

Establishing Common Ground with the Audience: An Analysis of American Commencement Addresses

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ABSTRACT

Successful communication requires establishing common ground with other participants through shared knowledge and experiences, whether in private conversations, workplace meetings, or speeches given to large audiences. The aim of the study is to analyze strategies of establishing common ground employed in American commencement addresses. The data used in the analysis comes from the corpus of 100 commencement addresses delivered in American universities and colleges. Commencement address, which constitutes an important element of commencement ceremony, is deeply rooted in the American university tradition. It is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes, such as celebrating academic achievements, honoring graduates, and giving them advice for the future. The audience comprises graduates, their families, friends, and faculty, while the speakers are notable figures in American society. The analysis adopts the Discourse-Historical Approach, committed to Critical Discourse Studies. The data has been analyzed in terms of strategies of establishing common ground, argumentation schemes and linguistic means used to realize the strategies. In the analyzed discourse, five strategies of establishing common ground have been identified: reference to similar/common experiences; self-disclosure; reference to common beliefs, values and practices; reference to common identity; and the use of humor. The findings emphasize the importance of claiming common ground with the audience for public addresses (including commencement speeches) to be successful. Despite the diversity of cultural backgrounds, social status and professions, and generational differences among the speakers, the interaction between them and the audience, the graduates in particular, generally proceeds smoothly, although the speakers' attempts to establish common ground with the audience are not always successful.

Keywords: common ground; commencement address; American culture; the Discourse-Historical Approach

INTRODUCTION

Whether in a private conversation, a workplace meeting or a speech delivered to a large audience, to make communication successful the speaker tries to find common ground with other participants. Claiming common ground cannot be underestimated, it is especially important when participants apparently do not have much in common, when they come from a different background, are in different age, represent different professions and do not share much experience. As Herbert H. Clark (1996: 120) maintains, “[o]rordinarily, people can justify a piece of their common ground by pointing to a shared basis for it — a joint perceptual experience or a joint action.” Sometimes claiming common ground with the others is to make them feel good and to enable the speaker to win their trust.

As has been said, establishing common ground is also important in public speeches, in which the speaker's effectiveness matters most. For example, commencement addresses, apart from the laudatory function (praising the graduates' achievements), have an educational function (giving the graduates advice for the future). Thus, delivering a commencement address is a communicative situation whose success depends, inter alia, on effectively winning the audience's trust. This can be achieved by establishing common ground.

The aim of the study is to analyze strategies of establishing common ground employed in American commencement addresses. The research questions are: How do commencement speakers establish common ground with the audience, the graduates in particular? What argumentation schemes, rhetorical devices and linguistic means of expression do they use? The analysis has been conducted within the framework of the Discourse-Historical Approach, committed to Critical Discourse Studies (Wodak, 2001; Wodak, et al. 2009; Reisigl, 2018). The data for the analysis comes from the corpus of 100 commencement addresses delivered during 2016 and 2017 graduation ceremonies in American universities and colleges. The study may contribute to better understanding of the specificity of public speeches, commencement addresses in particular, and explain how establishing common ground is employed to win the audience's approval and trust; it may show what impact knowledge shared by the speaker and the audience has on the success of the communicative event – commencement address.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, a short overview of the literature on the concept of common ground is presented. Second, commencement address is presented as a rhetorical genre specific for American culture. Third, the methodological framework employed in the analysis of commencement addresses is outlined. Fourth, I analyze strategies of establishing common ground, rhetorical devices and linguistic expressions used to realize them. The article is concluded with a presentation of the findings.

COMMON GROUND

The concept of *common ground* was introduced by Robert Stalnaker and originally used in formal pragmatics and philosophy of communication. According to Stalnaker's theory of presupposition, "[t]o presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information – as *common ground* among the participants in the conversation" (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 701). Common ground is mutual or shared knowledge (Sperber & Wilson 1990) which plays an important role in the way we process information in the course of social interactions (Enfield, 2008; E. Clark, 2015; Levinson, 2020). Thus, it is a necessary element in interpersonal communication. For Clark (1996, p. 92), "[c]ommon ground is a *sine qua non* for everything we do with others."

Clark (1996, p. 101) claims that people are members of many cultural communities. A cultural community is a group of people who share an expertise that other communities lack. They share a system of beliefs, values, practices, etc (cf. Hazaea et al., 2014). Members of a cultural community possess a common ground. Depending on whether people are insiders or outsiders, they have different information about a community:

- Inside information of a community is particular information that members of the community mutually assume is possessed by members of the community.
- Outside information of a community is types of information that outsiders assume is inside information for that community (Clark, 1996, p.101).

Members of cultural communities develop special lexicons, share basic facts, norms and procedures; all of them constitute communal common ground (Clark, 1996, pp. 106-116). It is based on interactants' mutual belief that they are members of a particular community (e.g. Americans, immigrants, graduates of a particular university). Apart from that, there is also personal common ground, which is based on *joint personal experiences* ("joint perceptual experiences and joint actions"). To establish either type of common ground, an interactant has to find the right *circumstantial evidence* (circumstances in which he/she meets the other) or *episodic evidence* (actions that the other performs or events in which he/she participates). Using language, people tailor their utterances to reflect the knowledge they share with their interlocutors; this is called *recipient design* (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979).

There are two main approaches to common ground. In the most popular one, represented, inter alia, by Stalnaker (1978) and Clark (1996), common ground is viewed as "a category of specialized mental representations that exists in the mind *a priori* to the actual communication process" (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009, p. 332). In the other one, common ground is conceptualized as an emergent property of ordinary memory processes (e.g. Barr, 2004; Colston, 2008; Keysar, Barr, Balin & Brauner, 2000). Common ground is interpreted as a form of shared memory (Colston, 2008). Colston describes it as "information that an interlocutor generates or encounters and then encodes into short- and/or long-term memory for ongoing or later use" (2008: 154). As a form of memory, common ground is said to be malleable: "the social relationships among interlocutors can greatly affect what they have in their common ground. A domineering person, for instance, who is greatly admired by many interlocutors, can set the stage for what is discussed and collectively encoded as the common ground" (Colston, 2008, p. 179). An alternative, socio-cognitive approach is proposed by Kecskes and Zhang (2009, p. 352), who combine the above two approaches, offering "an emergence-through-use view of common ground". Common ground is here mutually constructed by interlocutors throughout communication, playing both a regulative and a constitutive role.

Within the socio-cognitive approach to discourse studies, Teun van Dijk perceives common ground as a constituent of the communicative situation (apart from the setting, participants (and their identity, role and relationship), current social action and goals) (Van Dijk, 2014, p. 22). In other words, common ground is "context bound, that is, it defines shared knowledge in specific communicative situations" (Van Dijk, 2014, p. 118; 2018), and can be analyzed in terms of the following dimensions:

- the same general language and/or dialect
- interpersonal knowledge (among family members and friends)
- joint participation in the same (communicative) situation
- the same general knowledge system of the epistemic community (local, regional, national, international)
- the same specialized knowledge system (e.g., among professionals)
- the same attitude or social representation about an issue
- the same ideology
- the same norms and values (Van Dijk, 2014, p. 118).

Thus, common ground constitutes the foundation of social representations of a particular community and ideologies existing in it. The general knowledge shared by the community is presupposed.

Common ground has two main functions, the informational function and the social-affiliational function. The former involves "the mutual management of referential information,"

while the latter maintains “a common degree of interpersonal affiliation (trust, commitment, intimacy), proper to the status of the relationship,” and adjusted to the context of situation (Enfield, 2008, p. 223). Common ground is “socially relational, and relationship defining” (Astington, 2020: 422). It is important for the economy of expression; the more knowledge the interlocutors have in common, the less they have to explicitly say (Enfield, 2008). At the cultural level, common ground includes ethnic and cultural identities, common cultural background and past experiences (Enfield, 2008, p. 224).

The key element in the definitions of common ground is mutuality (Keysar et al., 2000). And it is shared knowledge and experience that commencement speakers employ to establish rapport with the audience, graduates in particular, and win their trust (so important for a successful mentor-disciple relationship).

AMERICAN COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AS A GENRE

Commencement address constitutes an integral element of the graduation/commencement ceremony performed annually at the end of the academic year in American universities and colleges, whose central part is conferring degrees and diplomas on graduating students. Commencement address is an epideictic speech fulfilling laudatory and educational functions. The persons invited to deliver a commencement address are notable figures in the society (e.g. politicians, artists, writers, businessmen, activists), academics or graduating students — all of them high achievers (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2020).

Commencement address is a structured verbal chain of coherent speech acts (e.g. thanks, congratulations, compliments, advice and good wishes), uttered by a single person and addressed to a specific audience (university authorities, the faculty, graduates and their families and friends) (see Reisigl, 2008, p. 243). Although it is classified as an epideictic genre, it often includes some deliberative elements: almost all commencement addresses involve references to the future, and perform exhorting and dissuading functions. The speakers (the experienced and successful) share their knowledge and experience with the young (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2020).

The success of a commencement address largely depends on the speaker’s relational work. Commencement addresses are to a certain extent interactive, and “socially integrative by contributing to the formation of transindividual identity and to the foundation of group solidarity” (Reisigl, 2008, p. 251). Commencement speakers often make an attempt to discursively construct a collective identity, e.g. the American national identity; the identity of the educated in general or of the alumni of a particular university in which the commencement ceremony takes place; or the identity of the young generation (if the commencement speaker is not much older than the graduates). Constructing their own individual identity as well as the collective identity (of both the speaker and the graduates), commencement speakers often resort to storytelling. Personal narratives serve various functions, e.g. positive self-presentation and/or establishing common ground.

Establishing common ground between the speaker and the audience is used as a rhetorical strategy in public speeches, e.g. political and commemorative (Slavickova, 2013; see also Reisigl, 2008). In commencement addresses, the strategy is used for several purposes: to attract the audience attention, to establish good rapport with them, to gain their trust, and build credibility, necessary for someone who is to provide them with wisdom.

THE DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

To analyze how commencement speakers establish common ground with the graduates, I have employed the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), developed by Ruth Wodak and her Vienna group (Wodak, 2001; Wodak, et al. 2009), which is one of the main schools of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The DHA is an interdisciplinary approach which combines pragmatics, “sociolinguistics and studies on narration, stylistics, rhetoric and argumentation with historical and sociological research” (Reisigl, 2018, p. 45).

For the representatives of CDS, discourse is a social practice; it is socially constituted as well as socially constitutive. It is understood as “a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action” (Wodak, 2001, p. 66); the social fields of action are segments of social reality constituting “the ‘frame’ of discourse” (e.g. the field of political action). “Through discourses, social actors constitute objects of knowledge, situations and social roles as well as identities and interpersonal relations between different social groups and those who interact with them” (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 9).

The DHA is a multi-perspectival and problem-oriented approach which goes beyond the linguistic dimension and includes the historical, political and sociological dimensions in the analysis and interpretation of a specific discursive event (Reisigl, 2018). The interpretation of discourses and texts is integrated with the analysis of four layers of context (Wodak, 2001, p. 67): the immediate linguistic co-text; the intertextual and interdiscursive references in the text; the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of a specific context of situation; and the broader sociopolitical and historical contexts.

The DHA concentrates on five types of discursive strategies (Wodak, 2011, p. 49):

- (a) *referential strategies* or *nomination strategies*, by which social actors are constructed and represented, for example, through categorization devices (e.g. metaphors and metonymies);
- (b) *predicational strategies* – social actors are characterized through predications (e.g. evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits);
- (c) *argumentation strategies* through which the attributions are justified/legitimized;
- (d) *the perspectivation, framing or discourse representation*, “by means of which speakers express their involvement in discourse”;
- (e) *intensifying strategies* and *mitigation strategies*.

The DHA is widely employed in analyses of political rhetoric (e.g. Reisigl, 2008; Wodak & Boukala, 2016) and commemorative speeches (e.g. Reisigl, 2009; Slavičková, 2013). It is the only approach to CDS in which the “interest in rhetoric is strongly developed, particularly with respect to tropes, genre theory (e.g., regarding political speeches), and persuasion (including argumentation)” (Reisigl, 2018: 48). Argumentation strategies consist in using *topoi*, “‘inference warrants’ granting the transition from arguments to conclusion” (Kienpointner, 1991: 46). *Topoi* are conventional and have dual construction, always include recurring elements and one-time elements responsible for their contextualization; they are autonomous, i.e. they can function within a given text as well as beyond it (Bogdanowska, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

The data for the analysis come from my corpus of 100 randomly selected commencement addresses (approximately 281,000 words) delivered during 2016 and 2017 graduation ceremonies in American universities and colleges. To collect the data, I employed the random sampling procedure, involving two steps. First, Google Search was used to find transcripts of commencement addresses delivered in the years 2016 and 2017. Second, the texts to be analyzed were selected from a pool of addresses delivered in the two years, respectively (50 for each year).

The body of data is suitable for an in-depth qualitative and interdisciplinary analysis. The analysis involves investigation of contents, strategies, and means and forms of realization (cf. Wodak's three-dimensional approach – Wodak, 2001, 2011; Wodak et al., 2009). In addition, as the analyzed discourse represents the epideictic genre, rhetorical and argumentative features of the texts are also taken into consideration. First, the commencement addresses have been analyzed in search of fragments when the speakers try to establish common ground with the audience. Second, specific strategies of establishing common ground have been identified. The strategies have been identified during the analysis of the data; they have not been imposed on as *a priori* categories (cf. Wodak et al., 2009). Third, argumentation schemes, rhetorical devices and linguistic means of expression used to realize the strategies have been discussed. Undertaking such an analysis has enabled me to interpret, explain and evaluate strategies of establishing common ground employed in American commencement addresses.

AN ANALYSIS OF CLAIMING COMMON GROUND IN COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Conducting an analysis of the commencement addresses from the corpus, I have identified the following strategies employed by the speakers to establish common ground with the graduates: (a) reference to similar/common experiences, (b) self-disclosure, (c) reference to common beliefs, values and practices, (d) reference to common identity, and (e) the use of humor.

REFERENCE TO SIMILAR/COMMON EXPERIENCES

The strategy which is most frequently employed to establish common ground with the graduates is referring to and reminiscing about similar experiences. The speakers often bring back the memories of their own university years. In personal narratives, they describe their perceptual experiences and actions which, irrespective of a time lapse, make them members of the same community as the graduates. The *topos* of sameness is one of the most frequently used. Another frequently used *topos* is the *topos* of similarity, which is a subtype of the *topos* of comparison in which persuasion is based on stressing similarity. The expressions frequently used include the adjectives *same* and *identical*, and phrases with the preposition *like* (*just like you*).

To establish common ground with the graduates, the speakers often express appreciation for and positive emotions towards the university the commencement takes place, especially if it is their *alma mater* (e.g. *I love this school. I truly believe I would never have been on Saturday Night Live and would never have hosted a talk show if it hadn't been for time at Northwestern* (Meyers, 2016)). If the university in which they deliver a commencement address is at the same time their *alma mater*, they refer to familiar places and people. There are direct references to the place — an element of the context of situation (*I sat just where you sit now*) (see Example 1). Referring to the

familiar is organized by the metonymy SITTING/BEING IN A PLACE FOR EXPERIENCING (e.g. *I was standing in your shoes. That's the same chair that I sat in* (Ferrell, 2017); *Twenty years ago, I graduated in this very same spot* (Meyers, 2016)). The academic community is represented in terms of the metaphor THE UNIVERSITY IS A FAMILY. Changing perspectives (and moving from the present to the past and back to the present), the speaker switches from the possessive pronoun *my* to the addressee-inclusive *our* (I + you (plural)). Addressing the graduates, the speaker presents herself as 'one of them'. Her attitude to the university is represented by the metaphor THE UNIVERSITY IS A HOME (see also Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2021). Home is a familiar place when one feels secure, relaxed and happy. Visiting the *alma mater* as a commencement speaker is described as *a homecoming* — the return on a special occasion to a place regarded as home.

(1) *I've had the honor of speaking at many commencements. But this one is particularly special for me. Because decades ago, I sat just where you sit now, feeling the embrace of my Howard family. Our Howard family. [...] They asked me to do it and I was more than honored. It's a homecoming.* (Harris, 2017)

Another *topos* which is frequently used is the *topos* of understanding (I understand what you are experiencing/feeling, because I have experienced/felt the same). In Example 2, the speaker uses a variation of the idiom *be in sb's shoes*, reminiscing about her own commencement and emotions she experienced then (the *topoi* of sameness and similarity). The expressions *on this same lawn* and *the same cap and gown* stress the sameness of place and occasion (the metonymies THE PLACE FOR THE OCCASION and THE DRESS FOR THE OCCASSION). The speaker employs an implicit comparison (analogy – what happened to me is now happening to you) (see Wodak et al., 2009: 39). Referring to similar/the same experiences and presenting herself as 'one of them', the speaker legitimizes her qualifications as a commencement speaker.

(2) *Some 30 years ago, I was standing in your shoes, on this same lawn, wearing the same cap and gown. To be frank, I don't remember the commencement speech, so I'm sure you will forget me – and that's okay! – but I do remember the mix of emotions: joy... relief... cheerfulness... sadness, but I also remember an inner voice asking the inevitable question: What's next?* (Faieta, 2017)

The commencement speakers' personal narratives include descriptions of their student activities which go beyond typical studying. In Example 3, such a description is used in positive self-presentation. The speaker presents himself as an insider (he did what the graduates did, and frequented places familiar to them). The inside information and the mention of familiar places (places of entertainment, elements of the university infrastructure) constitute the proof of his insider status. The reference to *lifelong friends at UW* implies the continuity of the speaker's relations with the university. The commonality of experience is shown from different perspectives (see Example 4). Making progress is presented as typical of humankind in general, individuals (like the graduates and the speaker) and nations (e.g. the US). The speaker employs the *topos* of comparison/the *topos* of similarity. Finding the connection with the graduates, the speaker wins their trust and gets credibility.

(3) *I made lifelong friends at UW, some of whom are here today, which I appreciate so much. We went to Badger games, dressed up as Mediterranean fruit flies for Halloween, sang and danced our hearts out in Humorology, suntanned on the Union Terrace on the first 40-degree spring day and occasionally we even went to class. After two years in the Lakeshore dorms, we lived at the SAE house and at the Kollege Klub, 151 steps away.* (Levitan, 2017)

(4) *Progress doesn't travel in a straight line. [...] for every two steps forward, it feels like we take one step back. Now, for some of you, this may sound like your college career. (Laughter.) It sounds like mine, anyway. (Laughter.) Which makes sense, because measured against the whole of human history, America remains a very young nation -- younger, even, than this university.* (Obama, 2016b)

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure is a strategy of claiming common ground which consists in disclosing personal information. It is often used in personal narratives. In Example 5, the speaker refers to her reasons for spending time in colleges: apart from the rational one — to work there, she alludes to the happy time when she was a student in her 20s (*I might want to relive my 20s just a little.* (Sandberg, 2017)). Her words imply she does not differ much from her audience, has similar preferences and likes similar lifestyle (the *topos* of similarity). They also presuppose that she is familiar with the institutions, such as colleges, and knows the relations existing there, which constitutes the inside information of the college/university community the graduates belong to.

(5) *I've spent a lot of time at colleges – yes for work, but also because I might want to relive my 20s just a little.* (Sandberg, 2017)

Self-disclosure involves telling the truth about oneself or at least signaling that one intends to do so. Very common among commencement speakers is the rhetoric of frankness, which consists in telling the truth or at least making an impression that one is telling the truth; a true representation of the speaker's situation or opinion is to increase the persuasive force of the message (Rosen, 1987; cf. *parrhesia* – Foucault, 2001). The transition from the mode of speaking typical of a particular oration to *parrhesia*, meaning *oratio libera* – “free speech”, is usually signaled by means of linguistic expressions, such as *the truth is...*, *to be frank* (Example 2), *to be honest with you* (Example 6). In commencement speeches, employing this rhetorical strategy is often accompanied by conversationalization, which consists in using discursive practices typical of the private sphere in public discourse and is associated with informality and increased openness (Fairclough, 2010). Conversationalization often involves “a ‘synthetic personalisation’ associated with promotional objectives in discourse [...] and linked to a ‘technologisation’ of discourse” (Fairclough, 2010: 98). The use of contractions of negatives, colloquial expressions (e.g. *got the invite*, *freaking out*), abbreviations (*Cal*) and interjections (*What the hell was I thinking?*), turn-taking (from time to time), direct quotations and a style more informal than expected on such occasions are to help the speaker to shorten the distance and establish a rapport with the graduates.

(6) *To be honest with you, I can't believe I'm giving the commencement speech today here at Cal! I graduated from U.C. Berkeley almost 25 years ago and I never would've thought I would be giving this speech! When I first got the invite I immediately said yes. As a graduate of Cal I was honored. But the next day I started freaking out. What the hell was I thinking? I'm a comedian. I don't know how to write a speech! I dropped out of a Ph.D. program so I could tell jokes.* (Jobrani, 2017)

REFERENCES TO COMMON BELIEFS, VALUES AND PRACTICES

Common ground also involves shared beliefs, values and practices. Communication between people who have the same value systems and share similar beliefs is easier, brings about better results and is more satisfying. In the case of commencement speech, it is relatively easy to achieve as it is usually graduates who select a person who is to deliver it. It is rarely the case that they are not satisfied with the choice or do not accept what the speaker says. For example, in 2017 Betsy DeVos, Donald Trump's education secretary, had to cut her address short at the historically black Bethune-Cookman University in Florida amid protests of many students and faculty against her selection as a commencement speaker; in Barnard College at Columbia University, some students and faculty signed a petition against the choice of Anne-Marie Slaughter (2016a) as a commencement speaker, which she commented on at the beginning of her address, quoting some of their arguments (*The protesters charged that I am a representative "of white corporate feminism"*).

A good example of a perfect alignment of the commencement speaker with the audience is the third commencement speech delivered by Hillary Clinton in her *alma mater* Wellesley College (Examples 7a-7c). Employing the *topos* of similarity, Clinton compares the impact of the college education on her with its impact on the graduates (the metaphor THE UNIVERSITY IS A TOUCHSTONE). The college is personified here as "a provider". It has provided them with *elite education*. Apart from common advantages, they may also share problems. The warning addressed to the graduates (see Example 7b) is based on an implicit comparison (analogy). In Example 7c, the reference to the graduates' college experience is combined with the speaker's own reminiscence of her college years – she changes the perspective and smoothly moves from *you* to *me*, stressing in this way similarity of experience and values instilled during the studies. In the last sentence of the excerpt, there is an abrupt change of the topic: the presidential election Clinton lost to Donald Trump, who is never mentioned explicitly in her speech. This, however, does not prevent her from indirectly criticizing her opponent, alluding to the quality of his campaign – her own opinion becomes their common opinion (the use of the addressee-inclusive *we*).

(7a) *This college gave me so much. It launched me on a life of service and provided friends that I still treasure. So wherever your life takes you, I hope that Wellesley serves as that kind of touchstone for you.* (Clinton, 2017)

(7b) *In the years to come, there will be trolls galore online and in person. Eager to tell you that you don't have anything worthwhile to say or anything meaningful to contribute. They may even call you a nasty woman. Some may take a slightly more sophisticated approach and say your elite education means you are out of touch with real people.* (Clinton, 2017)

(7c) *What you've learned these four years is precisely what you need to face the challenges of this moment. First, you learned critical thinking. I can still remember the professors who challenged me to make decisions with good information, rigorous reasoning, real deliberation. I know we didn't have much of that in this past election but we have to get back to it.* (Clinton, 2017)

Usually, the speakers try to find common ground with the graduates at the beginning of the address, trying to identify what they share with them. In the commencement address sections fulfilling the educational function, the speakers propagate American cultural values (e.g. equality, freedom, the autonomy of the individual, independence, democracy) and the ideas represented by civil society (e.g. public interest causes, such as human rights, citizen participation, the public good). Here, the direction is sometimes reverse: the speakers either presuppose or say explicitly that the graduates share their worldview or opinion (see Example 8 – *And to me, and, I think, to all of you*). In Example 8, the speaker depicts a social problem (discrimination) and provides a solution to it (*the only answer to more hate is more humanity*). Elaborating on it, he formulates a piece of advice which is more personal: the pronoun *we* is addressee-inclusive. In the context of tutelage, it could be interpreted as the “*paternalistic we*”, speaker-exclusive (Wodak et al., 2009: 45-46), however having in mind the laudatory function of the commencement address and the fact that the advice has a more general, social, character, it is rather the speaker-inclusive *we*. To stress they belong together, the speaker uses the expression *the same tribe* (the adjective *same* + the collective noun *tribe*). At the end of the excerpt, there is a change of tone, from serious to jocular, and frame, from didactic to humorous (*by feeling empathy for every soul – even Yalies* – the commencement took place at Harvard University).

(8) [...] *there's no difference between anyone who is discriminated against, whether it's the Muslims, or the Jews, or minorities on the border states, or the LGBT community – it is all big one hate. And to me, and, I think, to all of you, the only answer to more hate is more humanity. We gotta repair – we have to replace fear with curiosity. 'Us' and 'them' – we'll find the 'we' by connecting with each other. And by believing that we're members of the same tribe. And by feeling empathy for every soul – even Yalies.* (Spielberg, 2016)

In Example 9, the speaker, who is the Apple CEO, stresses the commonality of goals and ideas between the university (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and the company (the use of the verb *to share* and the pronoun *both*), employing the metonymy THE INSTITUTION (COMPANY OR UNIVERSITY) FOR THE PEOPLE WORKING/STUDYING IN IT. The use of addressee-inclusive *we* (the speaker + the graduates) implicates what has been explicitly said in the first sentence of the excerpt. The rhetorical device of *anaphora* (the repetition of the same word(s) at the beginning of the successive sentences) is used to emphasize the commonality. In Example 10, the commencement speaker is a faculty member in the university and college (the College of Biological Sciences) in which he delivers the address. This naturally makes him an insider. He addresses the graduates as fellow scientists (the use of addressee-inclusive *we*) – members of one community of practice (viewed as “a social learning system” (Eckert & Wenger, 2005)). The commencement address is an opportunity to share his knowledge and experience with the novices. To legitimize his words, he uses the frequently employed *topos* of authority (“if one refers to somebody in a position of authority, then the action is legitimate”) (Wodak, 2011: 44).

Commencement speakers usually quote words of eminent individuals, e.g. figures from American history, distinguished thinkers, scholars, or politicians. Here, however, there is a quotation from a fictional movie character (from the *Ghostbusters* films). The message, serious in meaning and tone, is interrupted by the informal interjection *hey*, which signals the clash between the solemnness of the commencement ceremony and the popular comedy film (which is also a way of claiming common ground with the young).

(9) *MIT and Apple share so much. We both love hard problems. We love the search for new ideas, and we especially love finding those ideas, the really big ones, the ones that can change the world.* (Cook, 2017)

(10) *We as scientists can't just rely on our belief that we know best, and that others will believe and trust us because, hey, as Peter Venkman put it "We're scientists". [...] Science benefits us all: we need to keep it non-partisan above politics. This will be one of your jobs: to promote science so nature is neither overcome nor extinguished.* (Siciliano, 2017)

REFERENCES TO COMMON IDENTITY

Our identity is constructed in language and culture in relation to other people. It is a description of ourselves which is emotionally charged (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Some aspects of identity are effects individuals produce by repeated performance of particular actions. Some forms of group identity (e.g. national identities) require a commonality of interests and group solidarity (Elliott 2020). This is often employed by commencement speakers. They claim common membership in a group, whether it is humankind (see Example 11), American society (see Example 12), women (see Example 13) or one generation (see Example 14), employing the *topos* of sameness and appealing to the audience's emotions. In Example 11, the *topos* of definition is also employed, which is based on the following argumentation scheme: "a person or thing designated X should carry the qualities/traits/attributes consistent with the meaning of X" (Wodak, 2011: 44). To stress the commonality between himself and the graduates (human nature, experience and fate) the speaker resorts to the rhetorical device of *epanalepsis* (the repetition of an expression at the beginning and at the end the sentence), e.g. *We're all, in this Stadium, human beings all of us*. There is a reference to the Latin saying *Errare humanum est* (intertextuality). The realization that "to err is human" is to rid the young of what restrains them and constitutes a starting point for their professional career. Human life is conceptualized in terms of the metaphor ONE'S LIFE'S PURSUIT IS MUSIC. Here like in many other cases, the reference to a commonality prepares the ground for the advice given by one of the knowledgeable and experienced to the young. Switching from the addressee-inclusive pronoun *we* to the pronoun *you*, the speaker assumes the role of the mentor (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2020).

(11) *We're all, in this Stadium, human beings all of us, which means we're all flawed by definition. The realization of this truth is a great, freeing baseline for the music of your life's pursuit, whether that's a straightforward Sousa march or the most licentious reefer-fueled jazz. Every single day is another opportunity for learning, for further improvement. If you mistakenly think you have finished learning, because*

you have mastered your craft, or just turned in all of your term papers, well then you open the door for bitterness to take hold. (Offerman, 2017)

The United States is to a large extent a society of immigrants. The cultural and ethnic diversity is also visible in universities. This diversity is a topic often discussed in commencement speeches, especially in universities and colleges in which the majority of students represent other cultures than the mainstream Anglo-American culture. Describing their road to success, commencement speakers frequently refer to their own origin and identity (be it national, ethnic or racial), treating it as a point of departure to find common ground with the graduates. America is represented as *the land of opportunity*. Such a representation of the United States results from its national ethos – the American Dream, which can be traced back to *The Declaration of Independence* (the *topos* of American uniqueness). The American Dream gets different meanings in different American stories. In Example 12, the speaker, himself an Iranian-American, refers to this fact trying to establish rapport with the graduates. He also makes an allusion to President Donald Trump’s controversial executive order commonly called the “Travel ban”, limiting or barring entry of refugees from selected (mainly Muslim) countries to the US (*we are at a crossroads in American history*). In the first sentence of the excerpt, the abrupt change of the pronoun *you* to the addressee-inclusive *we* (the same is done in the last sentence) points to the speaker being one of them — the immigrants and the Americans. There are allusions to *the United States Constitution*, in which equality is depicted as one of the fundamental American values. The speaker uses *hypophora* (which consists in asking questions and simultaneously providing answers). In the first question, there is an *antithesis* in the form of two parallel structures, which clearly suggests the answer, explicitly stated at the end (as the speaker’s opinion). In the last sentence, the *topos* of American diversity is used (the metaphor DIVERSITY IS A DRIVING FORCE – *a future America that welcomes people of different backgrounds and thrives on diversity*).

(12) *Whether you’re an immigrant or not we are at a crossroads in American history. And you graduates are right in the thick of it. Do we keep the American dream alive and let people from around the world come to this country to make the best of their lives or do we close ourselves in and kill the American dream? 25 years from now, who will be giving the Commencement Speech? Will it be a kid from Damascus or Mogadishu or who knows, maybe even an undocumented student? Or will they be shunned? I would encourage us to aim for a future America that welcomes people of different backgrounds and thrives on diversity.* (Jobrani, 2017)

Discrimination against women and women rights are topics frequently spoken on, especially by female speakers. It is when they express solidarity with other women. It usually starts with a personal narrative: a story of a woman from her family (*Roz was my grandmother. She was a huge inspiration to me and I’m so grateful that Berkeley recognized her potential.* (Sandberg, 2016)), or a story of stumbling blocks in her own professional life (*the idea of a pregnant, already the mother of a toddler woman lawyer was just plain old impossible* (Warren, 2016)). In Example 13, the pattern is the same. The use of a direct question (*‘Who said she could run?’*) and its repetition add dramatization to the narrative and drive the story in the right direction. The direct address form *sisters* is an expression of solidarity with other women who may experience discrimination at work. It is followed by an assertion with a request for confirmation, which makes

the fragment interactional. Referring to the situation she had to deal with at the early stage of her carrier, the speaker employs the *topos* of adversity (in the face of adversity, one has to do something to counteract it) and uses the metaphor BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING IS BREAKING A BARRIER WITHIN A HIERARCHY (and its variety BREAKING THE MARBLE CEILING IS GETTING A SEAT IN THE CONGRESS).

(13) *A few years after I went to Congress, when I was running for a leadership position which had been held by men for centuries, at least two centuries – some men asked, ‘Who said she could run?’ Sisters, you know what that does, right? ‘Who said she could run?’ That’s when I knew I had to. That’s when I knew I had to break not only the glass ceiling, but the marble ceiling of the Capitol. (Pelosi, 2016)*

In American culture, “high achievers see nothing wrong in talking about their failures in public”; failures are considered to constitute an important part of everyone’s life. “Such experience makes them stronger and endows them with the wisdom necessary to succeed” (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, 2018: 262). In Example 14, the speaker sees his age rather than the fact that he is a dropout as disqualifying in this respect. The self-presentation made in the first sentence of the excerpt is employed to establish common ground with the graduates, the speaker identifies himself as ‘one of them’ — an ordinary individual, a former fellow student and a member of the same generation. The common ground is established by the use of the addressee-inclusive pronoun *we* and the adverb *together*. It is also emphasized by the noun phrases with the adjective *same* (concerning their age, knowledge and experience) (the *topoi* of sameness and similarity). At the end of the excerpt, the speaker switches from the pronoun *we* to the pronoun *I*, marking in this way a transition from the role of ‘one of them’ to the role of the mentor, and back – to the role of their equal.

(14) *I’m an unlikely speaker, not just because I dropped out, but because we’re technically in the same generation. We walked this yard less than a decade apart, studied the same ideas and slept through the same Ec10 lectures. We may have taken different paths to get here, especially if you came all the way from the Quad, but today I want to share what I’ve learned about our generation and the world we’re building together. (Zuckerberg, 2017)*

HUMOR

One of the most important functions of humor is to create and maintain rapport and solidarity between the speaker and the audience. This is also the function in which humor is used in commencement speeches. To succeed in doing so, the speakers often share sensitive information, highlight similarities between self and others (Ziv, 1984) and resort to teasing. Speakers who do not belong to academia often fake modesty in spite of their indisputably high social position. The more distant the speakers’ profession is from academia, and the more incompatible they perceive themselves with the role of commencement speaker, the more frequently they exploit humor. Humor helps them adjust to the new environment and the new task – to give advice to the graduates on the basis of their own knowledge and experience.

Commencement speakers often use metadiscursive comments, disclosing their reflections on the process of speech preparation (Examples 15 & 16). In Example 15, the speaker starts with a pseudo-quotation of instructions for writing a successful commencement speech. Each sentence is started in the same way – *you need to...* (*anaphora*). Neither the speaker’s tone of voice nor his facial expression signals the use of the humorous frame. The humorous effect is finally triggered by the expression *a pithy quote from a semi-obscure learned person*. The elaboration on the topic is perceived by the audience as even more amusing and responded to with laughter. The speaker’s intention was to gradually increase the humorous effect to finally end his utterance with a punch line. The incongruence results from confusing two persons, the English philosopher (Francis Bacon) and the American actor (Kevin Bacon). However, the punch line was not understood and the audience did not respond with laughter. This time, employing humor to establish common ground was not entirely successful.

(15)

S: You need to start by thanking a lot of people, I’m happy to do that, you need to say that line, and you need a pithy quote from a semi-obscure learned person.

Audience: (laughter)

S: Now this part is tricky: if you pick someone too obscure the audience won’t connect with the quote; pick someone too well-known people will think you’re not good at Googling stuff.

Audience: (laughter)

S: I’m going with Francis Bacon, and if I hit the mark you’re thinking ‘oh yeah Bacon, I remember Bacon’. He was great. Francis Bacon: sixteenth century English scientist and philosopher. Plus he was great in Footloose.

Audience: (silence)

(Siciliano, 2017)

As has been said, commencement address is to be the message from the experienced and successful to the young, giving the graduates advice for the future and instilling in them the belief that they have the necessary abilities to succeed. Example 13 starts with a description of the process of advice formulation. The imperative *Get ready* implies that the advice may be different from what is usually said on such occasions. It triggers a frame change and functions as the preface, the first part of the “sequential organization” of joke-telling (the other two are the telling and reaction) (Sacks, 1974: 337). The joke refers to the then current political situation in the United States and includes a criticism of President Donald Trump’s activity in social media.

(16)

M: Everyone advises a commencement speaker to say one thing that the students will remember 40 years from now. Now that was hard—it took me weeks to come up with it. And then it came to me, something that I believe you will remember in the year 2057 because it is so true. Here it is. Get ready.

Audience: (laughter)??

M: Whether you’re in the French Quarter or the Oval Office, no good can ever come from tweeting at 3 a.m.

Audience: (laughter)

M: True.

(Mirren, 2017)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Commencement is a celebration of young people’s achievement, as such it fulfills a laudatory function. Praising and complimenting, to be well received, does not require the speaker to prepare the ground in any way, if there is a reason for which the addressee may be praised or complimented. Establishing common ground with the audience (the graduates in particular), however, is one of the first steps taken by commencement speakers, who want in this way to attract the audience’s attention and justify being a right choice for the speaker – the audience’s acceptance contributes to the success of the address. It is especially important as the commencement address is also to fulfill an educational function. The speaker is to act as one of the experienced and successful, conveying knowledge and giving advice to the young entering the adult life. To be able to do so, the speaker has to gain their trust, build credibility and establish rapport with them. Claiming common ground is employed as a rhetorical strategy to achieve this.

The data from my corpus of commencement addresses has been analyzed in terms of strategies of establishing common ground (the strategies have not been imposed on as *a priori* categories, but derived from the analysis of the data), argumentation schemes, rhetorical devices and linguistic means of expression used to realize the strategies (for a summary presentation of the results of the data analysis see Table 1). As has already been mentioned, in the corpus of commencement addresses, five strategies of establishing common ground have been identified: (1) reference to similar/common experiences, (2) self-disclosure, (3) reference to common beliefs, values and practices, (4) reference to common identity, and (5) the use of humor.

TABLE 1. Establishing common ground in commencement addresses –
 summary presentation of the results of the data analysis

| Strategies of establishing common ground | Argumentation | Means of expression |
|--|--|---|
| Reference to similar experiences | <i>topos</i> of comparison/ <i>topos</i> of similarity <i>topos</i> of sameness | the adjectives <i>same</i> , <i>identical</i> the preposition <i>like</i> direct references to the place — an element of the context of situation SITTING/BEING IN A PLACE FOR EXPERIENCING THE UNIVERSITY IS A FAMILY Changing perspectives: from the present to the past and back Changing perspectives: from the first person singular to the second person plural THE UNIVERSITY IS A HOME THE DRESS FOR THE OCCASSION |
| | <i>topos</i> of understanding | the idiom <i>to stand in your shoes</i> |
| | <i>topos</i> of definition | personal narratives allusions conversationalization (informal style, colloquial expressions, turn-taking, interjections) colloquial expressions idioms |
| Self-disclosure | <i>topos</i> of comparison/ <i>topos</i> of similarity | |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | | interjections turn-taking <i>to be honest, to be frank, frankly speaking</i> |
| Reference to common beliefs, values and practices | the rhetoric of frankness | |
| | <i>topos</i> of comparison/ <i>topos</i> of similarity | THE UNIVERSITY IS A PERSON THE UNIVERSITY IS A TOUCHSTONE analogy the addressee-inclusive pronoun <i>we</i> <i>the same tribe</i> THE INSTITUTION (COMPANY OR UNIVERSITY) FOR THE PEOPLE WORKING/STUDYING IN IT the verb <i>to share</i> the pronoun <i>both</i> <i>anaphora</i> (the repetition of the same word(s) at the beginning of the successive sentences) quotations |
| Reference to common identity | <i>topos</i> of authority | interjections the addressee-inclusive pronoun <i>we</i> the adverb <i>together</i> |
| | <i>topos</i> of sameness | |
| | <i>topos</i> of comparison/ <i>topos</i> of similarity | <i>epanalepsis</i> (the repetition of an expression at the beginning and at the end the sentence) intertextuality ONE'S LIFE'S PURSUIT IS MUSIC allusions <i>hypophora</i> (which consists in asking questions and simultaneously providing answers) <i>antithesis</i> |
| | <i>topos</i> of definition | personal narratives direct speech direct address (Vocative) the adjective <i>same</i> <i>the American Dream</i> <i>the land of opportunity</i> DIVERSITY IS A DRIVING FORCE BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING IS BREAKING A BARRIER WITHIN A HIERARCHY |
| | <i>topos</i> of American uniqueness | |
| | <i>topos</i> of American diversity | |
| | <i>topos</i> of adversity | |

The second category analyzed in the corpus is argumentation. The key argumentation schemes used by the commencement speakers establishing common ground with the graduates are the *topos* of comparison/*topos* of similarity and the *topos* of sameness. The *topoi* logically lead to several conclusions including: having similar experiences, sharing beliefs and values, engaging in similar activities and having the same social identity.

The means of expression used to realize the strategies of establishing common ground constitute the third category that have been analyzed. Fragments whose main aim is to establish common ground with the graduates are more interactive than the rest of the address. They are characterized by informal style, the use of colloquial expressions, idioms, interjections, exclamations and inclusive language. Similarity and sameness are constructed by means of the following lexical expressions and syntactic forms:

- personal pronouns, collective nouns (personal reference),
- toponyms, names of institutions, adverbs of place, prepositional phrases (spatial reference),
- adjectives and adverbs denoting similarity and sameness,
- verbs denoting commonality.

In addition, similarity and sameness are often built by means of metaphors and metonymies.

The use of humor, which is the last strategy of establishing common ground presented in the analysis, differs from the other strategies. It cannot be identified with the recurrence of any particular *topoi* or type of linguistic means of realization. Besides, humor employed for the purpose is often used in combination with other strategies (see Examples 10 and 16).

The study results show the importance of claiming common ground with the audience for public addresses (commencement addresses included) to be successful. Taking into consideration the fact that commencement speakers represent different cultural and social backgrounds, different professions and different generations, the interaction between the speaker and the audience, the graduates in particular, is quite smooth. The graduates mostly seem to properly interpret the speaker's intentions and react with approval (their reactions are rarely rendered in commencement address transcripts included in the corpus, but can be heard in the videos available in the Internet). This constitutes the proof for the effectiveness of the strategies employed by the speakers. However, in some, rather rare, cases, the choice of the strategy or its realization appears to be inappropriate, and instead of cheers and other expressions of approval, the graduates react with silence (resulting from the lack of understanding or the lack of some knowledge) (see Example 15). In other, extremely rare, cases, the speaker's failure to establish common ground with the graduates results from their lack of acceptance for the choice of the person as a commencement speaker or explicit disapproval of what the speaker said.

The study contributes to the general picture of commencement address. It also provides some insights into the nature of establishing common ground as a rhetorical strategy and its use in public speeches with the educational function.

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