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# Obama's English

By H. SAMY ALIM and GENEVA SMITHERMAN

TWO aspects of President Obama's [acceptance speech](#) to the Democratic National Convention on Thursday night were of linguistic interest. The first was "signifying" — the use of indirect humor as critique, and a much discussed feature of black speech. "My opponent and his running mate are ... new ... to foreign policy," he said, adding the two pauses for great comedic effect. The second, and more familiar, was the soaring crescendo, beginning with "in the words of Scripture, ours is a future filled with hope," in which Mr. Obama demonstrated his strongest mode of linguistic performance — the black preacher style — to end his remarks ("knowing that providence is with us and that we are surely blessed").

"Artful," the Republican strategist Steve Schmidt called it. "Literary," said the liberal commentator Rachel Maddow.

Language played a notable role in the last election cycle, when President George W. Bush and Joseph R. Biden Jr., now the vice president, called Mr. Obama "articulate," and the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, observed that Mr. Obama spoke "with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one."

Language is playing a role in this electoral season, too, but in ways most observers have overlooked. Because language is a primary factor in shaping whether a politician is seen as "likable" or "relatable," the stark differences in speaking styles between Mr. Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, are probably contributing to the persistently higher marks for "personality" that Mr. Obama has gotten in numerous polls.

Mr. Romney's manner of speaking is essentially the verbal equivalent of his public persona: flat, one-dimensional, unable to connect. It is striking that he sounds almost the same in every speech, regardless of the audience. Observers have chronicled the wooden, monotonous nature of his delivery, the lack of tonal variation, the multiple hedges, the forced laughter, the "Leave It to Beaver"-era "gosh"-ness of his speaking. A painfully awkward example: his attempt to interact with black youngsters, at a parade in Jacksonville, Fla., for Martin Luther King's Birthday in 2008, where he dully [barked](#): "Who let the dogs

out? Woof, woof.” During the primary campaign this year, he was [mocked](#) as inauthentic for throwing in some “y’alls” while stumping in the South.

This linguistic judgment is not based on race or party. Our last three presidents have all been able to shift their speaking styles — an ability that is distinct from eloquence or empathy. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were known for speaking in a “folksy” manner: Mr. Clinton with black and Southern audiences, and Mr. Bush with Southern and Latino audiences (he would even switch into Spanish in his speeches). Before them, Lyndon B. Johnson was perhaps the president most notable for variation in speaking style. More recently, the blunt (and occasionally profane) style of Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, and the strategic sprinklings of Spanish by Gov. Susana Martinez of New Mexico and Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, have contributed to their rising profiles in the Republican Party.

In 2008, Mr. Obama took the linguistic flexibility of his predecessors to new heights. Take, for example, his style-shifting during a visit to Ben’s Chili Bowl, a well-known Washington eatery, days before his inauguration in 2009. In a [scene captured on YouTube](#), Mr. Obama declined to accept the change from a black cashier with the statement “Nah, we straight.” These three short, seemingly simple, words exhibited distinct linguistic features associated with African-American ways of speaking.

First was the rendering of “no” as “nah.” The vowel sound in “no” is like the one in “note,” while the vowel sound in “nah” is like the one in “not” (not to be confused with the way some whites say “nah” as in “gnat,” or the way some Southerners say “naw” like the vowel sound in “gnaw”).

Second was Mr. Obama’s use of “straight” in the sense of “O.K.,” “fine,” “all right.” Observers have noted Mr. Obama’s use of black slang in relation to hip-hop culture, his use of words like “flow” (the mapping of rhymes onto a beat) or “tight” (cool, hip). In his memoir “Dreams From My Father,” Mr. Obama also used words and phrases that are not as widely known outside the black community, like “trifling” (lazy and inadequate) and “high-yella” (a reference to light-skinned blacks).

Third was Mr. Obama’s omission of the word “are.” The removal of forms of “to be” — what linguists call copula absence — is one of the most important and frequently studied features of black English.

MR. OBAMA’S embrace of the black preacher tradition is also reflected in his use of call-and-response. A quintessential example was his speech to a predominantly black crowd in South Carolina in 2008. He fired up the audience by slowly walking around the stage and then called them with words associated with Malcolm X:

Obama: They're tryna bamboozle you.

Audience response: Yes!

Obama: It's the same old okey-doke.

Audience: That's right!

Mr. Obama's ability to bring together "white syntax" with "black style" played a critical role in establishing his identity as both an American and a Christian.

It also has a multilingual dimension. In his 2011 visit to Puerto Rico, for example, he got cheers for using "boricua" to describe residents of the commonwealth. In "Dreams From My Father," he described learning enough Spanish in Harlem to "exchange pleasantries" with his Puerto Rican neighbors; noted that his Kenyan father spoke with a British accent; explained that he learned some Hawaiian Creole from his maternal grandfather; and claimed that it took him "less than six months to learn Indonesia's language, its customs, and its legends." Later in life, Mr. Obama wrote about greeting some of his Kenyan relatives in Luo. In March, The Washington Post even reported on his sign-language interactions with a deaf community college student.

While Mr. Obama's linguistic flexibility is a political asset, his style-shifting is not without its critics. There are some who read his "chameleon-like" speaking skills as not quite authentic, or as slightly patronizing — a sort of linguistic pandering. Some African-American critics have strongly objected to Mr. Obama's use in the public sphere of phrases deemed to be part of black private discourses. In June 2008, when Mr. Obama criticized absent black fathers, his style-shifting was read as a coded message to white voters that he could be tough on his own people, and prompted the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson to [grumble](#) that Mr. Obama was "talking down to black people."

For their part, right-wing critics have observed Mr. Obama's linguistic fluidity with a mix of admiration and outrage. "Obama can turn on that black dialect when he wants to, and turn it off," Rush Limbaugh once fumed.

Regardless of who wins in November, Mr. Obama's linguistic legacy will have implications for both education and politics. It's still true, as Mr. Obama wrote in his book "The Audacity of Hope," that "members of every minority group continue to be measured largely by the degree of our assimilation." But while racial and ethnic minorities (and working-class whites) must continue to learn "standard" American English — the country's dominant

language — all children surely need to learn to understand and appreciate the nuances of America’s diverse ways of speaking.

In a multiethnic, multicultural America where Hispanics are the largest ethnic minority and Asians are the fastest-growing minority, national politicians also will have to be fluent in multiple ways of speaking. For too long, sounding presidential meant sounding like a white, middle- or upper-class straight man (with modest leeway for regional accents). In 2012 and beyond, it’s going to take a lot more than that to win over the hearts and minds — and ears — of the American people.

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*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: September 23, 2012***

*An earlier version of this article referred imprecisely to the population of Hispanics in the United States. They are the largest ethnic minority group, not the largest ethnic group.*