

The Greatest Speech of the Greatest Bangali

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The speech that our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered 38 years ago was an amazing event in the context of theoretical application of communication science. An incredible manifestation of modern communication concepts could be observed in this historic speech by the greatest Bangali of all times – Bangabandhu.

Bangabandhu completed this timeless speech in 19 minutes by uttering between 58 and 60 words per minute. In broadcasting theory, 60 words per minute is considered to be an ideal. There were no annoying repetitions in the speech of 1,107 words. There were no unnecessary articulations – only the gist or core points. However, repetition at one or two places had reinforced the inner meaning of the speech.

The opening lines of a speech are considered to be very important. It is therefore said: ‘There is nothing like a good beginning for a speech’. The communication theorists say, the audience orientation and recent happenings should be highlighted in the opening words. This reference to the audience found marvellous expression in this epoch-making speech by Bangabandhu.

Bangabandhu had started his address like this: “My dear brothers, I have come before you today with a heavy heart. All of you know and understand how hard we have tried. But it is a matter of sorrow that the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rangpur and Rajshahi have today become coloured with the blood of my brothers. Today, the people of Bangla want freedom, they want to live, the people of Bangla want their rights.” It was a highly effective introduction to the speech, which laid the foundation for the main address and provided indications to the audience regarding what was to follow.

If the contents of the speech is analysed, it is seen that it was basically a message about the emergence of a new state on the global map and a notification cum narrative on the winding up of the eastern region of the then Pakistani state as a natural progression.

The 7th March speech was the main mantra and theory for an independent Bangladesh. This address was like a war-cry during the nine months of the liberation war. Whether children or juvenile, young or old, everybody became excited after listening to this speech. This speech – articulated in Bangabandhu’s own voice – not only united the 7 crore

Bangalis – it taught them the mantra of joining the liberation war. This address was a de-facto declaration of Bangladesh's independence.

The 'speech idioms' appropriate for mass communication were correctly applied in this speech. It was a dialogue between the people of Bangladesh and their undisputed leader on the eve of Bangladesh's birth. This fluent and extempore speech delivered in a lucid language and style was the principal document of our liberty. Bangabandhu quite adeptly adopted a conversational style while delivering this speech in order to attract the audience. He raised questions at different stages. Specifically, he posed five questions. 'What wrong have we done? What did we get? What R-T-C? With whom shall we sit? Shall we sit with those who had taken the blood of my people?' Proper application of the 'ask question, then answer' prescription had taken place for connecting with the audience. Logical use of the present tense refreshed the speech. Bangabandhu had also intermingled the past and future tenses quite beautifully in his speech for the sake of a conversational style.

Sentences naturally became shorter in those parts of the address where Bangabandhu gave orders, directives or warnings. The prescriptions of the communication theoreticians on making the declarative sentences shorter found reflection in Bangabandhu's speech. Some examples may be cited from the speech. For example, "the employees will fetch their salaries on the 28th. Turn all your homes into fortresses. I say to the government employees: what I say has to be obeyed. As long as this country does not become free, no revenues-taxes will be paid. Nobody will pay."

An essential characteristic of a statesmanlike and authoritative speech is not only to familiarise the audience with future initiatives and work-plan, but also to motivate and inspire them to participate actively. Bangabandhu's words were inspirational: "I call upon you to turn every home into fortresses, confront the enemy with whatever you have and close all roads for life even if I am not around to give orders." The seven and a half crore people of Bangladesh had accepted these orders as more important than mere directives. A humanitarian outlook was a key feature of Bangabandhu's character. The 7 March speech had demonstrated that his liberal humanism did not diminish even while issuing stern warnings. While standing on the crossroads of life and death of a nation, he cautioned, "We will starve them of food, we will deprive them of water." But this was immediately followed by words of reassurance: "You are my brothers – you stay in the barracks, nobody will tell you anything. But do not attempt to shoot at my heart." This coexistence of hard and soft attributes could always be observed in the big heart of Bangabandhu.

The speech was an informative one, because it incorporated appropriate facts. The audience were tremendously inspired because of the sharpness of its logic. In Bangabandhu's words: "The arms which were purchased with my money for protecting the country from attacks by external enemies are now being used against the poor, sad and suffering people of my country. Bullets are being fired on their chests. We are the majority in Pakistan, whenever we Bangalis tried to go to power, they pounced upon us." This kind of powerful argument in such simple words was a natural attribute of Bangabandhu's address. Mention is made today about the expansion or repetition of the introductory words in the middle of an speech in order to increase its effectiveness. This aspect has also found amazing expression in Bangabandhu's speech. Towards the middle of the address, he said, "I told him, Mr. Yahya Khan, you are the President of Pakistan, come to Dhaka and see how our poor, our Bangali people have been mowed down by your bullets, how the laps of our mothers have been emptied, how my people have been slaughtered! You come, see for yourself and then judge."

Bangabandhu followed properly the rules of 'put the attributes first' while making references to quotations. He made comments after mentioning the source first. For example, "Mr. Bhutto said, he would not go;" or, "Yahya Khan took over the government. He said, he would give constitution, democracy to the country, we accepted."

The main job of a public speech is setting an agenda, which was repeatedly done by Bangabandhu's speech. The following part of his address shows that there was no change in his humanitarian approach even while announcing tough programmes:

"I want to pronounce clearly that the courts, offices, criminal courts and educational institutions will remain closed from today indefinitely. Other items will remain outside the purview of the strike, so that the poor don't suffer and my people do not endure hardship. Rickshaws, hors-drawn carriages, trains and launches will run; only the Secretariat, Supreme Court, High Court, Judge Court, semi-government offices like WAPDA shall not operate."

Status conferral function with regard to individuals and events is an important aspect of mass communication. Application of this premise could be observed in various parts of Bangabandhu's address. He said for example, "And those labourer brothers who had joined this 7-day strike, industry owners will reach them their salary," or, "And those people who were martyred or sustained injury, we shall try to help them as much as we can on behalf of the Awami League."

The need for posing a challenge for obtaining effective results in public addresses and mass communication is well-known. When Bangabandhu said towards the end of his speech, “Set up action committees under the leadership of Awami League in all villages and townships, and remain prepared with whatever you have. Remember, since we have learnt to give blood, we shall give more of it – we shall free the people of this land by the grace of Allah,” it showed that he could hook the audience to the speech with a high degree of efficiency by applying the art and techniques of communication theory.

The modern communication theorists say that the decisive part of a speech should generally be pronounced towards the end. The last sentence of Bangabandhu’s 7 March speech, “The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence!” was effectively a declaration of independence expressed with a firm resolve, which had in fact defined the speech. The way he concluded the speech tallied exactly with the text-books of communication theory. It is said, “don’t drag out your conclusion.” We often use words like “In conclusion” or “We must say one thing” while concluding a speech. But Bangabandhu directly entered the ‘speech definition’ in his historic address – through an appropriate application of communication theory, which was quite unthinkable 38 years ago.

In his address delivered on 4 June 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had said: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.” Here, ‘we shall fight’ was the definition of that speech.

Similarly, when Martin Luther King delivered his historic address on 28 August 1963, the definition part of his speech was “I have a dream.” A portion of that address was as follows:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

We know that powerful speeches are always short. The fiery and ground-breaking address of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered on 7 March 1971 is the best example of this genre. A speech that could inspire an entire nation to join the liberation war was a rare event in history. Analysis of the importance, significance and timeliness of this speech, which contained the directives and declaration of the liberation war in Bangabandhu’s own voice, has remained a gold-mine

for researchers. The manner in which this address had invigorated and indoctrinated the Bangalis with the mantra of liberty added a new chapter in the annals of speeches. This historic address is considered to be a compulsory text at home and abroad by the experts of public speeches, researchers and communication theorists. A polished and clear presentation on our day-to-day perceptions and idealistic position is a key premise for public addresses.

In this context, a quotation by Dale Carnegie can be recalled here. He said, “The best argument is one, which seems merely an explanation.” A lucid and detailed explanation about the events unfolding at the time made this speech withstand the test of logic for all times to come.

Although the historic 7 March speech was an extempore one, what was noticeable about it was that annoying repetitions and hesitations in framing words as observed in such speeches were totally absent. It was possible for Bangabandhu alone to deliver such an unostentatious, direction-giving, poetic speech without any break and without taking any help from notes while standing in the middle of a sea of people. That is why, the international periodical ‘Newsweek’ termed Bangabandhu as a ‘Poet of Politics’ in the cover story of its 5 April 1971 issue. This speech was literally a revolution – which culminated in our liberation war and freedom. Such spectacular application of words was truly an amazing event.

An analysis of the application of words by Bangabandhu reminds us of the famous quotation by the third President of the United States Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826): “The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.” This 7 March address of 1971 was not only the greatest speech in Bengali language, it is one of the best in the entire world. This is because, this speech was simultaneously the declaration of our independence and the inspiration of our liberation war.

This speech will continue to rekindle the Bangali nation with a spark of fire, show the path of realizing the mundane truths and provide political direction to emancipation of the Bangali people.

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