3 Melody and Rhythm in Ancient Political Discourse
On How Emotions Induce Persuasion

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3.1 Introduction
If we admit with G. A. Kennedy that, “all communication involves rhetoric” (Kennedy 1999, p. 1), any speaker has to be careful when choosing words and gestures so as to give a persuasive performance. This was especially true in Antiquity. In those days, people who decided to devote themselves to politics had to learn rhetoric during their whole childhood. Skilled speakers were then supposed not only to be able to write discourses and to learn them by heart but also to improvise in front of any audience. Most of all, they had to adapt their speeches to the surroundings and to the hearers’ socio-cultural backgrounds (Michel 1996, pp. 201-209, May 2002, pp. 53-54). Indeed, rhetoric had to be used differently in a tribunal, on the forum (Aldrete 1999, pp. 77-81, May 2002, pp. 55-59) or in front of the Senate, before judges or ordinary people who were often illiterate (Aldrete 1999, p. 85). Actually, a good speaker was supposed to make a “one-man show” of it (Narducci 2002, p. 439, Hömke 2009, pp. 240-255) since the public “entered the forum and listened to a speaker, expecting not only to hear the facts of a case, but also to be entertained while doing so” (May 2002, p. 59). One of the most fundamental rules the ancient speaker had to keep in mind was to adapt and modulate melody and rhythm. Indeed, since Antiquity, musicality in political discourse has been considered as essential for persuasion. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st century BC) clearly summarised this challenging relationship between rhetoric and music. According to him,

Political eloquence is a sort of music. The difference between eloquence and music – either vocal or instrumental – is quantitative not qualitative. Actually, words in speeches follow a melody and a rhythm. (...) Consequently, the difference between music and speech consists of a “more or less”. (DH. De Comp. 6, 11, 64-66)
A good speaker has to master music because a proper melody and rhythm actually give him the power to influence the hearers’ feelings and decisions. An emblematic example is the case of Antonius. In Cicero’s treatise *De Oratore* (1st century BC), this orator concludes his demonstration with these words: “By moving the judges’ emotions more than by providing proof, I triumphed over you, Sulpicius.” (Cic. *De Or.*, 2, 201). This statement suggests that the musical quality of words played a central role in the ancient rhetorical theory as well as in the way speeches were actually delivered. Consequently, speakers had to imitate singers. They accordingly used to train their voices and rehearse their gestures to be able to modulate intonations and to keep up rhythm. This was clearly stated in Quintilian’s pedagogy (1st century AD) (Quint. *Inst.*, 1, 10, 22; 1, 11, 12; Hömke 2009, pp. 243-244).

Furthermore, melody and rhythm were used in ancient music to play on emotions and to give pleasure; rhetoric in Greece and Rome adapted this process to its specific goal, which was persuasion. Indeed, to obtain the expected feedback from their audience and to follow their strategies of persuasion successfully, speakers had to earn people’s goodwill, to sway their feelings and emotions (Solmsen 1938, pp. 390-404; 1941, pp. 35-50; 169-190; Wisse 1989, pp. 65-74, Cooper 1996, pp. 238-257, Leighton 1996, pp. 206-237). Therefore, although the distinction between singing and speaking was a leitmotiv in Cicero’s rhetoric and also in Dionysius’ and Quintilian’s works, political eloquence was nevertheless based on a deep interaction between music, emotions and persuasion. This interaction raises two main questions: how does this process work? And what does it mean as far as the relation between politics and ethics is concerned?

### 3.2 Natural music in speech and song

#### 3.2.1 Melodic and rhythmic properties in speech and song

Linguistic theories in Antiquity were based on the belief that the melodic and rhythmic properties of languages were rooted in nature. For instance, to Cicero, nature had an effect on the stress patterns of Latin:

> Nature itself, as if to *modulate* human speech, has placed an accent, and only one, on every word and never farther from the end of the word than the third syllable. (Cic. *Or.* 58)
According to him, nature supplied melodic modulations to Latin by determining verbal dynamics, while giving to the voice

A marvellous quality, so that from merely three intonations (ascending, descending and also ascending then descending), it produces such a rich variety in song. However, there is in speech too a sort of secret singing. (ibid. 57)

Cicero therefore admitted that speech and song were based on the same melodic properties, characterized here by three types of intonations that were in fact common to Latin and Greek (DH. De Comp., 6, 11, 77-79). However, political discourse could not sound like a song. Melody had to remain discreet, somewhat hidden. Dionysius of Halicarnassus added that vocal amplitude in speech was to be narrower than in song – never higher than an interval of one fifth (ibid. 73-74). Actually, to mistake a speech for a song would have meant a loss of dignity for the speaker because it would have given political discourse the same role as musical entertainment. Clearly enough, ancient political discourse was definitely influenced by music since it was based on melody and rhythm. But it was to be plainly distinguished from song at the same time. This difficult compromise was absolutely fundamental since it gave its specificity to the aesthetics of political rhetoric and determined delivery as well.

3.2.2 Nature in the creation and perception of music
The great power assigned to nature had a huge impact on the way ancient theorists considered the process of musical creation and perception. First, musical performance, either in song or in speech, had to comply with the demands of nature. Here is the rule given by Cicero: “Therefore let art follow the leadership of nature in pleasing the ear” (Cic. Or., 58). In other words, according to ancient theorists, rhetoric must be based on the gifts granted to the human voice by nature. It is necessary for any speaker to follow this rule so as to deliver a good speech which is to please an audience. Moreover, since rhythm and melody are natural, they are supposed to be intuitively perceived by anyone, even by uneducated people. Indeed, Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Quintilian all told short anecdotes in their treatises to illustrate the universality of musical judgement (Cic. De Or., 3, 195; Or., 173; Quint. Inst., 9, 4, 11-12; DH. De Comp., 6, 11, 29-52). According to them, illiterate hearers can unanimously notice any mishap in rhythm or in melody. To quote Cicero, it is
Because in this particular department as in every other, nature has a vast and indeed incredible power (Cic. De Or., 3, 195). Actually, nature itself has placed into our ears the faculty of judging long and short, high and low sounds. (Cic. Or. 173)

For ancient rhetoricians, there is therefore no need for any previous knowledge, for any linguistic skill to perceive melody and rhythm. When untaught people listen to a song or a speech, they can feel and judge what follows the musical rules or not, in spite of knowing nothing about musical and rhetorical theories, notions and techniques.

Consequently, Cicero and Quintilian used to draw a clear distinction between the process of feeling and the process of analysing. According to them, the former is based on emotions, the latter on reason. The ability to assess ideas requires culture and knowledge in many fields such as linguistics, philosophy, law and politics while the ability to appraise melody and rhythm is given to everybody:

While the faculty of assessing facts and words is based on intellectual skills, ears can assess sounds and rhythms. The first assessment is linked with logic, the second one with pleasure. In the former, reason discovers art whereas in the latter, perception does (Cic. Or., 162). That is the reason why cultivated people understand the composition of discourse while uncultivated people can perceive its charm. (Quint. Inst. 9, 4, 116)

A speaker who carefully chose melody and rhythm was consequently sure to exert an influence on the whole audience, even if the argumentation developed in this discourse remained somewhat unclear for a lot of people. This idea may sound rather discriminatory but it was held by people who had received a good education and belonged to the elite. Moreover, this dual system which distinguished rational and emotional assessments was also prompted by a vast experience of rhetoric. Ancient theories, especially Cicero’s, were indeed based on empirical observations. Eventually, this distinction has also been proved today by cognitive sciences. Very interesting experiments truly suggest that people who cannot read and who know nothing about music and rhetoric can however be sensitive to musicality (Warren 1994, pp. 41-52, 69-70).
3.3 From emotions to persuasion: The power of pathos

3.3.1 The orator’s threefold psychological task
In ancient rhetoric, melody and rhythm in speech were deemed necessary to have a deep impact on the whole audience. Indeed, musicality was supposed to be emotionally perceived by everybody, but also to provide a speech with a powerful emotional quality. Ancient rhetoricians were indeed clearly aware of the role of emotions in the interaction between performer and audience. Aristotle first clarified the process to follow to play on feelings and emotions (Solmsen 1938, p. 393, Wisse 1989, p. 65):

It is necessary to divide the material about each of the emotions under three heads; for instance, when talking about anger, (1) what state of mind makes people inclined to anger, (2) with whom they usually get angry, (3) and on account of what. For if we knew one or two of these heads, but not all three, it would be impossible to arouse anger; and the same applies to the other emotions. (Arist. Rhet. 1378a 23-28)

According to Aristotle, the speaker must follow this tripartite psychological process in order to arouse emotions. For him, oratory success is thus based on accurate psychological knowledge and on appropriateness. Indeed, the most important is to adapt speech to the hearers’ moods and to the topic which is to be developed (Hömke 2009, p. 242). Aristotle’s analysis is therefore based on the belief that political discourse must have a psychological impact to be persuasive. This implies a close correlation between emotions and persuasion:

Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to make their judgements different, and that are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and the like, as well as their opposites. (Arist. Rhet. 1378a 20-23)

For Aristotle, controlling the hearers’ emotions enables the speaker to control their minds and thus to sway their judgements. This is the reason why he considers that playing on emotions plainly contributes to the oratory strategy of persuasion. This use of emotions (pathos) must work together with rational demonstration (apodeixis) and moral characterisation (ethos) (Solmsen 1938, pp. 390-397; 1941, p. 178, Wisse 1989, p. 5, pp.15-21):
Of the means of persuasion furnished by the speech, there are three kinds, for some depend on the character of the speaker (ethos), some on putting the hearer into a certain emotional state (pathos), and some on the speech itself, brought about by proving or seeming to prove (apodeixis). (Arist. Rhet. 1355b 35-1356a 4)

This threefold division of persuasive material was also used by Cicero as a basis for his rhetoric. However, as he was initially under the influence of the Stoics when writing his treatise De Inventione, the younger Cicero focused on argumentation and a little on moral characterisation rather than on emotions (Wisse 1989, p. 267, Achard 1994, p. 13): for him, persuasion was definitely induced through a well-built series of different kinds of arguments (Cic. De Inv. 1, 34-76; 2, 159-169). Yet, after many oratory experiences, he finally took into account the fundamental role played by emotions in persuasion. More precisely, he correlated each means of persuasion to a specific oratory task. According to him, the speaker must inform his audience and prove what he says in order to achieve success in his demonstration. He must also convince everybody that he is a good citizen and that he defends virtue so as to win them over by earning their goodwill and pleasing them. Finally, he must play on emotions to move the hearers’ hearts deeply to make sure his victory is overwhelming (Cic. De Or. 2, 115; 2, 128; 2, 310; 3,104; Brut. 185; 276; Or. 69; Solmsen 1938, p. 399). Actually, “to prove is the first necessity, to please is charm, to move is victory; for it is the one thing of all that avails most in winning verdicts” (Cic. Or. 69). This analysis is clearly influenced by Aristotle’s theory but it also illustrates a lucid awareness of communication processes. As J. Wisse (1989, p. 6) explains, “arguments seem to be bound up with the message, ethos seems to be bound up with the sender, pathos intends an effect of the message on the receiver.”

The role played by melody and rhythm in this threefold psychological task is really crucial. Indeed, in ancient rhetoric, especially in Cicero’s, the most powerful rhetorical material to charm and to move is music (Chiron 2008, pp. 27-46):

For as art started from nature, it would certainly be deemed to have failed if it had not a natural power of affecting us and giving us pleasure; but nothing is so akin to our own hearts as rhythms and sounds – these rouse us up to excitement, and smooth and calm us down, and often lead us to mirth and to sorrow. (Cic. De Or. 3, 197)
To put it briefly, ideas developed in argumentation supply a demonstration while melody and rhythm alter feelings and emotions. In other words, music in speech has a strong role to play in persuasion since it participates in two of the three psychological oratory goals, as shown below:

**FIGURE 3.1**

This process was quite fundamental in ancient rhetoric. It also suggests that any strategy of persuasion must take into account the whole subjectivity of both performer and hearer. Since melody and rhythm take part in the shaping of the speaker’s morality and the conditioning of the hearer on an emotional level, they are thus definitely essential for persuasion.

### 3.3.2 Melody and rhythm in emotional mimesis

The close interaction between emotions and persuasion unquestionably raises a challenging problem: how can melody and rhythm sway the hearers’ emotions and hence induce persuasion? Actually, on this particular point, ancient rhetoric was influenced by music theories first developed by Plato and Aristotle (5th-4th centuries BC) in Greece and then summarised by Aristides Quintilianus during the Roman Empire (3rd century AD). In music as well as in rhetoric, melodies and rhythms were classified according to their character and the emotions this character was supposed to rouse. For instance, a quick rhythm associated with a high-pitched melody can express anxiety or mirth (Cic. *Or*. 193; A. Quint. *De Mus.*, 2, 15, 34; West 1992, p. 158) whereas a peace-
ful rhythm and a low-pitched melody can express calm, solemnity or deep sorrow (Plat. Leg., 3, 700b; Arist. Poet., 1459a 8-10; Quint. Inst., 9, 4, 83; A. Quint. De Mus., 2, 6, 1-7; 2, 15, 16-22; Duysinx 1990, p. 122; Mathiesen 1999, p. 62; Dangel 2001, pp. 44-45). Consequently, melody and rhythm themselves were described according to their ethos and their pathos, i.e., their moral characterisation and their emotional impact.

Well-chosen melodies and rhythms thus determine the stylistic and musical properties of speech and contribute to the strategy of persuasion by participating in the oratory ethos and pathos. More precisely, melody and rhythm first mimic real feelings and emotions. Then, out of empathy, the hearers recognise — consciously or not — part of their own subjectivity and are led to feel the same emotions (West 1992, p. 249, Halliwell 2002, p. 53, Zagdoun 2007, p. 96). This empathy is actually induced by the similarity between what is expressed in the speech and felt in the soul; indeed, after Cicero’s words, “nothing is so akin to our own hearts as rhythms and sounds.” Consequently, as matched with ideas, melody and rhythm contribute to the strategy of persuasion through a double emotional mimesis (see figure 3.2):

![Figure 3.2](image_url)

This conception is obviously correlated with the above-mentioned belief that language and the oratory use of language come from nature as Cicero’s words read: “art started from nature.” Therefore, speech itself is “regarded as a living organism possessing a certain character, by which it can influence the hearers” (Wisse 1989, pp. 61-62). Melody and rhythm definitely determine this charac-
ter by providing speech with their own properties. They are part and parcel of
the strategy of persuasion in controlling what is irrational in the hearers’ sub-
jectivities. This system reveals how much ancient rhetoricians were aware of
the psychological impact of delivery itself on persuasion. Indeed, music in
speech is expressed by vocal intonations, rhythms of words and gestures (Cic.
*De Or.* 3, 220; *Brut.* 278; Quint. *Inst.* 1, 10, 22; 11, 3, 107-108; Aldrete 1999,
p. 39): the whole body must be involved in the delivery to communicate
melody and rhythm, to arouse emotions and finally to persuade.

3.4 What about ethics?

3.4.1 Music and oratory manipulation
The interaction between emotions and persuasion may raise some deep eth-
ical concern. Indeed, in Aristotle and Cicero’s views, the same emotions can
be used respecting ethics or not. Thus, “rhetoric is a tool that may be used
rightly or wrongly, and it is morally neutral in itself” (Wisse 1989, p. 297).
Consequently, the speaker who uses them in his strategy of persuasion has a
strong moral responsibility. According to Cicero, he must exercise his rhetor-
cal skills to help justice (Cic. *De Or.* 1, 30-34; 2, 33-38; Wisse 1989, p. 397):

If anyone neglects the study of philosophy and moral conduct, which is the highest
and most honourable of pursuits, and devotes his whole energy to the practice of
oratory, his civic life is nurtured into something useless to himself and harmful to
his country; but the man who equips himself with the weapons of eloquence, not
to be able to attack the welfare of his country but to defend it, he, I think, will be a
citizen most helpful and most devoted both to his own interests and those of his
community. (Cic. *De Inv.* 1, 1)

However, can this ideal be truly reached in reality? Cicero was actually aware
of the heuristic function of this introduction: his aim was to describe the per-
fect speaker in order to provide a model of rhetoric but also to warn against
immoral oratory practices. These had already been evoked by Aristotle in an-
cient Greece:

Appropriate style also makes the fact appear persuasive; for the mind of the hearer
is imposed upon under the impression that the speaker is speaking the truth, be-
cause, in such circumstances, his feelings are the same, so that he thinks – even if it
is not the case as the speaker puts it – that things are as he represents them; and the hearer always sympathises with one who speaks emotionally, even though he really says nothing. (Arist. Rhet. 1408a 19-24)

An appropriate speech is characterized by a perfect correspondence between formal properties, topic and psychological goals. Melody and rhythm thus determine appropriateness. According to Aristotle, a speaker who perfectly masters the music of words, vocal intonations, tempo and gestures, can achieve persuasion whatever he says. Consequently, persuasion can be exclusively based on emotions. The problem is that formal properties – above all melody and rhythm – do not serve ideas but replace ideas themselves. In other words, the message is deprived of what must be its main component. These practices were clearly inspired by Gorgias’ theory of “the dominance of the passive psychè by the active logos” (Wardy 1996, p. 79). Nevertheless, this ethical danger is still real nowadays: emotional manipulation through melody and rhythm is indeed an oratory tool which may be the basis of dictatorship.

3.4.2 Solutions
Ancient rhetoricians suggested some solutions against emotional manipulation in political discourse. First, emotions like ideas have to be “permeated by reason” (Wardy 1996, p. 62) because reason is necessarily guided by morality and honesty. The “reasonable” speaker can therefore show himself as a wise and trustworthy person. This means that throughout the performance, the emotional *mimesis* must always be correlated to the argumentation (Arist. Rhet. 1356a 14; Garver 2000, p. 17).

Cicero proposed an additional solution. In his view, a good speaker must also feel the very emotions he wants to arouse (Wisse 1989, p. 264, Cooper 1996, p. 239) and then express them with appropriate melody and rhythm during the performance. In other words, morality is implied by the genuineness of the emotions to be displayed (Narducci 1997, p. 77). The orator Antonius analyses this process in detail in the second book of *De Oratore*:

> It is impossible for the listener to feel indignation, hatred or ill-will, to be terrified of anything, or reduced to tear of compassion, unless all those emotions, which the advocate would inspire in the judge, are visibly stamped or rather branded on the advocate himself. Now if some feigned indignation had to be depicted, and that the same kind of oratory afforded only what was counterfeit and produced by mimicry,
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some loftier art would perhaps be called for. (...) I give you my word that I never tried, by means of a speech, to arouse either indignation or compassion, either ill-will or hatred, in the minds of a tribunal without being really *stirred myself*, as I worked upon their minds, by the very feelings to which I was seeking to prompt them. (Cic. *De Or. 2*,189).

This solution thus suggests that genuine emotions are the most persuasive because they imply sincerity and are consequently effective in defending the truth. Actually, these two solutions have to work together, as shown by figure 3.3:

FIGURE 3.3

However, Cicero holds an ambiguous position about emotions and ethics. On the one hand, he insists on the fact that good speakers have to be “aflame” before attempting to “inflame” the hearers (Cic. *De Or. 2*, 189-196, Wisse 1989, pp. 257-258, Narducci 1997, p. 80) – but it is far from easy to tell a good speaker from an actor and thus to draw the line between rhetoric and dramatic eloquence. On the other hand, imitation and pretence can also be part of the strategy of persuasion. In this case, rhythm and melody are regarded as an oratorical trick based on pleasure (Cic. *De Or. 197*; 208): they *secretly* coax the hearers into experiencing the emotions that will eventually persuade them. However, Cicero believes that the speaker must keep in mind that “no doubt reality always does better than imitation” (Cic. *De Or. 3*, 215). Consequently, imitation must never be the last step – it must support truth and virtue (Wisse 1989, p. 262).
3.5 From Cicero to Obama: Melody and rhythm in the victory speech (4th Nov. 2008)

By altering emotions, melody and rhythm play a fundamental part in the strategy of persuasion. This process was interpreted in Antiquity in the light of mimesis. Even though this conception clearly belonged to a specific social, cultural and aesthetic context, it can rightly elucidate aspects of some persuasive process involved in modern political discourses. Many examples could be taken, among which Obama's victory speech on November 4th 2008. That day, as soon as the Obama family appeared, people in the audience showed their joy and goodwill. Obama's aim was therefore to reinforce his partisans' support as well as to associate all the American people with his victory, even those who had not voted for him.

3.5.1 Anaphora, solemnity and admiration

His speech followed a clear argumentative progression. Vocal intonations and syntactic rhythm specifically contributed to the whole architecture as they guided the hearers from one idea to another while maintaining an unquestionable emotional tension as well. One of the most striking musical effects was based on anaphora, i.e., the repetition of the same word or expression at the beginning of sentences. This repetitive effect can create a rhythm because it influences perception by inducing anticipation and recognition of a specific pattern. Particular vocal intonations also make it easily perceptible. At the same time, it is clear that it contributes to the argumentative structure of the speech. This process is particularly patent in the introduction:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible;
who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time;
who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.
It’s the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches (...)
It’s the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican,
black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled (...)
It’s the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve (...).
Rhythm in this extract is based on two very simple ternary anaphoric patterns. The first consists of the repetition of the same syntactic structure: “who still” + verb. Actually, the main musical marker is the adverb “still” as is clearly shown in the sonogram in figure 3.4:

FIGURE 3.4

who still doubts who still wonders who still questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F (kHz)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D#₃</td>
<td>t = 0.13 s, f = 0.307 kHz</td>
<td>F₃</td>
<td>t = 0.11 s, f = 0.350 kHz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E₃</td>
<td>t = 0.08 s, f = 0.342 kHz</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time (s) is reported on the horizontal axis whereas frequency (kHz) is reported on the vertical one. Each sound corresponds to a series of harmonics, represented here by a stratification of lines. The lowest harmonic constitutes the fundamental tone – A#₂ in Obama’s voice. The blackness of the harmonics corresponding to “still” signals a strong vocal intensity, induced by the harshness of sounds but also by Obama’s will to plainly mark the beginning of each segment. Measures of frequency tend to reveal a binary melodic development: first, the voice follows a rising movement and then a falling one. Time spans are also shorter and shorter; this acceleration of tempo creates a tension likely to produce expectancy among the hearers. This ends with the words “tonight is your answer” which corresponds to the first direct address to the audience. The same process is applied to the anaphoric clause “It’s your answer.” In fact, the use of a ternary rhythm and vocal amplitude – as in an incantation – gives solemnity to the speech and dignity to the speaker. In this specific case, it con-

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1 I employed the software Audiosculpt (IRCAM, Paris).
tributes to encourage goodwill by associating the hearers with political victory and nourishing their collective energy too.

Other musical processes, also based on anaphora, may be observed in the following parts of this speech. They confirm a shift in the oratory strategy. Indeed, after thanking all the people who had been involved in the campaign, Obama exposed the difficult task ahead. Sentences tend to be shorter as if to delineate each step. A good example is this sentence: “There’s new energy to harness and new jobs to be created; new schools to build and threats to meet and alliances to repair.” Here again rhythm is based on the anaphora of a syntactic group: “new” + noun + infinitive. The first coordinative “and” initially suggests a binary rhythm. However, the addition of the third group “new schools...” actually induces a modulation and thus introduces ternary dynamics.

**FIGURE 3.5**

There’s new energy and new jobs; new schools and threats and alliances
to harness to be created; to build to meet to repair

\[
\begin{align*}
  f &= 0.488 \text{kHz} \\
  f &= 0.443 \text{kHz} \\
  f &= 0.565 \text{kHz} \\
  f &= 0.510 \text{kHz} \\
  f &= 0.233 \text{kHz}
\end{align*}
\]

This group “new schools to build” is in fact the pivot of this sentence. Indeed, it marks the end of the first ternary group and the beginning of the second one. This central role is moreover given by melody and rhythm: the adjective “new” corresponds here to the highest vocal tension. It also initiates the second ternary movement which follows a parabolic intonation. Indeed, frequency measures show that the central group “and threats to meet” is characterized by a vocal suspense – the voice does not fall down to the fundamental tone as it usually does to mark punctuation. Therefore, Obama visibly mastered melody and rhythm in this sentence. By choosing short
sentences and cautiously chunking them, he hinted at each difficult step to be taken in the future task. As he combined binary and ternary rhythms while modulating his voice, he maintained solemnity and in a way built up an atmosphere of epic tension: he and the American people would have to be “heroes” to achieve this renewal.

3.5.2 The chorus “yes we can” for a collective victory
The most famous musical effect in this speech must be the repetition of the credo “yes we can.” This short phrase really played the role of a chorus when Obama finally told the story of Ann Nixon Cooper, the 106-year-old woman who voted during this election. The oratory goal was to inflame the audience, to make everybody proud of America and its history that this lady – described by Obama as extraordinary – was supposed to embody. By repeating the chorus, the hearers showed their unity and confirmed it was a successful speech. Then it was time for Obama to conclude:

\[ This \ is \ our \ chance \ to \ answer \ that \ call. \]
\[ This \ is \ our \ moment. \]
\[ This \ is \ our \ time \]
\[ to \ put \ our \ people \ back \ to \ work \ and \ open \ doors \ of \ opportunity \ for \ our \ kids; \]
\[ to \ restore \ prosperity \ and \ promote \ the \ cause \ of \ peace; \]
\[ to \ reclaim \ the \ American \ dream \ and \ reaffirm \ that \ fundamental \ truth \]
that out of many, we are one;
that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism and doubt,
and those who tell us that we can’t,
we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: yes, we can.

Here again, ternary anaphoric patterns (“this is our chance (...) this is our moment (...) this is our time (...) to put (...) to restore (...) to reclaim”) were used to reinforce the chanting rhythm full of solemnity. Moreover, by employing the pronoun “we,” Obama did associate the whole American people with his victory. However, the last sentence is the most interesting as far as melody and rhythm are concerned. The sonogram (see figure 3.6) indeed reveals a very elaborate musical process:
First, this sentence is based on a binary progression: the credo “yes we can” is clearly isolated by a pause (of around 1s). In the first part, vocal tension is maintained: the first harmonic higher than the fundamental tone is around C, which truly corresponds to a huge stress in Obama’s voice. A descending movement can however be observed on the last word “people”, just before the pause. The second part is characterized by a lower tension, as to signal a final punctuation. The most striking effect is the use of specific rhythmic patterns. Indeed, as in Latin, stress in English plays a fundamental role in verbal dynamics. In this sentence, each stress thus marks the beginning of a musical measure. Each measure is clearly distinguished and typified by a rhythmic pattern based on contrasts between long stressed and short unstressed syllables (of around 0.20s and 0.10s). Moreover, some regularity can be detected. Among the five opening measures, the first and the second are based on a dactylic pattern (one long and two short syllables), the following two on a trochaic one (one long syllable and one short syllable) and the last on a spondaic one (two long syllables). Then a pause occurs as to emphasise the group of words “the spirit of a people.” This begins with the unstressed syllable “the” which can be interpreted as an anacrusis, i.e., a preliminary measure after which the beat starts. The two following measures are based on a rhythmic pattern that used to be most appreciated by ancient orators: a peon (one long syllable and three short syllables) and a trochee (one long syll...
lable and one short syllable). The phrase “yes, we can” can finally be interpreted as a series of three long syllables, which is a moloss. Consequently, melody and rhythm in this last sentence are particularly elaborate. The rhythmic regularity and melodic tension set up an easily perceptible pace and provide the whole speech with a cadence likely to be greeted with cheers of agreement and admiration.

3.6 Conclusion
Melody and rhythm can be rightly considered as highly powerful tools to achieve persuasion. It has been experimented since Aristotle and Cicero. During Antiquity, political speeches, as well as songs, were supposed to alter feelings and thus to determine the hearers’ behaviours. More exactly, the speakers’ duty was to take advantage of the natural gifts of the human voice, i.e., intonations, long and short sounds, contrasts of intensity, etc. Indeed, ancient theorists such as Aristotle and Cicero knew that ideas were not sufficient to impose a point of view, that they were to be reinforced by delivery and most of all, by melody and rhythm. Through a complex mimetic process that involves rational and irrational material, ancient speakers were supposed not only to develop an argumentation and provide evidence on facts but also to adapt rhythm and melody in order to make speeches appropriate, to prove themselves wise and trustworthy and to play on emotions as well – a last step necessary to achieve persuasion. In other words, music in speech was considered as deeply correlated to *ethos* (moral characterisation) and *pathos* (emotional impact). The analysis of Obama’s victory speech has shown how much this interaction between music, *ethos* and *pathos* is definitely and unquestionably fundamental in rhetoric, even today. Consequently, although ancient Greek and Latin differ from our own languages, although those cultures may appear so alien to our daily worries, ancient thought can really provide a good starting point for our reflections on rhetoric. It is particularly true when we deal with the interaction between emotions and persuasion and the ethical concern inferred by the psychological impact of music in political speech.

References


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