A rhetorical change that changed reality
Rouhani vs. Ahmadinejad at the UN

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This paper is the first to explore the development of Iranian rhetoric from former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the current president Hassan Rouhani, in messages delivered to the international community. The study compares eight speeches given by Ahmadinejad at the UN, to two speeches given on the same platform by Rouhani. The speeches were explored by qualitative research of the prominent rhetorical strategies employed by each president, as well as by quantitative research of the frequently used words in each president’s speeches. The findings reveal a radical change in Iran’s rhetoric since Rouhani succeeded Ahmadinejad in 2013. The newly elected president adopted a moderate, modern and rational discourse regarding both Iran’s attitude to the West and the Iranian nuclear program. The findings suggest that this change made the new president and the “new” Iran possible partners to negotiating with the West, and eventually enabled the historic nuclear deal in 2015.

Keywords: Iran, rhetoric, UN speech, Ahmadinejad, Rouhani, nuclear

1. Introduction

On July 14, 2015 the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council: United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China, plus Germany (the P5+1), the European Union, and Iran signed an historic agreement regarding Iran’s nuclear program – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Only 20 months after the formal negotiations between the parties began the JCPOA was signed in Vienna, marking a dramatic turning point in the attitude of the world’s leading nations towards Iran and its nuclear program. Under the new deal, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear capabilities in return for lifting international oil and financial sanctions.
The current study aims at exploring the rhetorical grounds that preceded the signing of this historic agreement, from the Iranian side. The study analyzes the development of the Iranian rhetoric in its messages to the international community from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to President Hassan Rouhani, during the years 2005–2014. The analysis shows that since Rouhani took office in August 2013 he has made efforts to soften the Iranian tone against the West and ease the enduring tension regarding Iran’s nuclear program, in order to reach a compromise that would eventually lead to the removal of the sanctions. By uncovering different rhetorical devices and strategies the study demonstrates that, as opposed to his predecessor, Rouhani adopted a different ideology and started speaking to the world in modern, moderate, pragmatic, and rational terms. The study further suggests that this dramatic rhetorical change made the newly elected president and the ‘new’ Iran possible ‘partners’ in negotiating with the West on the nuclear program and in achieving such an historic agreement.

The study focuses on the rhetorical change manifested in Rouhani’s speeches at the annual opening sessions of the General Assembly of the UN, compared to those given by Ahmadinejad. I do not deal with the question of whether the rhetorical change reflects a ‘real’ change, meaning a change in Iran’s foreign policy, or merely a ‘linguistic’ change, but rather I focus on examining the way the Iranian leaders chose to present themselves, their nation, and their ideology through their speeches to the international community.

According to Bakhtin (1986), every language act is a dialogue. In other words, the listener is never to be considered passive: “When the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution and so on” (Bakhtin 1986, 68). So even though an utterance, or in this case a political speech may not be immediately followed by a response, sooner or later what the listener heard and understood will elicit a response – whether articulated (e.g., in the form of a speech or a comment) or reflected in some other sort of behavior or action.

Similarly, Reisigl (2008) argues that speeches should not be considered “monological linguistic events”. A political speech serves political purposes. Commemorative speeches, for example, aim at establishing consent, solidarity, identification and the “disposition to act as the speaker proposes to do” (Reisigl 2008, 254). Political speeches serve two purposes – inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, they contribute to the formation of transindividual identity and to the formation of group solidarity, and on the other hand, they can fulfill disintegrative and destructive purposes by “mobilizing addressees to social exclusion and, at worst, to violent attacks against those excluded and denigrated by the orator” (Reisigl 2008, 251).
Adopting this point of view, I argue that the supposedly main addressees of Ahmadinejad’s and Rouhani’s speeches, meaning the primary listeners to which the speeches were addressed, including the world nations’ representatives and leaders – should not be regarded as passive listeners. They heard the speeches, agreed or disagreed with their content, and reacted accordingly. In the case of Ahmadinejad’s speeches, the study shows that the (Western) listeners could not agree with (most of) the content and responded accordingly, i.e., imposed harsher sanctions on Iran. Rouhani, on the other hand, evoked a radical change in the world’s response. Formal nuclear negotiations started when he took office, and relatively quickly bore fruit in the form of a nuclear deal and an agreement to remove sanctions.

I do not argue that the nuclear deal was achieved only due to Rouhani’s two speeches in the UN (given before the signing of the deal). There surely were many different factors that contributed to this agreement, including United States President Barak Obama’s attitude favoring a diplomatic solution to this dispute, the willingness of other Western nations to reach a compromise with Iran, Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei’s changed view regarding negotiations with the West, and more. However, the palpable change in the way the Iranian president began speaking to the world contributed to making the negotiations with the West possible.

As Harris (2014) writes in her analysis of Rouhani’s leadership, “Rouhani did not mask his intention to pursue a deal, telling the Iranian parliament early in his term that his government’s top priority would be to ‘ease tensions with the outside world’” (Harris 2014, 83). The current research shows that these intentions were manifested in Rouhani’s speeches at the UN in which he focused on easing the tension with the West and aimed at reaching a compromise, as opposed to Ahmadinejad who kept blaming the West for every world injustice and did not show sincere intentions to negotiate with it.

The study focuses on UN speeches because they provide an excellent empirical array for revealing their purposes, since world leaders exploit them to convey their ideas, opinions, policies, and ideology to the entire international community. For that reason, examining speeches given by two different Iranian leaders on the same stage and presumably to the same audience enables witnessing rhetorical differences that reflect a strategic change in the way each of them presents himself and his nation to the world.

One such analysis was conducted by Sardabi, Biria, and Nooshin (2014). They analyzed the first speech Rouhani gave to the General Assembly of the UN in 2013, and concluded that he chose to adopt a moderate discourse reflecting a moderate ideology by using a range of different discursive strategies and rhetorical devices. The current study offers a comprehensive study that examines two speeches
Rouhani gave to the UN before the signing of the nuclear agreement in 2015, and compares them to all eight of the speeches given by Ahmadinejad during the time he served as Iran's president (2005–2012). The purpose of this study is to show that there was a clear change in the Iranian rhetoric.

2. Research method

Annually, heads of states or governments speak at the opening session of the General Assembly of the UN at its headquarters in New York. The current study explores the Iranian speeches given by Ahmadinejad and Rouhani on this occasion. It explores the formal written transcripts downloaded from the UN official web site, and focuses only on linguistic features and not extra-linguistic factors such as body language, pauses, intonation, etc. All of the speeches were given in Persian, and I used the English translations.

Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted. The quantitative research draws conclusions from the frequently used words in each leader’s speeches and provides additional support to the conclusions drawn from the qualitative research. Details of the qualitative research, including the method, are given in Section 5.

The qualitative research uncovers the ideology underlying each president’s speeches by examining different rhetorical strategies and the ways in which each president attempts to convince his audience of his political views. Numerous rhetorical devices and strategies were found in each speech. The most prominent ones are presented, along with examples for each.

The outline of both leaders’ speeches is quite similar. They begin their speeches with greetings or praises to God or to the UN, they continue with an overview of the world’s current problems or urgent matters, including references to Iran’s nuclear program, and they end their speeches by suggesting ways to solve what they view as the current problems the world is facing, including the Iranian nuclear crisis.

The analysis of the speeches was conducted in light of the following six aspects which I argue to be relevant for the possibility of starting serious negotiations with the West over the nuclear crisis.

First, the study focuses on the way each of the leaders represents himself; How does he view himself and can he be considered a potential partner? Second,

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1. At the time the study was conducted there was one more speech given by Rouhani (in September 2015). However, since this speech was delivered after the agreement was already signed, it was excluded from the current research.
it deals with the question of who the speakers are addressing their speeches to. Third, since the negotiations are to include Iran, the UN and the West, it examines how these bodies were referred to in the speeches and what each of these leaders had to say about them. Fourth, it is important to examine how they present Iran’s nuclear program and the sanctions against their country, because these are the main issues the nuclear deal is supposed to resolve. Finally, the study explores the solutions they suggest for solving the world problems and the crisis over Iran’s nuclear program.

More specifically, the analysis of the speeches was conducted in light of the following six aspects:

a. Who is the speaker? What roles is he playing when giving his speech and how does he choose to present himself?

b. Who is the addressee of the speech? Is it the one that the speaker directly refers to or are there reasons to assume that the ‘real’ addressee is someone else?

c. How does the speaker refer to the West and how does he present Iran?

d. What is the speaker’s attitude towards the UN and the Security Council of the UN?

e. How does the speaker refer to Iran’s nuclear program and to the sanctions against Iran?

f. How does the speaker suggest solving the nuclear crisis?

Section 4 presents the analysis of the speeches divided by the six aspects mentioned above. The following section presents the theoretical background of the analysis.

### 3. Theoretical background

Political speeches are, by their nature, both ideological and persuasive. They are means of linguistic actions in which (political) speakers formulate their ideologies (the systems of ideas, beliefs, values, etc.) and try to persuade others to adopt them. “The crucial aims of political actors doing politics are to assert themselves against opponents, to gain followers and to persuade addressees to adopt a promoted political opinion” (Reisigl 2008, 98).

The current study explores ten speeches that should be considered ‘political speeches’, since they are all given by political figures and in a political setting – the opening session of the General Assembly of the UN (Van Dijk 2001). The aim of the current study is twofold: (a) to uncover the ideology or political views
underlying the speeches, and (b) to reveal the rhetorical devices and strategies each president uses in order to persuade\textsuperscript{2} his audience to adopt his views.

Persuasion has been a main feature in rhetoric since the classic theory was put forth. Aristotle defines rhetoric as the means of persuasion that are used in various circumstances (Aristotle 1982). Regarding modern rhetoric, Perelman (1984) states that rhetoric is “the art of soliciting and persuading people” (Perelman 1984, 6). The study of rhetoric examines the techniques used to bring about the agreement or deepen the agreement of the audience with the positions or arguments presented. Aristotle mentions three different kinds of arguments that are used to influence the audience: arguments which stem from the personality of the speaker (Ethos) and are based on his or her credibility; Logical arguments (Logos), which are meant to prove the speaker’s point or to give the impression that the point has been proven; and Emotive arguments (Pathos), which aim to create a particular mood in the listener.

The current study uncovers the prominent rhetorical devices used by each speaker to persuade the audience of his views. Furthermore, it aims at uncovering the political views expressed by each speaker. “When a politician, a party leader an institutional actor ‘speak’, or make a ‘declaration’ they do not make a linguistic action only – \textit{illocutionary act} – (that is persuasive action), and/or \textit{performativ} action… but they specifically make a ‘political’ action” (Cedroni 2013, 221).

To accomplish this I adopt a critical discourse analysis approach, and use Van Dijk’s framework of “positive self-representation” and “negative other-representation”. Van Dijk (2001) argues that “probably more than any kind of discourse, political discourse is eminently ideological” (Van Dijk 2001, 1). Oktar (2001) adds that when focusing on the relations between discourse and ideology, the concept of ideology can be associated with language use. Ideologies are typically expressed through language and can be defined as “the basis of social representations shared by members of a social group” (Van Dijk 1998, 8).

Ideologies often have a polarized structure reflecting conflicting or competing ideologies (Van Dijk 2004). In other words, political discourse often focuses on the positive things \textit{we} have accomplished and associate negative actions to the opponents. Van Dijk (2004) shows that ideological discourse often features the following strategies, called the “ideological square”:

- Emphasize \textit{Our} good things
- Emphasize \textit{Their} bad things

\textsuperscript{2} I deliberately use the term ‘persuade’ and not ‘convince’ since I adopt Landau’s (1988) distinction between ‘convincing’ and ‘persuading’. The first is used when the speaker is interested in convincing the listener of the truth of his or her arguments as they are determined by the intellect, while the latter is used when the speaker is interested in getting his or her audience to agree with his or her position.
De-emphasize Our bad things
De-emphasize Their good things

In this sense we expect this ideology to also appear in the discourse itself, or in this case – the speeches. Using Van Dijk’s framework enables us to examine ways in which the ideology is expressed in the speeches and infer if there is an underlying different ideology expressed in the leaders’ speeches.

Basically, both Ahmadinejad and Rouhani have similar goals: (a) to persuade the international community that Iran is not seeking to produce nuclear weapons and has the right to develop its nuclear program for peaceful aims, and (b) to persuade the world to remove the sanctions against them. But while their goals maybe similar, the ways in which they try to achieve them are different.

As discussed in detail in the next section, Ahmadinejad presents the Others (referring to Western countries and their leaders) as a threat to the world, as a cause of the world’s major problems, and more radically, as following the path of Satan, therefore requiring them to reform themselves. Rouhani, on the other hand, uses the same ideology to emphasize how Iran has changed and turned into a moderate, modern, rational, and pragmatic state. As opposed to Ahmadinejad, Rouhani reaches out his hand to the West, and when he speaks of the Others he usually means the extremists such as ISIS. In this way he puts himself and Iran in the same category as other responsible world leaders and in opposition to extremists Islamic terrorist groups. This strategy is also classified in the literature as a means to requite the audience by evoking consensus through creating common ground for action and warning of consequences to the speaker and the addressee of ignoring recommendations (Lewin and Livnat 2016; Livnat and Lewin 2016). The quantitative research (Section 5) also shows the contributions of positive words such as hope and moderation in Rouhani’s speeches.

4. Analysis and discussion

The analysis and discussion of the speeches are divided by the six aspects mentioned in Section 2.

4.1 The speaker

Ahmadinejad and Rouhani both gave their speeches to the General Assembly of the UN while serving as the Iranian president. As such, they both represent their people, their government, and, in this particular case, also the Ayatollahs – the supreme Islamic leaders of Iran – and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards that are
in charge of protecting the country’s Islamic system. In this sense, and as Ensink (1996) argues, the fact that they speak as representatives of a state and not as individuals enables them to fulfill more than one role. For example, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can move within one speech between different identities and roles: the Israeli Prime Minister, a Jew, a world leader, a bereaved brother, etc. (Livnat, 2014).

Therefore, before addressing the content of the speeches, it is important to examine how the speakers represent themselves and which role(s) they play while giving their speeches. For this purpose, and following Ensink (1996), the study focuses on their use of personal pronouns and other deictic nouns and examines what can be inferred from this.

The choice of pronoun indicates the degree of the speaker’s personal involvement in the matter he or she is talking about, meaning how close or distant the speaker chooses to represents him/herself with respect to the topic he or she is discussing (Wilson 1990). Exploring Ahmadinejad’s use of pronouns in his speeches reveals three main roles in which he chooses to express his statements:

a. The Iranian president, who represents the Iranian supreme leaders (including its spiritual leaders), the Iranian government, and the Iranian people;
b. A world leader;
c. A Muslim, a prophet, or a preacher.

**Ahmadinejad speaking as the Iranian president**

When Ahmadinejad speaks in the role of the Iranian president, he uses the first person singular or plural (I, me, my, we, our).

1. “Allow me, as the elected president of the Iranian people, to outline the other main elements of my country’s initiative regarding the nuclear issue…” (2005)

2. “As the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I assure you that my country will use everything in its power to contribute to global tranquility and peace… My country will interact and cooperate constructively with the international community.” (2005)

3. “Our nation has successfully gone through a glorious and fully-democratic election, opening a new chapter for our country… They entrusted me once more with a large majority this heavy responsibility”. (2009)

4. “Our country has been a main victim of terrorism and the target of an all-out military aggression during the first decade of the revolution”. (2009)
In Examples (1) and (2) we can see that Ahmadinejad chooses to use the first person singular pronoun. In this way he emphasizes that he is the legitimate chosen representative of the Iranian people. Further, the use of the first person singular pronoun expresses his commitment to the role he is playing as the Iranian president and the heavy responsibility he is carrying. In Examples (3) and (4) he uses the first person plural pronoun (our nation or our country) in both its exclusive and inclusive interpretations. In Example (3) he uses it in its exclusive interpretation in order to emphasize that his people elected him to lead them. In Example (4) he uses our in its inclusive interpretation in order to put himself with his people, express solidarity and emphasize the suffering of all Iranian people.

Sometimes Ahmadinejad also chooses to use other deictic nouns, such as Iran, the Iranian government or the Iranian people.

(5) “You are all aware that Iran is a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency and has always observed its rules and regulations and has had the most extensive cooperation with this Agency in all areas…” (2007)

(6) “The government of Iran spared no effort to build confidence, but they were not satisfied… They were only after depriving the Iranian people of all their inalienable rights…” (2007)

In Examples (5) and (6) Ahmadinejad uses other deictic nouns in order to distance himself from the Iranian nuclear program. Firstly, he emphasizes the legitimacy of the Iranian nuclear program, which belongs to the nation, to the people, and to their government. In other words, it is not to be considered a ‘crazy’ idea of one man, but rather a legitimate right Iran should have, as any other country. Secondly, when he is talking about the sanctions, as in Example (6), he emphasizes that as opposed to the purposes of the West and to the Western leaders’ statements, the sanctions in fact hurt the people and not him as the president or the other Iranian leaders. This is a very powerful rhetorical device that appeals to the audience’s feelings, in order to persuade them that the sanctions are unjust and inhuman.

Ahmadinejad speaking as a world leader
The use of the first person plural pronoun in its inclusive interpretation emphasizes that Iran and its leader are part of the world, are members of the UN, and just like any other country (including Western countries) are committed to peace and justice.

(7) “We are all members of the international community and we are all entitled to insist on the creation of a climate of compassion, love and justice”. (2007)
“Today we must rise together in a collective commitment against the present challenges; we must take change seriously and help others through collective work to return to the basic moral and human values.”

Ahmadinejad speaking in the name of God
Ahmadinejad often mentions God in his speeches (see Section 5 for specific frequency) and speaks a great deal about religion. The following examples show that Ahmadinejad considers himself as God’s messenger, a prophet, or a preacher.

“I invite you to return to the path of God, the Prophets and to the path of the people of the world and to return to the truth and justice.”

“I am here to voice the divine and humanitarian message of learned men and women of my country to you and the whole world…”

In the examples above he uses the first person singular pronoun to emphasize his personal closeness to God, to the Islam, to the Qura’an. He emphasizes that he represents God and speaks on His behalf and calls upon everyone else to follow Him. The use of the first person singular pronoun also expresses his personal commitment to justice, human rights, and peace.

Let us now turn to Rouhani. In his speeches we witness a clear change in the choice of pronouns. I identified three main roles he plays while giving his speeches:

a. The newly elected Iranian president/representative of Iran;
b. A representative of the region he is coming from – the Middle East;
c. A world leader.

Rouhani speaking as the newly elected president
In his first speech to the General Assembly of the UN, shortly after he was elected, Rouhani places great emphasis on the fact that he is representing a ‘new’ Iran, and that he has chosen to follow the path of rationality and moderation and tries to distance himself from his processor Ahmadinejad. To do this he uses the nouns Iran, the great people of Iran, and the first person plural pronoun we (or our). Unlike Ahmadinejad, he rarely uses the first person singular pronoun. This is to emphasize the change that Iran has undergone by giving the power to the people to decide who represents them.

“The recent elections in Iran represent a clear, living example of the wise choice of hope, rationality and moderation by the great people of Iran … The firm belief of our people and government in enduring peace, stability, tranquility…”

“Iran poses absolutely no threat to the world or the region”.

In the following example from his second speech, he uses the first person singular pronoun to emphasize his personal dedication, sincerity, and commitment to peace and to the war against world terror and extremism.

(13) “Last year I tried to fulfill the role of my country in the realization of peace at both the regional and international levels by putting forward a proposal about ‘a world against Violence and Extremism’…” (2014)

When Rouhani turns to talking about the sanctions against Iran, he chooses to use the noun Iran just like Ahmadinejad did and for the same purpose: to emphasize that the sanctions do not hurt him or other leading figures in Iran, but rather the people themselves. He further uses the exclusive first person plural pronoun in order to emphasize that he is talking as a representative of his people, who are united in their will to negotiate with the West concerning their nuclear program. In this way the program does not seem to be his or other Iranian leaders’ nuclear program, but rather the program of the entire Iranian nation and its people. In other words, the choice of pronoun in this case is meant to emphasize the legitimate right of the Iranian people to have a nuclear program just like any other nation. In addition, Rouhani emphasizes that the people themselves chose to change Iran’s policy and to negotiate with the West.

(14) “During the last year we have engaged in the most transparent dialogue to build confidence regarding Iran’s peaceful nuclear program. We placed serious and honest negotiations on the agenda, not as a result of sanctions or threat but rather because of the will of our people”.

Rouhani speaking as a world leader

In 2013 Rouhani puts himself in line with other world leaders who want to solve the world’s problems and aspire for peace and security. To do this he uses the inclusive first person plural pronoun we or our.

(15) “Our world today is replete with fear and hope” (2013)

(16) “I warn that if we do not muster all our strengths against extremism and violence today… tomorrow the world will be safe for no one” (2014)

This is the way to include Iran – and himself as its leader – in line with all other nations, including Western ones, as part of the world and not against it.

Rouhani speaking as a representative of the Middle East

Not only does Rouhani emphasizes that he is a world leader, but it is also important for him to emphasize that he is a Middle Eastern leader, a representative of a region of the world which, in his words, suffers from extremism and radicalism.
Rouhani presents himself here as a responsible Middle Eastern leader who has to face radicalism and extremism just like any other leader of the region and the world. The use of the first person singular at the end of the quote in (17), in opposition to the third person plural pronoun they which refers to the extremists, also puts himself on the opposite side of radical and extremists groups and in the same group that includes Middle Eastern countries as well as Western countries.

In Example (18) below, Rouhani also speaks of himself as a representative of the Middle East. However, this time he posits himself against Western countries that try to impose their beliefs and ideologies on others. In other words, he emphasizes once more his responsible leadership, which is in no need of help from the West.

(18) “Our region expects that the Western world would once and for all place itself in the company of those true seekers of democracy, and, hence, soften the bitter memories of its support for dictators”. (2014)

To conclude this subsection, we have seen that Ahmadinejad mainly chooses to represent himself as a leader of a religious Islamic country, and considers himself as carrying a message from God or as a superior leader who calls for other leaders to reform themselves. In this sense he puts himself and Iran in contrast with the West. Rouhani, on the other hand, represents himself as a moderate, responsible, pragmatic, and reasonable leader. He does not talk of himself as a superior leader but rather puts himself in the same category as other world leaders. In addition, he represents himself as carrying the voice of his people, as representing a world nation that is entitled to all the same rights as other nations, and as a responsible leader in a chaotic region.

4.2 The addressee

After exploring the different roles both speakers fulfill, let us now deal with the question of whom exactly are both speakers directing their message to – the various nations’ representatives who are physically sitting in the UN General Assembly listening to the speeches? The Western leaders? The Iranian people? The supreme Iranian leaders?

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), a speech can exert influence only if it is customized to the audience that is supposed to be convinced by
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it. So whom exactly are Ahmadinejad and Rouhani trying to convince? Are they directing their message to the same audience?

According to Reisigl (2010, 257), there are three circles of addressees:

a. Primary audience – face to face;
b. Secondary audience – audience listening to a live transmission via the mass media;
c. Tertiary audience – audience listening to a later transmission via mass media, or recipients reading the press.

In our case the primary audience is the audience sitting in the General Assembly hall, i.e., the states’ representatives. The secondary audience is the ones listening to the speeches live via mass media. This can be world leaders, politicians, and the people of Iran and other nations. The tertiary audience is the same audience as the secondary one – only they listen to the speeches after they were already given. In this case they usually hear or read edited versions of the speeches or even just commentary, quotes, or comments. In this sense the speeches are not heard directly, but are mediated by others’ commentaries, perceptions etc.

I claim that in the case of Ahmadinejad’s speeches, part of the reason he didn’t succeed in convincing the West of Iran’s peaceful intentions is the fact that he didn’t really try to convince them because he didn’t address his speeches to them. Firstly, he didn’t refer to the West or to Western leaders directly, but used deictic nouns such as some or some powers to refer to them (see also the discussion in subsection 4.5). This means that he didn’t direct his speeches to them, but rather spoke of them. Further, not only did he speak of them, rather than to them, but all of his references to them had negative connotations and were in a blaming context, as the following examples demonstrate:

(19) “By causing war and conflict, some are fast expanding their domination, accumulating greater wealth and usurping all the resources…” (2006)

(20) “Some seek to rule the world relying on weapons and threats…” (2006)

(21) “Some occupy the homeland of others…” (2006)

Moreover, large parts of his speeches are filled with religious terms and contexts, as the example in (22) demonstrates. This context does not really ‘speak’ to Western leaders, but rather to religious ones.

(22) “God Almighty purposefully created the world… God created the world for humans and humans for Himself…” (2008)

Rouhani, on the other hand, speaks in modern and moderate terms and expresses explicit willingness to cooperate with the West.
(23) “… The Islamic Republic of Iran… is prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and result-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency” (2013)

(24) I listened carefully to the statement made by President Obama today at the General Assembly. Commensurate with the political will of the leadership in the United States and hoping that they will refrain from following the short-sighted interest of warmongering pressure groups, we can arrive at a framework to manage differences…” (2013)

He specifically mentions US President Barak Obama, thus showing respect and emphasizing that he listened carefully to what Obama had to say and expressing an explicit offer to negotiate with the West.

(25) We are determined to continue negotiations with our interlocutors in earnest and good faith…” (2014)

4.3 The UN

The UN and the Security Council in particular are the targets of repeated accusations in Ahmadinejad’s speeches. He accuses them of being inefficient, unfair, and not committed to the tasks they are supposed to fulfill. By using different rhetorical devices, Ahmadinejad escalated his tone against the UN over the years. This might also be related to the fact that in those years the sanctions against Iran were hardened. Rouhani, on the other hand, rarely mentions the UN in his speeches, and when he does it is mainly to thank them for their efforts to solve the nuclear confrontation. Let us first focus on Ahmadinejad’s speeches. In his first speech to the General Assembly in 2005 he mentions the UN only once:

(26) “The UN must be the symbol of democracy and the equal rights of nations… the UN can be the standard bearer of democracy in the world, when it itself, is a manifestation of democratic process”. (2005)

In 2006 his tone against the UN and the Security Council is much more aggressive. Speaking of the situation in Lebanon he says:

(27) “We witnessed that the Security Council of the United Nations was practically incapacitated by certain powers to even call for a ceasefire. The Security Council sat idly by for so many days, witnessing the cruel scenes of atrocities against Lebanese while tragedies such as Qana were persistently repeated. Why?” (2006)

By choosing ‘lexical items’ such as incapacitated, and sat idly by to describe the UN, and words that carry strong negative connotations such as atrocities and tragedies
to describe actions against Lebanese, Ahmadinejad emphasizes the inefficiency of the UN and its incapacity to do what it is supposed to – keep the world safe and protect innocent civilians. These accusations appear in each one of his speeches.

(28) “Among all ineffective bodies, unfortunately the UN Security Council ranks first…” (2007)

(29) “It is not acceptable that the United Nations and the Security Council, whose decisions must represent all nations and governments by the application of the most democratic methods in their decision making processes, be dominated by a few governments and serve their interests”. (2009)

An additional rhetorical device Ahmadinejad employs is ‘rhetorical questions’. This is another rhetorical device that is classified by Livnat and Lewin (2016) among the strategies used to requite the audience by evoking consensus through shared information. A rhetorical question supplies information and generally does not request it. In fact, it has the significance of a statement. Quirk et al. (1976) argue that the rhetorical question has the meaning of an inverse statement: a positive rhetorical question makes a negative assertion and a negative rhetorical question makes a positive assertion. Hunston and Francis (2000) adds that rhetorical questions appeal to shared judgments regarding a certain matter.

Ahmadinejad uses many rhetorical questions in his speeches, most often when he emphasizes the world’s injustices, the incapacity of the UN, or the “atrocities” carried out by the West. Many times he uses serial rhetorical questions – several questions that appear one after the other to create a rhetorical rhythm and focus the subject, and strengthen the argument and emphasize it (Landau 1988).

(30) “Which organization or Council should address these injustices? Is the Security Council in a position to address them? Can it stop violations of the inalienable rights of countries? Can it prevent certain powers from impeding scientific progress of other countries?” (2006)

In his suggestions as to what should be done in order to solve the world problems, he states:


(32) “…It is necessary to note that the UN belongs to nations. Thus, the existence of discrimination amongst the members is a great insult to all. The existence of discrimination and monopoly in the UN is in no way acceptable”. (2012)

There is a dramatic difference between Ahmadinejad’s and Rouhani’s attitude towards the UN and the Security Council, which is reflected in their speeches.
In Rouhani’s speech from 2013 he mentions the UN when he talks about the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists:

(33) “Here, I should say a word about the criminal assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists. For what crimes have they been assassinated? The United Nations and the Security Council should answer the question: Have the perpetrators been condemned?”

(2013)

As opposed to Ahmadinejad, who constantly accused the UN for being unjust, unfair, and ineffective, in Rouhani’s speeches there is only one accusation (mentioned above) against the UN, and even this accusation is not against their actions but against the fact that those responsible for these assassinations were not condemned. The rest of his references to the UN are when he expresses his gratitude to the UN’s efforts.

(34) “At the outset I would like to offer my most sincere felicitations on your deserved election to the presidency of the General Assembly and seize the moment to express appreciation for the valuable efforts of our distinguished Secretary-General”

(2013)

(35) “At the outset, I would like to extend my sincere congratulations on your well-deserved election as the president of the 69th Session of the General Assembly. I also express my appreciation to H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for all his efforts”

(2014)

To conclude this subsection, we have seen the significantly different tone towards the UN and the Security Council in the two leaders’ speeches. While Ahmadinejad’s speeches were full of accusations and suggestions on how to improve the function of the UN, Rouhani was delicate in his attitude towards these parties. Not only does he make no accusations against the UN in his speeches, but he insists on thanking the UN.

4.4 The West

Ahmadinejad tends to blame the West for all the problems and injustices of the world. To emphasize this he uses a very prominent rhetorical device. As already mentioned in subsection 4.2, he constantly refers to Western countries by different deictic nouns such as those, some powers, big powers, the occupiers, and a bullying power, and rarely mentions them by name. This is a prototype of the ideological strategy Van Dijk (2006) describes as the expression of a “polarized relationship between (opposed) ideological groups”: positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. “Political speeches… typically focus on the preferred topics of ‘our’ group or party, on what we have done well, and associate political opponents
with negative topics, such as war, violence, drugs, lack of freedom, and so on …” (Van Dijk 2006, 734). In addition, Van Dijk (2006) argues that “whenever a meaning is associated with good things, it will tend to be associated with the in-group of the speaker … And the opposite will be the case for Others, Opponents, or Enemies” (Van Dijk 2006, 734).

In his speech from 2006, Ahmadinejad chooses to construct three sequential paragraphs in the same way:

(36) “By causing war and conflict, some are fast expanding their domination, accumulating greater wealth and usurping all the resources, while others endure the resulting poverty, suffering and misery”. (2006)

(37) “Some occupy the homeland of others thousands of kilometers away from their borders, interfere in their affairs and control their oil and other resources … while others are bombarded daily in their own homes; their children murdered in the streets and alleys of their own country and their homes reduced to rubble.” (2006)

By using the deictic noun some versus others and by using ‘syntactic parallelism’ (some… while others…) he emphasizes Their (the West’s) bad acts. He accuses the West of seeking power, domination, wealth, land, and weapons at the expense of the Others – the people who live in poverty, insecurity, and danger. The syntactic parallel structure and the ‘lexical choices’ of negative words to describe the West’s actions versus the ‘victimization’ of the Others who suffer the consequences of the Western action, intensify the cruelty of the West and their inhumanity towards innocent people.

The following examples demonstrate Ahmadinejad’s other uses of reference to the West:

(38) “A bullying power allows itself the right to set up a missile system, makes the life of the peoples of a continent bitter, and lays the ground for arms race”. (2007)

(39) “Some rulers who superficially appear to be powerful, believe the tools they have at hand can be used at any time and for any purpose and consequently threaten others…” (2007)

(40) “Iraq was attacked under the false pretext of uncovering weapons of mass destruction and overthrowing a dictator. The dictator is toppled and WMDs are not uncovered… but, after six years, the occupiers are still there”. (2008)

In his speech to the UN from 2011, Ahmadinejad presents a series of eleven rhetorical questions, in which he blames the West for the current problems in the world. Example (51) presents three of them:
(41) “Who abducted forcefully tens of millions of people from their homes in Africa and other regions of the world during the dark period of slavery…? Who imposed colonialism for over four centuries upon this world…? Who triggered the first and second world wars…”

Iran, on the other hand, is represented by means of ‘national self-glorification’: positive references to the nation’s principles, ideology, policy, history, traditions (Van Dijk 2006).

(42) “Coming from Iran, the land of glory and beauty, the land of knowledge, culture, wisdom and morality, the cradle of philosophy and mysticism, the land of compassion and light, the land of scientists, scholars, philosophers…” (2012)

The change in ideology is reflected in the leaders’ attitudes towards the West. As opposed to Ahmadinejad, Rouhani is extending his hand to the West and offers cooperation. This doesn’t mean he is sparing the West from his criticism. He does make some similar critical comments against the Western nations, using deictic nouns of the kind Ahmadinejad uses, and blaming them for similar things (see Example (43) below). However, his tone is much softer. He expresses his willingness to cooperate with the West and even expresses his belief that they can arrive at a compromise that will be acceptable to all the parties.

(43) “The strategic blunders of the West in the Middle-East, Central Asia, and the Caucuses have turned these parts of the world into a heaven for terrorism and extremism. Military aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq and improper interference in the developments in Syria are clear examples of this erroneous strategic approach in the Middle East… Democracy is not an export product that can be commercially imported from the West to the East…” (2014)

(44) “Iran seeks constructive engagement with other countries based on mutual respect and common interests, and within the same framework does not seek to increase tensions with the United States.” (2013)

4.5 Iran’s nuclear program and the sanctions

Iran’s nuclear program is the most important issue in both leaders’ speeches. Their main rhetorical goals are similar – to persuade the world that Iran has the right to pursue a peaceful nuclear program and to lead the removal of the sanctions. However, the ways in which they deal with these matters are quite different. Let us first examine the following examples from Ahmadinejad’s speeches:
(45) “Ironically, those who actually used nuclear weapons, continue to produce, stockpile and extensively test such weapons…are trying to prevent other countries from acquiring the technology to produce peaceful nuclear energy”.

(46) “Some powerful states practice a discriminatory approach against access of NPT members to material, equipment and peaceful nuclear technology, and by doing so, intend to impose a nuclear apartheid”.

In the examples above, Ahmadinejad mainly accuses the West of being hypocritical and unfair in preventing some states from having nuclear rights but not others. He uses strong negative words to emphasize these unjust actions, including discriminatory approach and nuclear apartheid.

Further, Ahmadinejad emphasizes Iran’s pure intentions on the one hand, and even stresses that the pursuit of nuclear weapons is against Islam, but on the other hand he continues blaming the states that possess nuclear weapons and have even used them in the past (mentioning Hiroshima and Nagasaki) for being hypocritical.

(47) “All our nuclear activities are transparent, peaceful and under the watchful eyes of IAEA inspectors”.

(48) “A few bullying powers have sought to put hurdles in the way of the peaceful nuclear activities of the Iranian nation … These are the powers that produce new generations of lethal nuclear arms and possess stockpiles of nuclear weapons that no international organization is monitoring; and, the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were perpetrated by one of them”.

Regarding the sanctions, Ahmadinejad stresses that they are inhuman and hurt the people of his country. This is a very powerful rhetorical device which appeals to the addressees’ emotions in order to make them sympathetic to the in-group and criticize the out-group (Van Dijk 2006) by emphasizing how cruel the sanctions are, hurting the people and not the government or the elite.

Rouhani does the same. He also stresses that Iran has no intention of developing nuclear weapons. In addition, he also emphasizes Iran’s sincerity in the negotiations with the West.

(49) “Iran’s nuclear program – and for that matter, that of all other countries – must pursue exclusively peaceful purposes. I declare here, openly and unambiguously, that, notwithstanding the positions of others, this has been, and will always be, the objective of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nuclear weapon and other weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran’s security and defense doctrine, and contradict our fundamental religious and ethical convictions”.

“The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the 5+1 have continued during the past year with seriousness and optimism on both sides... We are committed to continue our peaceful nuclear program, including enrichment, and to enjoy our full nuclear rights on Iranian soil within the framework of international law.” (2014)

Most of his references to the topic, however, are dedicated to the sanctions, emphasizing how inhumane and unjust they are, as can be seen by the following examples:

(51) “Unjust sanctions, as manifestation of structural violence, are intrinsically inhumane and against peace. And contrary to the claims of those who pursue and imposed them, it is not the states and political elite that are target, but rather, it is the common people who are victimized by these sanctions...” (2013)

(52) “The oppressive sanctions against Iran go on in continuation of a strategic mistake against a moderate and independent nation under the current sensitive condition in our region.” (2014)

To sum up, both Rouhani and Ahmadinejad argue for Iran’s right to have a peaceful nuclear program and enjoy technological progress, just like other countries. They both insist that this is the sole purpose of Iran’s nuclear program and that nuclear weapons are against their religion and values. However, while Ahmadinejad mainly accuses the West of being hypocritical by disallowing only Iran from having this right, Rouhani mainly speaks of the peaceful intentions of Iran and its willingness to cooperate with the West in order to solve the crisis over their program.

4.6 Solutions

A significant difference between the two leaders is reflected in the ways they suggest solving the world problems. While Rouhani speaks of solutions that are in accordance with other world leaders’ suggestions, Ahmadinejad mainly speaks in religious terms, making himself sound extreme, and isolated, as well as leaning on archaic religious principles.

(53) “Faith will prove to be the solution to many of today’s problems. The truth will shine the light of faith and ethics on the life of human beings and prevent aggression, coercion and injustice...” (2005)

(54) “It is essential that spirituality and ethics find their rightful place in international relations. Without ethics and spirituality, attained in light of the teachings of Divine prophets, justice, freedom and human rights cannot be guaranteed”. (2006)
Rouhani, on the other hand, sounds totally different when suggesting how to solve the world problems; he uses more rational, practical, and cooperative terms, which do not contradict the Islam’s principles at the same time.

By repeatedly using positive words that express moderate principles such as hope, moderation, peace, and democracy, Rouhani emphasizes the change Iran has undergone. The West maybe still doing ‘bad’ things, but Rouhani, unlike Ahmadinejad is expressing Iran’s will to move forward, to cooperate with the West, to make compromises, and to join the rest of the world. Rouhani is offering realistic solutions that the Western world can identify with.

To sum up this final subsection, I have shown that the solutions Ahmadinejad offers are neither practical nor applicable. He does not turn to logic, but instead to faith in God and the Qura’an. He speaks of a utopian reality, something that we can perhaps dream of but is not realistic. Rouhani, on the other hand, presents himself as a pragmatic leader who offers solutions that are based on reason and moderation. These are practical solutions that the West can ‘work’ with. Rouhani offers himself as a responsible, rational partner for negotiating with and arriving at actual achievements, while Ahamadinejad stays distant and cannot be considered a ‘true’ partner for negotiations.
5. Quantitative analysis

In order to provide additional support for the conclusions of this study and to complete the picture that this comparative research suggests, a quantitative analysis of the twenty most frequently used words in both leaders’ speeches in the UN was conducted.

Because the corpus of this study includes eight speeches of Ahmadinejad and only two of Rouhani, the study focuses on the relative frequency of each common word by checking the frequency in percentages. For this purpose each leader’s speeches were gathered into two separate files which were checked online with the Word Counter Tool. The results of Ahmadinejad’s and Rouhani’s speeches are given in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Ahmadinejad’s frequently used words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>6.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nations</td>
<td>5.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>justice</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>4.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>security</td>
<td>3.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peace</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>powers</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rights</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuclear</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>council</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>countries</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against</td>
<td>1.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>1.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divine</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>order</td>
<td>1.60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The total number of words is 27,783.

A rhetorical change that changed reality

Table 2. Rouhani’s frequently used words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>5.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violence</td>
<td>5.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>region</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extremism</td>
<td>4.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>3.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international</td>
<td>3.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peace</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuclear</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hope</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>security</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanctions</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>war</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>president</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>countries</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The total number of words is 5,118.

The most frequently used word in Rouhani’s speeches is Iran (7%). This fact is not surprising. As we have seen in subsection 4.1 Rouhani mostly speaks in the name of his country and much less on behalf of himself. Secondly, the overuse of the nation’s name is a result of his ideology. He aims at changing the world’s views of Iran, and convincing the international community that Iran has changed; it is now modern and moderate, seeking peace and willing to reach a compromise. There is also an extensive use of the words violence (5.8%) and extremism (4.6%), referring to extremist groups (such as ISIS), to extremist Islam. This as opposed to Iran, which he puts in line with the rest of the rational world in the need to fight these groups.

Further, the frequency of the following 12 words in both leaders’ speeches was compared: justice, God, powers, Divine, nuclear, peace, Iran, violence, extremism, sanctions, hope, and moderation. The results are given in Figure 1.
As can be seen, the frequently used words in Ahmadinejad’s speeches are *justice*, *God*, and *Divine*. These are words he uses in the context of the ways he thinks that the world’s problems can be managed – by returning to religion. Rouhani, on the other hand, speaks in terms of *moderation* and *hope*. The usage of these words in contrast with *violence* and *extremism* reflects his ideology of emphasizing how Iran has changed.

The words *peace* and *nuclear* appear in both leaders speeches’ at relatively the same frequency. This fact is also consistent with the study’s conclusions. They both try to persuade the international community that Iran’s nuclear program is meant for peaceful means, which should lead to the removal of the sanctions. This is why they both speak of their nuclear program as well as of peace.

Figure 1 also shows two distinct poles, each of them representing the frequently used words in each leader’s speeches: The one on the left represents Ahmadinejad’s frequently used words, and the one on the right represents Rouhani’s frequently used words. These two poles represent two distinct semantic fields. Ahmadinejad mainly speaks in religious terms and of the West’s (he refers to Western countries as *powers*) faults and 'misdeeds', while Rouhani hardly speaks in these terms. Rouhani speaks of the violence and extremism that the world should deal with, but also talks about the “new” Iran and of hope, peace, and moderation.

6. Conclusion

The paper reports a comparative study of Ahmadinejad’s eight speeches in the UN versus Rouhani’s two speeches, from both a qualitative perspective and a quantitative one. The qualitative research explores the speeches through six aspects that are argued to be critical for enabling negotiations between Iran and the West, and for reaching a compromise regarding the nuclear crisis: the speaker, the addressee, the attitude towards the West, the attitude towards the UN, the attitude towards the
Iranian nuclear program and the sanctions, and finally, the ways each president suggests solving the nuclear crisis.

The findings reveal that while Ahmadinejad presented himself as God’s messenger and as a superior leader, Rouhani emphasized his status as a legitimate world leader who was democratically chosen by his own people and who speaks in new, moderate, modern, rational, and pragmatic terms. Further, the study demonstrates that as compared to Ahmadinejad, Rouhani spoke less of the West’s faults. He approached the Western leaders directly and showed his willingness to negotiate with them. Finally, the study shows that Rouhani suggested solving the nuclear crisis in terms such as moderation, democracy, and peace – concepts that the West could identify with.

This made the newly elected president Rouhani and the ‘new’ Iran possible partners for negotiating with the West and reaching a compromise in the form of the historic nuclear deal that was signed in July 2015. An opinion article in the New York Times on January 12, 2016 by the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif reinforces this conclusion: “The world will soon celebrate the implementation of the landmark agreement that resolves the unnecessary, albeit dangerous, crisis over Iran’s nuclear program… President Hassan Rouhani has repeatedly declared that Iran’s top foreign policy priority is friendship with our neighbors, peace and stability in the region and global cooperation, especially in the fight against extremism…”

References


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