

Words' Power Makes a Big Difference—A Stylistic Analysis of the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies

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Abstract

The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies has been called a collection of "one of the best-known sentences in the English language". It encourages American people greatly in achieving self-independence. This paper has found the sacredness of the declaration owes a lot to the distinct word usages in the text. The distinct word usage can be classified into capitalization of words, collocation of words, choice of words, post modification of words, complication of words, and repetition of words, which mingle their effects in the language to make the declaration a powerful text.

Keywords

Stylistic Analysis, Declaration of Independence, Word Usages.

1. Introduction

The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies has been called a collection of "one of the best-known sentences in the English language"[1]. It is the result of the American War of Independence and the spreading enlightenment which advocates the idea of freedom, democracy, and equality. Its content can be divided into four parts. The first part demonstrates the purpose of the declaration[2]. The theoretical basis constitutes the second part. It states twenty-seven crimes of the British colonialists in the third part. For the last part, it declares the independence solemnly. The declaration expresses the wishes of pursuing independence and freedom. It encourages the revolutionary power in America and the Latin America[3]. The declaration has been analyzed from political, social, legal perspectives but few in linguistic angle. Many stylistic features have contributed to its expressive effect in the level of phonology, lexis, grammar, and semantics. This paper has found the sacredness of the declaration owes a lot to the distinct word usages in the text. The distinct word usage will be examined closely through the capitalization of words, the collocation of words, the choice of words, the post modification of words, the complication of words, and the repetition of words. It assists a lot in conveying the anger to the British, the eager of independence, and the confidence and pride among the American people at that time.

2. Stylistic Analysis of the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies

2.1. Capitalization of Words

The author capitalizes the initial letter of some key words to show emphasis. A capitalized word stands out in the line. Readers can easily find words capitalized like, "Right", "Nature", "Government", "people", "Assent", etc in the text. Besides it shows people's admiration and worship of freedom by capitalizing these political words together with the words, "God" and "Creator" which shows us that the importance of these capitalized words compare favorably with God in mind.

2.2. Collocation of Words

Xu Youzhi [4] believes that collocation refers to the habit of expected co-occurrence of words. The meaning of a word depends on its immediate context-----its nearby words which are its collocates. The declaration uses the unusual meaning of a common word by giving certain collocates, which shows its formality and gravity. The word "dissolve" usually means to make and become liquid when put into a liquid. But, when used in paragraph one, it collocates with "band". Thus it means to end or break up a group or a formal relationship. "Assume" usually means to believe that something is true without any real proof. However, when it collocates with "power" in paragraph one, it means to begin use or have the right to do so. Similarly, "secure" in paragraph two means to get something after a lot of effort and "effect" in paragraph two means to cause something to happen. Words in such unusual meanings often appear in formal occasions to make the text has a sense of seriousness.

2.3. Choice of Words

Words chosen in the text are very formal. The declaration uses "assent" instead of "agree", "alter" instead of "change", "suspend" instead of "pause", "relinquish" instead of "quit", etc. Old English words like "hath", "shewn" and religious words like "brethren", "consanguinity" can also be found. These words help to convey the sacred independence they desired. It also shows the confidence and pride in the Americans. The text often puts a "his" before the political nouns, for instance, "his Assent", "his Governors", "his measures", "his invasions". "His" refers to the British colonialists'. This word indicates that it is the British who has committed the crime. The anger for the British and the eager of independence spontaneously emerged. The choice of those words is absolutely not an coincidence but a deliberation to strengthen its power.

2.4. Complication of Words

The declaration often uses a series of complex words and attributes instead of a few simple words to show its seriousness and nobility. "A decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they Should declare the cause which impel them to separation." This sentence mainly convey the idea of "To respect Human rights, we should declare the reasons of independence." But the text expresses in a structure of something requires that..., with many attributes and formal words. Readers cannot understand it quickly at first sight. The author uses "becomes destructive of" instead of "destroy". Besides, the interposed parenthesis makes it even harder to understand the meaning. In paragraph 16, "He has kept among us, in times of space, Standing Armies, without the consent of our legislation," the object "Standing Armies" is put after the prepositional structure and the parenthesis. In paragraph 33, "A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people," the parenthesis is an attributive clause with another attributive clause inside to modify. Its complex use of words and expressions makes the text distinct from daily used languages, which achieves the formal and serious effect. Furthermore, it suggests a sense of submissiveness to the readers.

2.5. Repetition of Words

The word "He" has been used as the first word of a paragraph for 18 times. "He" refers to the British Colonialist. The declaration lists their crimes by repeating the subject "he" continuously through a string of paragraphs. Instead of using the term "British Colonialist", the text adopts the pronoun "He", brief but forceful, in parallel structure, which shows the cruelty of the colonialists and the necessity and urgency of American independence. "For" appears repeatedly at the beginning of a paragraph for 9 times and "we" 4 times. A series of paragraphs deployed with the same word "He", "For" and "we" to start a new paragraph makes the declaration powerful and sacred. Repetition of the same word to start a paragraph in parallel structure

endows the juristic text with some literary style, which in turn strengthens the force of the language.

3. Conclusion

Words' power has played an important role in achieving its sacredness . The capitalization of the political words together with the words, "God" and "Creator", which renders the reader that those words match each other in strength. Common words collocated with unusual meanings in formal occasions makes the text has a sense of seriousness. The choice of words is never a coincidence but a deliberation to strengthen its power. Its complex use of words and expressions makes the text formal and abstract, which indicates a sense of submissiveness. Repetition of the same word to start a paragraph in parallel structure endows the juristic text with some literary style, which in turn strengthens the force of the language. The distinct features of word usages in the declaration mentioned above contribute profoundly to the sacredness of the declaration. The special word usage composes one of the factors of the declaration becoming the target which generations of Americans struggle to pursue.

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