# Martin Luther King’s secrets for effective speaking

**Martin Luther King is generally considered one of the best speakers ever. Speeches as the ‘I have a dream’ speech have cemented their place in history. His ideology has become well-known and he has made major strides to realize racial equality in the USA and beyond. This raises the questions: Why are his speeches are so famous? What makes them so effective? What effects does his word choice and structure have? In his acclaimed ‘I have a dream’ speech, Martin Luther King communicates his vision of change effectively through the use of linguistic devices. This vision of change can be divided into the completeness, urgency, pacifistic nature and the universality proposed by Martin Luther King.**

Firstly, MLK expresses the concept of completeness well by using repetition and similes. One can see this repetition roughly halfway through the speech when 4 paragraphs start with the words ‘We cannot be satisfied…’ or words of similar meaning. Repetition is an effective means of hammering a concept home and King uses this many more times in the speech. But this is not the only linguistic device he uses. To explain the size of his vision of change, he uses similes. One such simile can be found in the same section. MLK mentions that ‘they cannot be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream’. This is of course a very powerful picture. It should be noted that this a quote from the bible book Amos. This makes the simile even stronger for Christians, of which there were a lot among his audience, given that he was a reverend himself and that African-Americans are still very religious, as they will likely recognize the words. In the third paragraph King employs another simile when speaking of the ‘great vaults of opportunity’: “But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.” Here the great vaults of opportunity are not open yet to most blacks, which explains why their living conditions are worse compared to whites. Through the simile this is made much clearer, than when just put dryly. These linguistic devices enhance the point of the completeness in such a way that they will be more memorable.

Secondly, Martin Luther King uses additional linguistic devices to communicate the urgency of his envisioned transformation. In the fifth paragraph, he uses a metaphor to describe the opposite of taking action with the following words: ‘This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tran­quilizing drug of gradualism.’ There is no tranquilizing drug of gradualism, but the negative tone that comes with drugs helps emphasize that the opposite is needed, namely urgent action. Just a few sentences onwards, he utilizes a duo of similes: “Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. “These similes stress the urgency by comparing the situation of the suppressed blacks in the USA to those fallen victim to quicksand. It can be noted that the word time is repeated multiple times to further aid Martin Luther King’s point. Further on, past the halfway mark, King uses a similar metaphor when he encourages the listeners to ‘wallow not in the valley of poverty’. Metaphors are able to convey emotions and ideas much more effectively and MLK obviously knew this and used them to communicate his vision very well.

Thirdly, King emphasizes the importance of peaceful action as opposed to violent protests by using his language with great effect. For example, in the middle of the speech he uses an antithesis: ’Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.’ This antithesis shows how different ‘soul force’ is from physical force. Martin Luther King also uses the metaphor of ‘a high plane of dignity and discipline’. This metaphor indicates that peaceful protests are to be preferred over violent riots, as it has the ‘moral high ground’. He uses another metaphor when speaking ’Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred’. He also omitted the following line, which was present in his prepared speech: “This offense we share mounted to storm the battlements of injustice must be carried forth by a biracial army.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This metaphor would not support the peaceful message, or even weaken it. These two metaphors paint the difference very well, like the antithesis and both make the pacifistic approach more desirable, as King pictures it as more noble and opposes it to brutality.

Fourthly, MLK conveys the universality of the transformation he envisions effectively by means of even more linguistic devices. One of these devices can be found in the final part of the speech, where King uses a combination of repetition and climax by repeating ‘Let freedom ring’ as follows: ”So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring (..) Let freedom ring (…) Let freedom ring (…) Let freedom ring (…) Let freedom ring (…) Let freedom ring (…)”, culminating in the following words: ‘Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountain side. Let freedom ring.’ This climax is one of the strongest parts of the speech. It emphasizes the absolute universality of freedom for every single American. A similar climax is the most famous ‘I have a dream’ section of the speech: ” I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up(…). I have a dream (…) I have a dream (…) I have a dream (…) I have a dream ... I have a dream (…) I have a dream today ... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low.” It expresses the universality of all Americans living together without hatred, whereas they did not at the time of the speech. During the speech, it is well audible that this is a climax by the sound of Martin Luther King’s voice. These two climaxes are easy to remember as the words ‘Let freedom ring’ and ‘I have a dream’ are repeated 11 and 8 times respectively and have cemented themselves in the public memory and have therefore been very effective to communicate the universality of his proposed changes.

To conclude, all the above-mentioned linguistic devices contribute to King’s message and he employs them very effectively. It should not be surprising now, that this speech has gone down in history as one of the greatest ever and King as one of the best speakers ever. His speaking techniques are still being studied all over the world and prominent figures have been inspired by his speaking style. I would advise anyone who needs to give a speech to look at MLK’s effective techniques and learn from them.

# Sources

Hanson, K. A. (2011, June 1) *Constructing A Dream: A Close Textual Analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream.”* Cal Poly | Learn by Doing. <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=comssp>

I have used the copy of the “I have a Dream” speech as supplied by the U.S. National Archives initially:

<https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

However, this link does not refer to the document anymore, so I used the following resource as an alternative:

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/KING-PAPERS/DOCUMENTS/I-HAVE-DREAM-ADDRESS-DELIVERED-MARCH-WASHINGTON-JOBS-AND-FREEDOM>

Sahgal, N. & Smith G. (2009, January 30) *A Religious Portrait of African-Americans* Pew Research Center

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1. Hanson, K. A. (2011, June 1). *Constructing A Dream: A Close Textual Analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream.”* Cal Poly | Learn by Doing. https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=comssp [↑](#footnote-ref-1)