the first tool, called the Deixis Tool, requires researchers to identify deictics in the text and examine how they are being used, what information the speaker assumes the audience knows and whether deictic-like properties are attributed to content words. This tool is strongly linked to the Fill In Tool, which consists in assessing what is missing or assumed in the text under analysis, what information gap the listener needs to complete and what inferences the speaker wants the audience to make. All these questions need to be asked with one broader scope in mind, that is, identifying the aim of the speaker and what meanings they are trying to realize and convey. In order to do so, the Making Strange Tool could be very helpful. This third tool invites the researcher to read or listen to the text as if they were outsiders without a shared cultural knowledge with the speaker and, consequently, questioning every word or assumed meaning that the text's creator expects the listener to understand. The role of the outsider is important in discourse analysis because, when reading or listening to a text of a familiar culture, discourse analysts, alike any other person, tend to complete the assumed or missing information involuntarily and, most importantly, unconsciously, without realizing the mental process they activated. It is fundamental, therefore, for a researcher to question his judgement and to be conscious of what the author is implying and what they want the reader to infer.

The fourth tool, on the other hand, focuses on the grammatical roles of subject and predicate and, for this reason, it is labelled the Subject Tool. The subject is also known as the topic of a sentence because it represents the most important element of a sentence and what is being discussed, while the predicate gives information about the subject. Given these roles, speakers organize their texts strategically in order to convey specific ideas to the listener, emphasizing certain discourse parts and not others, and consequently influencing people's reception of the message. The Subject

Tool, therefore, consists in reflecting on the word order speakers choose, on how they organize information in their sentences and on the terms they choose for subjects. The objective is that of understanding why speakers give importance to certain words or concepts while minimizing others.

The last two tools that form the first unit in Gee's (2014) toolkit are the Intonation Tool and the Frame Tool. While the former refers to the speaker's intonation and its effects on the text's meanings, the latter is related to the context taken into consideration by the researcher. Intonation is a fundamental aspect of communication, which gives information to the listener concerning how to interpret a sentence. By stressing a specific word, for instance, the speaker gives it more informational saliency and listeners will be drawn to pay more attention to that word than the rest of the sentence. The Intonation Tool, therefore, invites researchers to examine texts in terms of stress and intonation and how these aspects affect the listeners and the meanings of the text. The Frame Tool, on the other hand, should be applied at the end of the discourse analysis and it simply consists in widening the context analysed and verifying that the conducted analysis and results do not change.

## 4.2.2 The Saying, Doing and Designing Unit

The second unit elaborated by Gee (2014) focuses on language as a social practice and how it is employed to do things. Indeed, the Doing and Not Just Saying Tool emphasizes the fact that language is not just an informative instrument, but it is also used to perform different actions and to achieve various goals. Researchers should, therefore, ask themselves what the speaker's intentions are and not just what they are trying to say, but what they are trying to accomplish by using language. In order to achieve one's goals, the speaker needs to accurately choose the words and the grammatical structures of their text as each decision has an impact on the meanings conveyed to the listeners. Because of this, the eighth tool listed by Gee (2014) is the Vocabulary Tool, which guides discourse analysts to examine the vocabulary used by the speaker, its origins, the reasons behind the selection of certain terms instead of others and the effects that this has on the overall message.

In communicating, speakers make choices concerning linguistic and grammatical structures, which inevitably lead to the discard of alternative options that

authors did not employ. It is important as discourse analysts to question whether there are actual alternative options to the speakers' linguistic choices and to identify the reason why they were not chosen, taking into consideration the speakers' intentions and the purposes that they may try to achieve. This is summarized in the Why This Way and Not That Way Tool.

Not only do speakers need to make decisions about vocabulary and grammatical functions, but they also have to determine how to integrate and combine all the information in different clauses, which structures to use and what perspective they want to portray. An embedded clause, for instance, will not have the same effect, the same meaning and the same importance as a main clause and, consequently, it will be received differently by the listener. The Integration Tool refers to these aspects of a text's creation and asks researchers to reflect on how speakers integrate different clauses, which aspects they give importance to and the effects that certain linguistic structures, such as coordinates or subordinates, have on the meanings realized by the text.

Another part of discourse that can affect the listener's perspective of the message is the theme. The theme is the first element of a clause and the part that influences the listener's view of the message that comes after it. Although it is not always the case, the theme can correspond to the subject, also known as topic, and it can also be differentiated between textual themes and interpersonal themes. The normal and usual tendency in the English language is for theme and subject to be realized by the same term, when this does not happen the theme can be described as a 'marked' theme. The tool that indicates this aspect is the Topic and Theme Tool, which makes the researcher examine the speaker's choice in terms of theme and topic and identify the implicit objectives of the author, by considering the effects that the selected theme has on the audience.

Finally, the last tool that Gee (2014) includes in the second unit of his book is the Stanza Tool. Stanzas are groups of idea units that can be found in texts. Their boundaries can be easily traced by paying attention to a change in the topic, characters, setting or time. Each stanza, therefore, represents a block of information and can be grouped with other stanzas to create larger units of sense. The identification of these stanzas and larger blocks of information is what the Stanza Tool guides researchers to

with the purpose of improving the interpretation of what the speaker is trying to say and do with language.

**4.2.3 The Building Things in the World Unit**

In the third unit Gee (2014) emphasizes the constructive power of language and its ability to build and destroy relations as well as circumstances and contexts. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the thirteenth tool highlights the dynamic relation between language and context. While the communicative environment in which the text is produced strongly determines the words and structures chosen by speakers, it is also true that language helps create a context. Gee (2014) refers to this as the reflexive property of context and elaborates it in the Context Is Reflexive Tool. This tool is related to the previous tools that asked discourse analysts to take into consideration context besides language and it consists in reflecting on the context reproduced by the text under analysis. Researchers should ask themselves how the speaker's words contribute to the creation of the context, whether speakers are conscious of the context their words are reflecting and whether the reproduced context is similar or different to contexts of the same type.

Not only is language responsible for the creation and rebuilding of context, but it also contributes to the building of seven areas of reality every time people employ it in their interactions. The seven areas of reality can also be described as building tasks and each of them is linked to a new tool. The first of these tools is the Significance Building Tool and it is related to the power that language has in making different concepts important and salient through grammatical structures, vocabulary, word order and other forms of shaping language. According to this tool, therefore, discourse analysts should examine how words and speakers' linguistic choices emphasize or make more salient certain parts of the text and not others, what is being foregrounded and what is left as assumed.

Language can also build actions and activities. Gee (2014:103) uses the term activities to refer to "how an action or sequences of actions carries out a socially recognizable and institutionally or culturally normed endeavor". By following the Activities Building Tool, therefore, researchers are guided to determine the social, cultural or political significance of the text and the activity or activities it is enacting.

In addition, attention should be paid to the actions realized in order to complete the activity and the possible similarities or differences between the structure of the activity realized by the speaker and the typical and usual pattern of similar activities.

The Identities Building Tool, on the other hand, refers to how speakers produce text according to the social group they want to be part of, be recognized by or belong to. Language allows speakers to portray their sense of self to others and express all their different identities according to the setting they are in, the people they are with and the narrative they want to create about themselves. Furthermore, it is not rare for speakers to enact an identity through the comparison or contrast with other people's identities; for this reason, some of the questions provided by the Identities Building Tool that researchers should answer are related to the way speakers use language to portray their identities and those of others. Moreover, discourse analysts should consider the type of relationship portrayed between the speaker's identity and that of other people as well as the identity the listener is invited to assume. Similarly to identities, words can also build relationships. This characteristic is illustrated in the Relationships Building Tool, which is strictly related to the Identities Building Tool as the identity speakers create through language also depends on the type of relationships they want to establish with other participants and, simultaneously, the relationships speakers enact are influenced by the identity they portray. As a result, the Relationships Building Tool reminds researchers to assess the type of relationship built, maintained or changed by the speaker with cultures, institutions or other participants.

The fifth area of reality that can be created by language is politics. Gee (2014:124) employs the term politics to refer to "any situation where the distribution of social goods is at stake". Social goods indicate those elements, objects or actions that are considered valuable by one or more social groups, such as respect, dignity, wearing a skirt, going to the cinema, etc. Social goods can be promoted or rejected by speakers and can be the cause of many conflicts; for this reason, it is important in discourse analysis to examine whether speakers take a position in terms of social goods and how they represent their viewpoint to the public trying to influence the listener. This tool is labelled the Politics Building Tool.

In the real world, actions, events and objects can be seen as connected one with the other or as completely unrelated and distinct. This connection or disconnection is often portrayed by language, which can make relations explicit or implicit according to the intentions and purposes of the speaker. Because of this, Gee (2014) provides the Connections Building Tool, which has the aim of guiding discourse analysts to recognize connections established or ignored and minimized by speakers in their texts and how they use words and linguistic structures to make connections between events, for instance, relevant or irrelevant. One of the techniques employed to make connections is the use of cohesive devices, such as pronouns, conjunctions, substitution, etc. which contribute to make the text appear as a unit and not just as a group of separate sentences and clauses. Cohesion is, therefore, another element that should be examined in discourse analysis with the purpose of determining the goals of the speaker and how cohesive devices are being used to achieve them. This is illustrated in the Cohesion Tool.

The seventh building task described by Gee (2014) is sign systems and knowledge, which refer to the fact that language can promote specific communicational systems and, consequently, specific views of knowledge or ideas. Sign systems include different languages, dialects, and any form of communication, which is tied to different ways of seeing and conceiving the world. For this reason, the Systems and Knowledge Building Tool asks discourse analysts to examine words and grammar employed by the speaker in order to identify the communicational system and view of the world that are being privileged and promoted.

The last tool included in the third unit is the Topic Flow or Topic Chaining Tool. This tool is related to how the topics of a text are linked to each other to create a topic chain, how they are presented in terms of structure, and the importance they are given by the speaker. The English language is usually characterized by a topic-comment structure, where speakers first introduce the familiar information and later the new information that contributes to the development of the communication, but this structure can be easily manipulated. As a consequence, it is important to examine this aspect in discourse analysis because the way speakers organize the topics in their texts influences the perspective they present to the listener.

**4.2.4 The Theoretical Tools Unit**

The last unit of Gee's (2014) toolkit comprises six theoretical tools deriving from different theories. The first two of these tools are labelled the Situated Meaning Tool and the Social Languages Tool. On the one hand, situated meaning refers to the meaning words acquire when used in specific contexts and that listeners are often asked to decipher using their previous knowledge and experience. On the other hand, social languages indicate varieties of language that are associated to determined social identities and social actions. Indeed, in order to correctly interpret a message, listeners need to know not only the speaker's identity but also what they are trying to accomplish. Therefore, while the Situated Meaning Tool asks researchers to determine the situated meaning words acquire in the text, which listeners need to recognize, the Social Languages Tool reminds discourse analysts to examine the speaker's words and grammatical structures with the purpose of identifying the social language or languages enacted.

Additional aspects that need to be taken into consideration in discourse analysis are the figured worlds words can assume and intertextuality, that is, when a text alludes to another by explicitly or implicitly quoting or referring to it. Intertextuality is linked to the Intertextuality tool, which asks researchers to study the speaker's words in order to find possible references to other texts. The Figured Worlds Tool, conversely, is associated to the typical stories represented by the words employed by speakers in their texts. People unconsciously use typical stories as a strategy that allows them to save time and quickly participate in interaction without having to reflect on every pronounced word. However, they can negatively affect and exclude who does not fit into this typical picture or story. Typical pictures are socially and culturally specific because they depend on people's experience, and they are referred to by Gee (2014) with the term of figured worlds. According to this tool, therefore, discourse analysts should try to identify the figured worlds the speaker's words are enacting and inviting their listeners to imagine, as well as their characteristics.

The last two tools provided by Gee (2014) are the Big D Discourse Tool and the Big C Conversation Tool, which are connected one to the other. Gee (2014) uses the term Discourse with a capital D to indicate the way speakers employ language and act or interact in order to represent an identity and be recognized by specific social groups.

Discourses depend on shared conventions that are passed down through time and they can be defined by their opposing or agreeing relations with one another. One of the results of conflicting relations between Discourses is the emergence of debates that across time become publicly known and can affect people's interpretations of texts. Gee (2014) indicates these debates with the term of Conversations with a capital C. Discourses and Conversations need to be examined by discourse analysts with the purpose of, on the one hand, determining the socially recognizable identity the speaker is enacting through his words and actions and the beliefs and values this is associated with, and, on the other hand, recognizing the widely known sides and debates the speaker could be portraying or the issues the listener should know in order to thoroughly interpret the message conveyed.

## 4.3. Methodology in the Present Work

The present study examines the speeches delivered by Barack Obama and Joe Biden following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting in 2012 and 2022. The speeches were analyzed applying Gee's (2014) toolkit on how to do discourse analysis. Five tools were selected and applied to both speeches with the purpose of identifying the communicative strategies employed by the speakers, the reasons behind their linguistic choices and the goals they wanted to achieve through their words.

The tools applied to conduct the discourse analysis were the Deixis Tool, the Fill In Tool, the Identities Building Tool, the Vocabulary Tool and the Significance Building Tool. These specific tools were selected because they allowed to take into consideration not only the linguistic choices of the speakers and their strategies, but also the context in which the speeches took place and the contextual references realized by the Presidents. More tools could have been applied to the discourse analysis; however, due to time limitations and the word limit of this paper only five were selected and employed.

Firstly, Obama and Biden's speeches were analyzed in terms of deictics use. Deictics referring to people, place and time were identified and highlighted with different colors in order to separate them, analyze each of them thoroughly and recognize what they referred to in the context. The purpose was to make the texts

clearer and each deictic's reference explicit, consequently attempting to understand the connections established by the speakers between their words and the context, and what message they wanted their audience to receive. In addition, since the use of different deictics can have different effects on the listener (Putri & Kurniawan, 2015), the Presidents' linguistic choices were examined also in terms of their possible underlying aims and effects they wanted to achieve.

The second tool applied in the discourse analysis was the Fill In Tool, which consisted in examining the incomplete or simply mentioned information given by the speakers and expected to be known by the audience. For this reason, the contextual references present in the speeches were identified and explained in order to be understandable by every possible listener in the way the speakers intended them. By doing so, it was possible to recognize which concepts and topics the Presidents expected their audience to be familiar with and assumed they could infer from the context, and how much of their speeches rested on shared cultural knowledge. Furthermore, attention was also paid to how the speakers mentioned certain events or referred to specific situations in order to examine their intentions and how they were possibly perceived by the audience.

The Presidents' words were then analyzed with the purpose of identifying the identities enacted by the speakers and how they wanted to be recognized by the audience. In order to do this, vocabulary, text's structure and linguistic styles among other linguistic aspects were considered, which not only revealed how the speakers' identities were portrayed, but also how they changed throughout their speeches. Moreover, the Identities Building Tool was applied to determine the identities Obama and Biden invited their audience to assume or directly attributed to them, how they evaluated them and how they positioned themselves compared to others' identities. Finally, the possible effects the speakers' representations had on the listener were determined.

The Vocabulary Tool was the fourth tool employed and it led to the identification and underlining of all evocative, colored, and positively or negatively polarized terms and expressions employed by Obama and Biden. Possible correlations between these words were then recognized, and the analysis continued with the examination of the speakers' linguistic choices in terms of register, with the purpose of determining how

they contributed to the general style of the Presidents' speeches. In addition, the possible effects that the terms employed by Obama and Biden had on the audience were considered and particular attention was paid to the intentions of the speakers as well as the possible goals they attempted to accomplish through language.

Finally, the Significance Building Tool was applied. The speakers' lexical, syntactical, and grammatical choices were examined with the purpose of determining how Obama and Biden enhanced and built significance in certain passages of their speeches. The concepts that had been emphasized by the speakers were identified along with the devices employed in order make them more relevant, and their overall use throughout the speeches was considered in order to determine a possible pattern. The discourse analysis was concluded with the examination of how the devices employed by the Presidents affected the audience and what they revealed regarding the speakers' overall intentions.

The results of the conducted discourse analysis of each speech were finally compared with the aim of noticing possible differences or similarities in the linguistic choices of the speakers and, consequently, in their intentions, and the effects they had on the listener.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Discourse Analysis of the Two Speeches

### 5.1. The Deixis Tool

The first tool employed to analyze Obama and Biden's speeches delivered following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting is the Deixis tool.

Both Presidents use numerous deictics in their speeches that can be classified, according to Gee's (2014) division, into deictics that indicate person, place and time. In terms of personal pronouns, the pronouns I, WE and THEY appear to be the most significant.

Pronoun I can be found in different parts of the Presidents' speeches and seems to be employed for different reasons. Obama rarely tends to use this pronoun and when he does, he seems to employ it with the purpose of emphasizing his authority and his position of superiority compared to the audience (Example 1 to 3).

1) I offered Governor Malloy my condolences on behalf of the nation […] (Obama's Speech).
2) […] what I know every parent in America will do […] (OS).
3) And I will do everything in my power as President to help (OS).

These examples illustrate how the use of the pronoun I highlights the importance and social recognition of the speaker and underlines his social role as President of the United States, implying that he has the power and authority to speak on behalf of the nation.

Similarly, in certain instances, Biden uses pronoun I with the same aim and to create distance between himself and the audience. However, he also employs this pronoun to express a personal revelation, a subjective opinion, or a confidential thought that he confesses to the audience (Examples 4 and 5).

4) I had hoped, when I became President, I would not have to do this again (Biden's Speech).
5) I am sick and tired of it (BS).

This strategy depicts the listener as the receiver of what appears to be a personal disclosure, therefore, having the effect of making them identify with the speaker and pay attention to what he has to say. In addition, revealing emotions and lowering the register, as President Joe Biden does, especially in Example 5, can also help the audience connect with the speaker and portray truthfulness through his words.

After the introduction of their speech, both Presidents shift to a first-person plural pronoun, which keeps being largely used throughout the speeches. Pronoun WE usually refers to the combination of speaker and audience and it allows the Presidents to instantiate unity and solidarity while shortening the distance between them and the listener. Its use slightly changes between Obama and Biden's speeches; while the former tends to use WE with the purpose of portraying inclusion and highlighting the shared experiences and grief felt by audience and the speaker (Examples 6 and 7), the latter employs it mostly to address the listener and persuade them to agree with the speaker and follow his directions (Examples 8 and 9).

6)   We've endured too many of these tragedies in the past few years (OS).
7)   […] we have been through this too many times (OS).
8)   When in God's name are we going to stand up to the gun lobby? (BS).
9)   We have to act (BS).

Examples 6 and 7 show how Obama manages to involve the audience and portray himself as part of their group and not someone superior in role or social class, but someone who grieves and suffers beside them. Similarly, in Examples 8 and 9, Biden also represents inclusion through his usage of WE, but, in these cases, his purpose seems to be that exhorting the audience and convincing them of what needs to be done to address the issue of rampage school shootings. By also including himself in the proposition, the speaker creates a connection with the audience and illustrates a shared objective.

WE does not only refer to the union between speaker and audience, but it can also indicate other participants; for instance, in Obama's speech, WE is momentarily employed to refer to the former President and Michelle Obama (Example 10). In this case, WE represents the couple and parents that the audience is expected to know and

whose example they are expected to follow. Another interesting use of this pronoun is made by Biden, who employs WE probably to indicate himself and his political associates when discussing the efforts and laws concerning gun carry (Example 11).

10) […] Michelle and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter and we'll tell them that we love them […] (OS).
11) When we passed the assault weapons ban, mass shootings went down. When the law expired, mass shootings tripled (BS).

In Example 11, WE could also be strategically used to make the audience feel included in the passage of that legislation, yet it is more probable that the President referred to the group of people who was actually responsible for that change, who are usually politicians.

In political discourse, furthermore, it is very common to find an us VS them theme, which is often characterized by words with a positive connotation related to us and words with a negative connotation related to them (Van Dijk, 1997). In this study, this motif does not occur as the speakers are not directing their speeches to their opposite political parties, but to the families and loved ones of the victims of two specific school shootings. For this reason, in Obama and Biden's texts, the pronoun THEY indicates the victims, those who are suffering and the people who have been personally affected by the shootings (Examples 12 to 14).

12) They had their entire lives ahead of them […] (OS).
13) And they need all of us right now (OS).
14) They'll live with it the rest of their lives (BS).

What is clear is that the contrast represented in these examples is established between WE as those who are feeling sad but have not experienced first-hand these tragic events and THEY as the people who were murdered, who witnessed the violent attack and who were left without part of their family. This opposition can affect the audience and make them identify with the grieving people around the country, engaging them in the speech.

Biden employs THEY also to indicate those countries and people living in them that are affected by rampage school shootings as the United States are, yet their frequency is strikingly lower than in the USA (Example 15).

15) They have mental health problems. They have domestic disputes in other countries. They have people who are lost (BS).

In this case, the distinction the speaker highlights is related to the phenomenon of rampages, which distinguishes Americans from people from other countries due to the recurrence of these violent attacks typical of the USA. The stress on this difference between us and them is probably realized with the purpose of making the audience reflect on the gravity of this issue and, most importantly, on the underlying reason why these attacks keep happening in the USA.

There is one more personal pronoun that is worth mentioning, although it is only employed by President Biden, and it is the impersonal YOU. The speaker uses YOU to describe what it means to lose a child and, by doing so, he makes the listener feel as if the message was directed at them reducing the distance between the speaker and the audience (Example 16).

16) […] you feel like you're being sucked into it and never going to be able to get out (BS).

The choice of using the impersonal YOU, instead of it, one or they, makes the register less formal and engages the audience, who feels closer to the speaker.

In terms of deictics indicating place, on the other hand, the mostly used by both speakers is THIS, which tends to indicate the specific violent attack the speaker is addressing or rampage school shootings in general (Example 7 and 17).

17) Why do we keep letting this happen? (BS).

These examples show that, although the speakers are giving a speech with the aim of addressing and commenting on the violent attacks that recently occurred, the Presidents employ this moment to connect that specific event to the larger issue that rampage school shootings represent in the United States. The purpose of the speakers,

therefore, could be that of emphasizing the gravity of the phenomenon and making the audience reflect on the need to find a solution.

Finally, the deictics indicating time in the speeches under analysis are generally employed to refer to parts of the day connected to the day of the incident, such as THIS AFTERNOON, TONIGHT, and RIGHT NOW. These deictics do not need a great work on the part of the audience to understand and decipher what the speaker is referring to as they are all related to the shooting the President is addressing and the present circumstances as well as the following actions that have been taken or need to be taken. One of the differences between Obama and Biden's speeches is that in the former the deictic TODAY is often repeated and used to specify the violent incident the speaker is referring to, expecting the audience to be familiar with what he is talking about without ever explicitly saying it (Example 18).

18) The majority of those who died today were children -- beautiful little kids […] (OS).

The use of this deictic informs the listener that the shooting occurred the same day as the President is delivering his speech, and it allows the speaker to avoid clearly mentioning the details of the incident object of this speech by repeating TODAY instead of the expression SCHOOL SHOOTING.

On the other hand, not only Biden explicitly refers to the Uvalde school shooting in his speech, but he also employs another deictic: 10 DAYS AGO (Example 19). This deictic is strictly tied to the context in which it is used and, consequently, for non-American people it can be difficult to understand what the speaker is specifically referring to.

19) And the list grows when it includes mass shootings […] as we saw just 10 days ago, at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York (BS).

The grocery store shooting the speaker is referring to, in Example 19, is probably the mass shooting that occurred in Buffalo, New York, on May 14, 2022, at a Tops Friendly Market, which led to the death of ten people (Moshtaghian et al., 2022). The President assumes the audience knows about this incident and, for this reason, uses WE and does not describe the shooting.

## 5.2. The Fill In Tool

There are several passages in the speeches delivered by Obama and Biden that need to be considered and that need to be analyzed in order to recognize what information the speakers leave the audience to assume or infer, or what they expect them to already know. The ultimate goal is to try to understand the aim of the speakers and the reasons behind their choices.

Firstly, during their speeches, both Presidents complain to the audience about the recurrence of rampage school shootings in the USA. Not only do they make the listener reflect on the seriousness of this phenomenon, but they also enumerate instances of school shootings the audience is assumed to be aware of (Examples 20 and 21). While a person not living in the United States may simply not realize the significance of these lists, the audience can immediately recall the attacks the speakers are mentioning.

20) Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago -- these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children (OS).
21) Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Santa Fe High School in Texas. Oxford High School in Michigan (BS).

In Example 20, the places mentioned by Obama are not random as they represent real incidents that the audience is expected to be familiar with and remember. The first instance indicates the school shooting that occurred in Newton and that constitutes the main topic of the President's speech. Then, the speaker starts mentioning past shootings by only naming the settings in which they took place. The listener is, therefore, left to infer and understand what shootings the speaker is referring to. The Oregon's attack probably indicates the Clackamas Town Center shooting in Oregon on December 11, 2012, which led to the death of two people and occurred three days before the attack at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Griffin, 2012). The President also mentions a temple in Wisconsin likely suggesting the Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting, which happened in the same year and caused the loss of six people, and in 2012, the Aurora, Colorado shooting, which occurred on July 20 when a 24-year-old

shot and killed twelve people while they were watching a movie (Williams, 2012; History, 2013). Finally, the last shooting mentioned by the speaker probably refers to the persistent gun violence present in Chicago and that only in the year 2012, when the analyzed speech was delivered, witnessed more than 2000 shooting incidents (Slevin, 2012). Likewise, in example 21, Biden carries out the same strategy and lists some of the most notorious American school shootings. By mentioning these incidents instead of only providing numbers and data concerning gun violence, the speakers give the audience real examples of what they are claiming and remind them of the atrocity of these attacks. The choice of only naming them or hinting at them is probably due to the wide and common notoriety they acquired throughout the United States, and it seems consistent with the type of audience that is usually expected at this type of specific political speeches, which are tendentially broadcasted on national television. Had the audience been more heterogeneous, these examples would have probably had different effects on different listeners.

Another aspect that is not completely elaborated by the speakers, but it is expected to be known by the audience is related to the gun debate. Obama slightly refers to it in a single sentence throughout his speech, while Biden focuses a large part of his discourse on this topic, yet still assuming the listener to be familiar with his claims (Examples 22 to 24).

22) And we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics (OS).
23) For God's sake, we have to have the courage to stand up to the industry (BS).
24) Where in God's name is our backbone to have the courage to deal with it and stand up to the lobbies? (BS)

On the one hand, example 22 illustrates how Obama takes a more neutral stance compared to Biden and, in terms of finding solutions to school shootings, suggests the need to unitedly take action in the future. He only implicitly hints at the political conflicts probably concerning gun control, which create a separation in the American population that the President wants to avoid. In addition, Obama does not take any side as far as the gun debate is concerned and, on the contrary, asks the audience to come together despite their political differences and consequent differences of

opinion. When the speaker says REGARDLESS OF THE POLITICS, therefore, he is probably referring to the conflict between Republicans and Democrats and, more specifically, to their different stances regarding the cause of school shootings and gun control, which Americans and consequently the audience should be aware of.

On the other hand, Biden takes a very clear and distinctive side in this debate and exhorts the audience to do the same. The industry he is referring to in Example 23 is probably the gun industry since not much earlier in his speech the speaker criticizes gun manufacturers and accuses them of making profit out of the sale of assault weapons, and the lobbies mentioned in Example 24 seem to be the gun lobbies, which are also indicated earlier in his speech. In these cases, the audience is expected to know the references the speaker is making, based on their experience and shared cultural knowledge, and to complete each allusion with the appropriate background information. Here, the gun debate is more emphasized than in the speech delivered by Obama as Biden does not conceal his ideas regarding gun control, and the listener is facilitated in inferring what the speaker means when he talks about the gun lobbies, for instance. A listener not familiar with the American society and culture would probably not recognize the implicatures that the statements of both speakers hold, nor would they probably understand the role gun lobbies play in American politics and, consequently, the debate between gun control activists and gun rights supporters that Biden's speech could revive.

The goals of Obama and Biden, therefore, seem to be very different as, on the one hand, Obama attempts to focus the listener's attention to the union and involvement of everyone in finding a solution to the issue of school shootings, without instigating new debates and conflicts by downplaying people's difference of opinions concerning gun control, while, on the other hand, Biden openly reveals his opinions and sparks the gun debate emphasizing numerous times his stance without trying to conceal it in order to try to convince the audience to agree with him.

Moreover, another information that needs to be filled in by the listener is the identity of participants mentioned by the speakers only through their first name. Indeed, in both speeches, Obama and Biden refer to their spouses only using their first name (Examples 10 and 25).

25) […] Jill and I have talked about this in different contexts […] (BS).

These examples illustrate how the speakers assume their audience to know who they are talking about, that is, Michelle Obama and Jill Biden. The First Lady, indeed, is usually a very widely known and popular woman in the United States due to her role and the office she holds, as well as the apparitions she makes alongside the President. Consequently, the speakers' choice of calling their wives by their first name in front of the nation could be due to this assumption. In addition, this decision manages to shorten the distance between the speaker and the listener, who feels closer to the President and to his family, and it also allows to put the speaker and the audience on the same level. In both examples, the Presidents seem to be talking to friends and people they personally know, instantiating vicinity and generating interest in the audience.

## 5.3. The Identities Building Tool

Throughout their speeches, Obama and Biden enact various identities with different purposes and they also invite their audience to assume specific identities.

The identity of politicians and, more specifically, President of the United States, is the first and most common identity the speakers want their listener to recognize them by. This identity is portrayed through the formality the speakers use in certain passages of their speeches and through the authority they show by speaking representing the whole nation and the power to make demands (Examples 1 and 26 to 28).

26) […] I ask the nation to pray for them […] (BS).
27) I spent my career as a senator and as Vice President working to pass commonsense gun laws (BS).
28) I just got off my trip from Asia, meeting with Asian leaders […] (BS).

As can be seen from these examples, although the audience is probably already aware of the role the speakers hold due to contextual information, such as the setting or the physical appearance of the speakers, their identity can be easily recognized by their words, which highlight the speakers' duty of representing the entire country and their

authority that allows them to address the nation and make requests. In all these examples, it is clear that the speakers are portraying their power and authority, which is a typical characteristic of their office, and, for this reason, their words appear appropriate and consistent with the expectations of the audience. In Example 26, for instance, Biden employs a solemn tone probably to remind the listener of his social position and of the significance of his request; while, in Example 27, the speaker's mention of his previous titles gives him authority, but it also conveys the idea that he has been working to ensure people's safety for a long time and that he has knowledge and expertise concerning this topic. By mentioning his previous assignments and positions, he is portraying himself as a politician and enacting the identity of an experienced political actor. Finally, Example 28 describes part of the speaker's job, which provides him with the faculty of visiting the political leaders of other nations.

Another identity Obama and Biden share and enact in their speech is that of parents. Both speakers deliver a speech in response to a school shooting occurred in an elementary school and that led to the death of numerous victims, most of whom were children. For this reason, their speeches also have the purpose of addressing the families that have suffered a loss and acknowledge their pain as well as attempt to alleviate it. In order to do so, Obama and Biden empathize with these families and show their vicinity by enacting their identity as parents, who understand their sorrow although they can only imagine it (Examples 10, 29 and 30).

29) And each time I learn the news I react not as a President, but as anybody else would -- as a parent (OS).
30) To lose a child is like having a piece of your soul ripped away. There's a hollowness in your chest […] (BS).

In each of these examples, the speakers are portraying themselves as parents. This enacted identity conveys to the audience another facet of the speakers' image, which until that moment was only associated with the role of President of the United States. The identity of parents that the speakers enact makes them more humane and closer to the audience and, in particular, to those who, as the Presidents, have children. This perceived vicinity can have an impact on the listener, who may feel more represented by the speakers as they are adding personal details to their speeches, consequently,

appearing trustworthy in the eyes of the audience. The speakers' decision to incorporate this part of themselves in their speeches makes the texts more personal and conveys the idea that the Presidents are really affected by the discussed school shootings.

In addition, in Example 29, Obama instantiates equality with the audience portraying himself as a common and everyday person, by saying AS ANYBODY ELSE, while in Example 10, he also represents his wife as a parent and invites the audience to follow their actions. By revealing what he and his wife will do after the speech and once they return home, the speaker appears to be inviting the audience to do the same, especially because he compares himself and his wife to EVERY PARENT IN AMERICA and, being a person with authority, therefore superior to his audience, by saying I KNOW, he seems to be implicitly asking the public to follow his example.

Biden, on the other hand, in Example 30, elaborates what losing a child means consequently fostering empathy in the audience. By doing so, he manages to acknowledge the pain that the families of the victims are going through and describe it through very vivid and evocative images. This type of subjective description that the speaker realizes seems very personal and evokes his identity as parent who probably speaks from experience. Indeed, President Biden could be talking about the loss of his son, which occurred in 2015 (Liptak, 2015). This passage is, therefore, very personal and emotional. As a result, the speech appears more honest and heartfelt to the audience, who can identify with the speaker and with what he is saying.

Besides politicians and parents, Obama and Biden also enact another identity through their linguistic choices, that of religious people. In addition, they assume their audience to belong to that community and, consequently, expect them to recognize the speakers as part of it. This identity is portrayed through the numerous religious references the speakers make and, more specifically, to the citation of different parts of the Scriptures (Examples 31 to 34).

31) […] to remind them that we are there for them, that we are praying for them […] (OS).
32) May God bless the memory of the victims and, in the words of Scripture, heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds (OS).
33) Scripture says — […] "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." (BS).

34) Our prayer tonight is for those parents […] (BS).

These examples show how both speakers integrate religious references into their speeches and assume not only their audience to be familiar with them but also that they are part of this religious community. In Examples 31 and 34, indeed, the speakers do not question the fact that their audience may believe in God or not and, as a consequence, that they may pray or not, but the Presidents directly assume they do as they employ the inclusive first-person plural pronoun and its respective possessive adjective, which indicate that the speakers are inviting the listener to take up the religious believer identity.

Examples 32 and 33, on the other hand, refer to specific passages in the Scriptures, which religious people in the audience could identify with and find comfort in. Example 32 constitutes a reference to Psalm 147:3 (New American Standard Bible, 2020, 147:3). This verse was written with regards to the creation of Jerusalem by God and his gathering of all Israeli outcasts and people who lived at the edge of society. By mentioning this verse, Obama appears to rest his faith in God, seems more humane, fosters solidarity in the audience and invites them to reflect and pray, as well as find comfort in the presence of the Lord and in the Scriptures. This religious mention reminds the audience of a higher power that could ease their pain, it gives authority to the words of the speaker, and it resonates with a great part of the American citizens. In addition, the choice of this particular verse could also resonate with non-religious people due to its transparency and powerful imagery. Religious references seem to constitute a common aspect of political discourse as they not only address the religious part of the population, but they also provide an emotive force to the words of the speaker (Iancu & Balaban, 2013).

This can also be seen in Example 33, where Biden cite part of Psalm 34:18 (New American Standard Bible, 2020, David. 34:18). This verse was written by David, after he escaped from the Philistines, to praise the Lord. After having fled, David found refuge in a cave with other ill-fated men, and it is in this place that he probably wrote this verse (*ibid.*). The verse expresses how God is close to those who suffer and grieve, he listens, gives them comfort and he saves those who are in pain. It appears an appropriate reference to the context of situation in which the speaker pronounces it.

By doing so, the President offers comfort to the families of the victims through religion and reminds people to have faith and that they are not alone. Furthermore, not only does Biden presents himself as a person who believes in God, but he also represents his wife in the same way, claiming that they talked about this passage of the Scriptures in other contexts.

Finally, Biden uses his words and his speech to enact the identity of a person who believes in gun control and in firearms legislations, and who could be considered a gun-control activist. This identity is portrayed in numerous passages of his speech, where he not only insists on the necessity to confront the gun lobby and do something to prevent school shootings from happening again in the future, but he also objects to the sale of assault weapons, advancing arguments to sustain his claims and to convince the audience to agree with him (Examples 8, 11, and 35).

35) What in God's name do you need an assault weapon for except to kill someone? (BS).

As these examples illustrate, throughout his speech, the speaker attempts to persuade the audience to join his side of the widely known gun debate and does not conceal his opinions and point of view but, on the contrary, presents data to support them. In order to engage the audience and influence their thoughts, the speaker formulates rhetorical questions, which guide the listener to follow the reasoning of the speaker.

In addition, in Example 8, the identity of gun control activist is not enacted only by the speaker, but, by employing the first-person plural pronoun, the President assumes his audience agrees with him, and, as a result, the need to confront the gun lobby appears as a shared objective. The listener is, therefore, invited by the President to take up the identity of gun control activist and, consequently, be part of this community with the purpose of introducing what, according to the speaker, are necessary changes. This exhortation to the listener is strictly related to the fact that Biden seems to blame the power the gun lobby has on political decisions concerning firearm legislations in the United States for the recurrence of rampage school shootings.

Attempting to maintain an objective point of view and show the listener that words are accompanied by facts, in Example 11, the speaker describes the effects that

firearms legislations have had in the past. Indeed, Biden not only underlines his experience in politics, but he also presents a reasonable argument, providing the listener with data and making his claim more accurate and believable. The assault weapons ban Biden mentions refers to the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act which was part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, sponsored by Joe Biden (Viser & DeBonis, 2022). The assault weapons ban consisted in the prohibition of the manufacture, transfer and possession of assault weapons and ammunitions (Keneally, 2019). Nevertheless, the ban expired in 2004 and has not been renewed ever since (*ibid.*).

The speaker's disappointment and frustration related to this situation can be seen in Example 35, where, differently from the previous two examples, the speaker appears much more direct and emphatic. His aim seems to be that of showing the audience that assault weapons should not be made available for kids as they are dangerous, and their only possible use is to murder someone. Therefore, Biden expresses once more the identity of someone who is against the free availability of guns by asking the audience a rhetorical question which functions as a persuasive device to gain people's consent and support and direct their rage and indignation towards whom he ultimately considers responsible for gun violence in schools, that is, the gun lobby and gun manufacturers.

The President's opinion and stance concerning firearms exists in relation to another and opposite social identity, that of gun rights supporters. Biden takes this opposing and conflicting identity into consideration in his speech and uses words to depict it in a negative light (Example 36).

36) It's time — for those who obstruct or delay or block the commonsense gun laws, we need to let you know that we will not forget (BS).

As can be seen in Example 36, Biden addresses his speech directly to the people who believe in gun rights and in the respect of the Second Amendment and uses the inclusive pronoun WE to indicate the contrast between the people who have witnessed what happened and are ready to take action and those who want to prevent this from happening. Moreover, the verbs, such as OBSTRUCT, DELAY AND BLOCK, that the

speaker employs to refer to the gun rights supporters' actions present a negative connotation and contribute to a positive self-representation of the speaker and everyone who agrees with him, and a negative other-representation of the people who do not want new regulations concerning gun carry and who, for this reason, are considered by the speaker opposed to wanting to stop gun violence and, more specifically, rampage school shootings. Therefore, by negatively portraying the gun rights supporters' identity, the speaker condemns who disagrees with him and reminds them of their responsibility when future attacks will occur.

## 5.4. The Vocabulary Tool

The choice of vocabulary can highly influence the opinion and ideas of the audience as well as implicitly portray the beliefs and viewpoints of the speakers (Polyakova, Suvorova, & Trutnev, 2019). In the speeches analyzed in this study, both Presidents tend to employ emotive-evaluative vocabulary, that is, terms that express the speakers' judgement, that have the purpose of obtaining emotional reactions from the audience, or that extremize the perceptions of certain events or situations.

Instead of using neutral terms, Obama and Biden attempt to influence the listener and engage them in their speech by employing words that can be characterized as evocative and that do not transparently report facts but charge them with positive or negative connotations. Obama, for instance, never uses the term SCHOOL SHOOTING in his speech, but always refers to it with strong negative words that can probably permeate in the mind of the audience and convey the idea of a terrible event (Examples 6 and 37). This description contributes to the magnification of the image of the monster who caused the shooting and the idealization of the image of the victims, who become perfect and flawless in the eyes of the listener (Examples 18 and 38).

37) […] he will have every single resource that he needs to investigate this heinous crime […] (OS).
38) Among the fallen were also teachers -- men and women who devoted their lives to helping our children fulfill their dreams (OS).

Examples 6 and 37 show how the speaker employs the words HEINOUS CRIME and TRAGEDIES to indicate the school shooting he is addressing. This choice of vocabulary

has probably the purpose of revealing the President's indignation, express his condemnation of this attack, and induce the audience to feel the same way, reminding them of the mortality these violent incidents are characterized by and ensuring they do not become something to be simply accustomed to.

Examples 18 and 38, on the other hand, illustrate how the victims are remembered. Children are described as INNOCENT and BEAUTIFUL, which corresponds to the stereotypical perception the occidental part of the world has concerning kids, while teachers appear as martyrs who spent their life and dedicated their time to other people's children; this last image highly depends on the verb DEVOTED chosen by the speaker, which portrays teachers in a positive light.

Biden, like Obama, uses very negative terms to indicate school shootings; however, the difference lays in the semantic field these words belong to, that is, the semantic field related to war (Examples 39 to 41).

39) Another massacre (BS).
40) And how many scores of little children who witnessed what happened see their friends die as if they're on a battlefield […] (BS).
41) And don't tell me we can't have an impact on this carnage (BS).

Throughout his speech, some of the terms the speaker uses are MASSACRE, BATTLEFIELD, and CARNAGE, which are very strong and usually associated with war. This vivid vocabulary strongly associated with death, blood and violence has an impact on the audience as there appears to be a strong comparison between children and soldiers and between going to school and going to war. These linguistic choices can help Biden influence the audience and convince them of the gravity and seriousness of the situation, make them empathize with the people who have been affected by the attack, as well as possibly persuade the listener to follow the speaker's directions to prevent another shooting from happening.

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the term COMMONSENSE GUN LAWS that Biden employs three times in his speech (Example 42).

42) Most Americans support commonsense laws — commonsense gun laws (BS).

COMMONSENSE GUN LAWS is a common and popular term used in the United States that derives from the media and is widely used in politics to indicate those laws concerning firearms that are in existence and that are considered logical and reasonable (Ainsworth, 2023). This expression can have the effect of making those who do not agree with these laws feel excluded and different, and in a certain sense also wrong. The purpose of the speaker here is probably to emphasize the fact that the introduction of new legislations concerning gun control is generally accepted and rational, and, by saying that the majority of American citizens supports them and agrees with them, the President seems to be attempting to convince the audience that supporting gun laws is the right thing to do, making it seem not normal nor acceptable for people not to agree with this solution. Therefore, the speaker's choice of words is carefully made with the purpose of gaining consent in the public.

Beside the evaluative vocabulary that both speakers employ concerning school shootings and their victims, Biden also uses evaluative terms to reveal his personal opinions and manipulate the ideas and beliefs of the audience (Examples 43 and 44).

43) The idea that an 18-year-old kid can walk into a gun store and buy two assault weapons is just wrong (BS).
44) Deer aren't running through the forest with Kevlar vests on, for God's sake. It's just sick (BS).

In both examples, the speaker does not hide his feelings and personal opinions and shares with the audience his moral judgements of right and wrong, expecting them to agree with him. While in Example 43 Biden attempts to convince the listener of the dangers assault weapons represent, especially in the hands of teenagers, by charging the example with a negative moral judgement expressed through the word WRONG, in Example 44, the President employs the term SICK and the pronoun IT to indicate the insanity that the idea of a kid buying assault weapons represents. SICK is a term that can have numerous meanings, both positive and negative, but here it seems clear that the speaker intends the term in a negative connotation; as if the single idea mentioned before is sickening, insane and could make one nauseous.

These evaluative terms employed by Biden are accompanied by an informal register which often depends on the vocabulary chosen by the speaker and the use of phrasal and contracted verbs (Examples 24, 41, and 45).

45) When in God's name will we do what we all know in our gut needs to be done? (BS).

The informal register that the examples illustrate is firstly determined by the use of colored vocabulary, such as GUT or BACKBONE, which are terms commonly used in everyday conversations but not typical of political discourse. While the colloquial expression TO KNOW IN OUR GUT is used to indicate certainty, the BACKBONE refers to the courage, the strength or will that the speaker is exhorting the audience to use. The informality realized by these linguistic choices is also portrayed by the use of phrasal verbs, such as STAND UP TO and DEAL WITH, shown in Example 24, and the employment of a negative imperative form in Example 41.

The negative imperative mode portrays the audience as an active member of the communication, although, in fact, the only speaking participant is the President. By structuring his speech in this way, the speaker is assuming what the audience's reactions to his invite to take action would be and he is addressing them beforehand, almost to prevent the listener from interrupting him. Indeed, he says DON'T TELL ME, which seems to provide the audience with a real voice in this speech and, as a result, it appears to enact and portray the image of a real debate. Moreover, the negative imperative form not only has the purpose of encouraging the listener and convincing them of the opposite, that is, that they can have an impact on the issue, but it also contributes to the conversationalisation of political discourse, which could be the result of various linguistic choices, such as contracted verbal forms, the imperative mode, and the expression of personal opinions.

Therefore, the informal register that Biden realizes in certain passages of his speech through his lexical, grammatical and syntactical choices appears to instantiate vicinity between the speaker and the audience and manage to engage them by catching their attention and provoking emotive reactions. The purpose, consequently, appears to remain that of persuading the listener and influencing his decisions by creating a connection and a closer and informal relationship with them.

On the other hand, Obama remains generally quite formal and neutral throughout his speech. One of the factors that contributes to the formality of his speech is the employment of various Latinate words, which characterize formal styles, tend to be considered more complex and are often used in academic writings (Gee, 2014).

## 5.5. The Significance Building Tool

There are numerous strategies that the speakers use to build significance in their speeches and to give emphasis to certain concepts and not others. Among these techniques, first of all, Obama and Biden employ parallelism, which appears to make concepts clearer and more easily memorable by the audience, instantiating cohesion in the text and establishing links between different thoughts (Examples 20, 46 and 47).

46) […] to remind them that we are there for them, that we are praying for them, that the love they felt for those they lost endures not just in their memories but also in ours (OS).

47) There are parents who will never see their child again, never have them jump in bed and cuddle with them (BS).

Parallelism allows the speakers to focus the listener's attention to specific passages of their speeches and to memorize them rapidly, as well as to process them more thoroughly. In Example 20, for instance, Obama employs parallelism to instantiate inclusion and identification of the audience with the mentioned incidents and their victims. People may not have personally been affected by these violent attacks, yet the speaker is suggesting that they should feel outraged as if they had been. In addition, the short sentence appears schematic and memorable, and it can easily be processed by the audience, as it also occurs with Example 46. In this case, the use of parallelism seems to create a simpler and clearer syntax and probably aims to make the audience pay attention to the President's speech and to persuade them and convince them of what he is saying. This is achieved also through the use of only three clauses, which are easier to remember, and all depend on one main verb, that is, REMIND. Finally, Example 47 reports part of Biden's speech where parallelism is realized through the formulation of two clauses introduced by the adverb NEVER and dependent on the modal WILL.

There are different types of parallelism that can be employed, and one of the most widely used in the speeches under analysis in this study is anaphora, which consists in the repetition of the same word or couple of words at the beginning of successive sentences. The effect it has is very similar to that described above, yet the main difference is that the attention of the listener falls on the specific repeated words that the speakers emphasize (Examples 48 and 49).

48) So our hearts are broken today […]. Our hearts are broken for the parents […] (OS).
49) Why? Why are we willing to live with this carnage? Why do we keep letting this happen? (BS).

These examples illustrate how repeating a word or a group of words at the beginning of adjacent sentences attracts the attention of the audience on those words and lead the listener to a possible reflection induced by the speaker on specific concepts. For instance, while in Example 48 Obama emphasizes and acknowledges the pain and grief the nation is feeling, fostering solidarity in the audience, in Example 49, Biden expresses his frustration, disappointment, and impatience concerning school shootings, attempting to stimulate these feelings also in the listener.

Moreover, Obama and Biden build significance in their speeches through the employment of enumeration and exemplification. These two techniques allow the speakers to vividly portray their claims and describe the concepts they are elaborating (Examples 21 and 50).

50) They had their entire lives ahead of them -- birthdays, graduations, weddings, kids of their own (OS).

In both examples, the enumeration and exemplification of, on the one hand, some of the school shootings that have occurred throughout the years and, on the other hand, all the aspects of life that the children who died will not be able to experience makes the words and the message more concrete and accentuates its figurative power. Therefore, each specific example has the power of evoking an image in the listener's mind and of, consequently, affecting them.

Finally, both speakers, although in different measures, emphasize the need to find a solution to the issue of rampage school shootings. This need is more strongly asserted by Biden than Obama, who devotes only one line of his speech to the future actions that need to be taken in order to prevent this type of violent attacks from occurring again. Biden, on the other hand, firmly expresses his ideas and exhorts the audience to support him numerous times and, in order to be more convincing and persuasive, he builds significance concerning the urgency and the seriousness of the issue. Significance is built by Biden through a combination of linguistic strategies: on the one hand, the speaker employs verbs, such as HAVE TO, NEED TO or IT'S TIME TO (Examples 9, 36 and 51) that express urgency and obligation, on the other hand, he pronounces emphatic expressions that intensify his words and the emotions that transpire from them (Examples 23 and 24).

51) It's time to turn this pain into action (BS).

Examples 9, 36 and 51 illustrate how the speaker exhorts the audience and encourages them to actively try to prevent and stop the recurrence of school shootings in the United States by underlining the urgency of the issue through the selection of specific verbs. In addition, the President's words and suggestions directly affect the listener as they include them in these sentences, consequently considering them aware of the problem and of the solution. The employed verbs not only manifest urgency and necessity, but also personal obligation; they do not give the audience options as the only contemplated solution is the one suggested by the speaker, who attempts to persuade the listener.

One of these verbs can also be seen in Example 23 in combination with the emphatic expression FOR GOD'S SAKE, which, along with IN GOD'S NAME, are two of the most repeated expressions in Biden's speech. These emphatic expressions make the speaker's statements more significant and contribute to a varied intonation that allows the speaker not to lose the audience's attention. Moreover, the emphatic expressions employed by the President reinforce his words and highlight his emotive investment in the issue he is addressing.

## 5.6. General Discussion

The results of the discourse analysis conducted following Gee's (2014) methodology of the speeches delivered by Barack Obama and Joe Biden concerning two rampage school shootings occurred in two elementary schools in the United States suggest that, although both speakers generally use effective strategies to convey their message and engage the audience, there are some significant differences that need to be mentioned in terms of linguistic choices and communicative strategies employed.

Firstly, in terms of deixis, both speakers use personal pronouns to instantiate vicinity or to create distance from the audience. I is moderately employed, on the one hand, probably to portray authority and leadership and, on the other hand, especially by Biden, to reveal personal thoughts and emotions, consequently, fostering solidarity and empathy in the listener. This use of the pronoun I by Biden has been recognized also in Wisniewska's (2020) study, where the results of the discourse analysis conducted on election political speeches showed a large employment of the first-person singular pronoun by the President, with the purpose of communicating his personal ideas and beliefs. Obama and Biden carefully use the pronoun I, which when employed often can negatively affect the listener who tends to feel inferior and less important than the speaker (Beard, 2000). WE, on the other hand, is largely used in the Presidents' speeches mostly to indicate the union between speaker and audience, but sometimes also to refer to the President and his associates or his family. This is consistent with the text genre the speeches analyzed belong to as the first-person plural pronoun often appears in political discourse and can be interpreted as a constructive strategy to promote unification and to reinforce national identity (Håkansson, 2012; Wodak, 2008). In the Presidents' speeches, WE seems to portray inclusion and allow the speakers to engage the audience in their statements, as well as create a relationship probably with persuasive purposes. In fact, according to Hamdaoui's (2015) study, WE is the mostly used deictic in political discourse for persuasive purposes. A similar goal is served by the use of the generic and impersonal YOU in Biden's speech, which lowers the register and seems to directly address the audience, who can identify with what the speaker is saying. In addition, the generic YOU, which only appears when the President describes what it means to lose a child, instantiates a generalization that, in this case, seems to derive from

personal experience (Bramley, 2001). Finally, Obama and Biden employ the pronoun THEY, which, differently from what typically occurs in political discourse, does not refer to the opposite political party or opponent, but to the victims and their loved ones who are grieving and suffering. This change is due to the fact that THEY is a deictic and its reference changes according to the context in which it is used (Gee, 2014). This pronoun is usually employed to manifest a distinction and a contrast between the speaker's group and the others' group, which is maintained in this context of situation as the speakers' groups is represented by the people who witnessed the attack but have not been personally affected by it, while the others' group is formed by who needs help and is in pain due to the loss of part of their family (Håkansson, 2012). This is not the only contrast represented by the speakers as Biden employs THEY also to emphasize the distinction in the frequency of school shootings occurred in the United States and in other countries, probably to make the listener reflect on the reason of this current situation.

As far as context is concerned, it seems clear that Obama and Biden's decisions reflect the type of audience their speeches were directed to, that is, the entire nation. Many details are left as assumed as they seem to be considered by the speakers part of the shared cultural knowledge of American citizens, such as specific school shootings, the identity of the First Lady and consequently spouse of the President, and the gun debate. This last topic is elaborated by the speakers in two very different ways, which seem to reflect the purposes the Presidents wanted to accomplish through their speeches. On the one hand, Obama only slightly hints at the gun debate, remaining neutral and not enacting a specific identity concerning this Conversation with a capital C, as Gee (2014) would define it; on the other hand, Biden is very open and explicit about his stance and focuses most of his speech on trying to convince the audience to support him. Nevertheless, in both cases, the speakers expect the audience to recognize what they are referring to and to be familiar with the conflict related to gun legislations spread in the population and repeatedly sparked through politics.

Besides the identity of gun-control activist that Biden portrays to the audience inviting them to form part of this social community and take up this identity as well, both speakers portray the identities of politicians, parents and religious people. While

the political identity enacted by the Presidents is related to the faculties, power and social recognition the speakers have, and it can make their words more significant and relevant to the audience, the identity of parents seems to make the speeches appear more heartfelt and shortens the distance between speaker and listener as the Presidents look more humane and similar to everyday people. The connection that Obama and Biden try to establish with the listener is also reinforced by the religious references present in their speeches that can be easily recognized by religious believers in the audience and that can also be generally understood by the rest of the public. Religious references, specifically to the Scriptures and to the act of praying, have become common in American political discourse and seem to reflect the active religious presence that characterizes the United States (Hargreaves, Kelsay, & Twiss, 2007). Religious discourse in politics seems to have started increasing in the 1980s and it reached a peak with the Bush's administration from 2001 to 2009 (Gin, 2012). However, the presence of religion in politics has much deeper roots as the first appeal to God by an American President dates back to 1789 and the oath of office by George Washington (Iancu & Balaban, 2013). The presence of religious comments or appeals to God in political speeches, therefore, can be considered a ritualistic expression that derives from and expresses the cultural background of American citizens and that forms part of what Bellah (1967) calls American civil religion. Consequently, Obama and Biden's religious references could, on the one hand, be considered conventional expressions that characterize American political discourse, but, on the other hand, be strategically employed to remind the listener to have faith and to find comfort in the words of God, who, in the USA, appears to be the ultimate sovereign (*ibid.*).

In terms of vocabulary and communicative strategies applied by the speakers, both Presidents use negatively polarized words to indicate school shootings, probably with the aim of raising awareness and emphasizing the seriousness and mortality of these violent attacks. This emphasis is reinforced by Biden, who employs terms that typically collocate and belong to the semantic field of war and that, therefore, can evoke in the mind of the audience the image and comparison of kids going to school as if they were going to war. The slight difference of vocabulary between the two speakers could reflect their different purposes and what they are

trying to achieve through language. Obama employs a more formal register and, besides negatively connoted words to refer to school shootings, he also uses positively polarized terms to describe the victims, fostering empathy and solidarity in the listener as well as acknowledging the pain many families are feeling. On the contrary, Biden seems to focus more on gaining consent from the audience by employing vocabulary that stresses the gravity of school shootings, expresses the urgency of new legislations concerning gun carry and of confronting the gun lobby, and reveals personal opinions that could influence the listener's ideas and beliefs. In fact, the use of emotive-evaluative vocabulary can have persuasive effects on the audience, generate specific reactions and influence their opinions on different topics (Polyakova, Suvorova, & Trutnev, 2019). In addition, Biden uses negative terms also to refer to people who disagree with him and enact his opposite social identity, that is, gun-rights supporters; this semantic polarization contributes to a positive self-representation and a negative other-representation (Van Dijk, 1997).

In order to create a connection with the audience and maintain their attention, Biden tends to use a more informal register compared to Obama, which is realized through the use of phrasal verbs, colloquial verbs, colored expressions, the negative imperative form and rhetorical questions accompanied by emphatic expressions. In fact, rhetorical questions also allow the speaker to try to influence the audience by advancing arguments to support his claims and direct the listener's thoughts in order to exhort them to take action (Al-Jumaily & Al-Azzawi, 2009).

Finally, both Presidents employ rhetorical devices to emphasize different parts of their speeches. Parallelism and especially anaphora are two of the most applied strategies that appear to allow the speakers to make their sentences clearer and more memorable for the audience, as well as invite them to reflect on specific passages of their speeches. Repetition, indeed, can be considered a persuasive device as repeating a sentence can make it more easily acceptable for the listener who is more prone to agree with the speakers' words and follow them (David, 2014). Parallelism is not the only rhetorical device employed by Obama and Biden as they also use enumeration and exemplification, which seem to build significance to their claims by having an evocative power in the audience and making the speakers' words more real.

# CONCLUSIONS

This research paper has examined the multimodal communicative strategies employed by Barack Obama and Joe Biden in the recorded speeches they delivered in response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting, which occurred in the United States in 2012 and 2022. The present study had the purpose of filling a gap in the state of the art concerning how American Democratic Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden address the issue of rampage school shootings in their speeches and what multimodal communicative strategies they employ in order to achieve their non-linguistic goals.

In order to examine and identify the strategies used by Obama and Biden in their remarks to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Robb Elementary School shooting, a multimodal visual analysis and a discourse analysis of the Presidents' speeches have been conducted. The visual analysis has been carried out following Baldry and Thibault's (2006) multimodal systemic functional linguistics approach, while the discourse analysis has been conducted applying Gee's (2014) toolkit on how to do discourse analysis, and employing five of his 28 tools: the Deixis Tool, the Fill In Tool, the Identities Building Tool, the Vocabulary Tool and the Significance Building Tool.

The findings of the visual analysis have revealed differences in the way that Obama and Biden employ semiotic resources, consequently, generating distinct effects in the audience. One of the meaning-making modalities that the Presidents employ differently is gaze. While Biden's communication highly relies on direct eye contact with the viewer, making them feel engaged and instantiating vicinity, Obama tends to look down at his written speech without attempting to create an interpersonal relation with the audience, and therefore appearing cold and distant to the viewer. This portrayed distance in Obama's speech is slightly compensated by the direct horizontal perspective and the median vertical perspective realized in both film texts, which foster empathy and portray equality between the speaker and the audience. However, Biden's conveyance of his message remains more effective as the direct eye-contact with the viewer is accompanied by clear and meaningful facial expressions, which capture the attention of the audience and reveal the emotions and opinions of the speaker,

influencing the viewer. In addition, Biden successfully combines gaze and facial expressions with hand gestures and a varied intonation. The speaker's hand gestures not only portray inclusion, but they are also emphatic and tend to reinforce the words of the President, making him appear more convincing and engaging the audience in his speech. Indeed, Biden moves his hands following the rhythm of his words and regulates his voice in order to emphasize certain passages of his speech; the varied intonation allows the speaker to maintain the audience's attention and to appear more sincere, consequently, expressing his emotions and beliefs through his words. Obama, on the other hand, tends to remain still with his hands and arms by his sides or on the lectern and, although he makes numerous pauses throughout his speech that could express the grief and pain he shares with the audience and could consequently make them empathize with him, his tone of voice remains rather invariant. The combination of lack of direct eye-contact with the audience, general postural rigidity and a monotone voice could lead to feelings of disengagement in the listener as well as loss of interest that could undermine the effective conveyance of the message.

The results of the discourse analysis have also revealed differences between Obama and Biden's linguistic choices and overall intentions. On the one hand, Biden's main goal that seems to transpire from his words appears to be that of gaining consent from the audience and persuading them to agree with him in order to take action and, more specifically, confront the gun lobby as well as support the implementation of new gun legislations. On the other hand, Obama remains more neutral with regards to the gun debate and focuses on fostering solidarity and empathy in the audience, acknowledging the pain the families of the victims are experiencing and comforting them, and honoring the people who have died in the school shooting.

The speakers attempt to achieve their goals through the linguistic choices they make in their speeches. In terms of deixis, for instance, both Presidents extensively employ WE to portray inclusion and to engage the audience in their speeches as well as, in some cases, for persuasive purposes, while pronoun I is used to portray authority and, especially by Biden, also to express the speaker's emotions and opinions and to portray equality with the listener. In order to be more convincing, Biden also employs the generic YOU, which allows him to directly address the audience, and formulates rhetorical questions, which, reinforced by emphatic expressions, can constitute a

persuasive device that guides the listener's thoughts and opinions towards the speaker's beliefs.

Furthermore, both Presidents use evocative and positively and negatively polarized vocabulary. The positively connoted terms indicate the victims of the shootings and emphasize their innocence, while the negatively polarized words refer to rampage school shootings and highlight their mortality and their seriousness. The aim of the speakers is to provoke an emotional reaction in the audience and, consequently, influence the listener in order to, in Obama's case, foster empathy and denounce the gravity of school shootings and, in Biden's case, make the listener realize the danger that guns represent and exhort the audience to take action and do something to prevent more school shootings from occurring. Biden's stance in relation to the gun debate is made clear by the negatively polarized terms he employs to refer to gun-rights supporters, the verbs that express urgency in relation to the implementation of new firearm legislations, and by the identity of gun control activist he enacts and invites his audience to assume too. This is not the only identity that has been found in the speeches analyzed in this research paper as both politicians also portray themselves as parents and religious people to connect with the audience and shorten the distance between speaker and listener.

Moreover, the findings of the discourse analysis have shown that the most relevant and significant rhetorical devices employed by Obama and Biden are parallelism, in particular anaphora, and enumeration and exemplification. Repetition is used by Obama to emphasize and acknowledge the pain and grief the nation is feeling, and to foster empathy and solidarity in the audience. Biden, on the contrary, tends to use this strategy to persuade the listener to agree with him, to encourage them to act and to make the audience reflect on the seriousness of these violent incidents. Finally, enumeration and exemplification are used by both speakers to make their words and claims stronger and more vivid with the purpose of affecting the listener.

## 1. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research paper presents some potential limitations. First of all, due to the analysis of only two speeches of two Democratic Presidents of the United States, it is not possible to make generalizations concerning the multimodal communicative strategies

employed in speeches delivered in response to school shootings by this political party. The present study, indeed, does not attempt to generalize the results obtained from the conducted analyses to all Democratic Presidents, but aims to examine how specifically Obama and Biden address the issue of rampage school shootings and convey their messages to the audience.

Future research could, therefore, be conducted selecting a larger sample of speeches delivered by various American Democratic Presidents in response to rampage school shootings in order to possibly identify common patterns in the multimodal communicative strategies employed and in the intentions of the speakers of this political party.

In addition, because of the small sample size considered in this study, the results should be interpreted with caution as it becomes difficult to generalize them and to have a complete perspective of the techniques that Obama and Biden employ in this type of political discourse. For this reason, future studies could extend this research and carry out a visual and discourse analysis of a larger sample of speeches delivered by these Presidents in similar contexts of situation with the purpose of determining common traits and communicative techniques that characterize these speakers.

Moreover, the limited sample considered in this research paper and the decision to only select five of the 28 tools Gee (2014) provides in his toolkit on how to do discourse analysis were mainly due to time limitations. Time constraints did not allow to consider a bigger sample nor to apply more tools to the speeches examined, which could have contributed to a more thorough study. Thus, future research could provide a more detailed discourse analysis of the Presidents' speeches through the application of a higher number of tools which would contribute to a deeper understanding of the speakers' communicative strategies and intentions.

The last limitation of this study concerns the application of Baldry and Thibault's (2006) systemic functional linguistics approach to Obama and Biden's political speeches. The visual analysis led to the determination, description and examination of all the semiotic resources employed by the speakers, yet the characteristics and genre of the visual recordings of the Presidents' speeches did not allow to perform a thorough phasal analysis as it was probably intended by Baldry and Thibault (*ibid*.).

Finally, based on the findings reported in this research paper, future research could focus and further examine the identities portrayed by Obama and Biden in the speeches analyzed, and investigate whether they are repeated and re-enacted in other contexts or characterize their political discourse.

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