

On “Yes, We Can”: Linguistics Power and Possibility

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ABSTRACT:

In this article I address a hitherto used buzz phrase in English, “Yes, we can.” This phrase represents various forms of meanings—challenge, possibility, ability, permission and opportunity in social, political and linguistics domains. I consider the syntactic and the semantic properties of “Yes, we can.” I also compare its conventional usages with more recent treatments. The catch phrase “Yes, we can” has standard usage in sports, music, language, literature and politics. Candidate Obama elevated it as a slogan in his presidential campaign.

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The phrase “Yes, we can” is one of the most influential phrases in the speeches of Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States. Obama has used this phrase as a powerful rhetorical device in his presidential campaign: “Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can” (“Transcript,” 2009 Para 5). The modal verb *can* has been frequently used as a refrain in music, politics, religion, sports and literature to motivate people in any obstacles. The Black Eyed Peas has developed a music video on “Yes, we can”; Warren Angel’s book *Yes We Can Love One Another* (1997) helps the Church answer Jesus’ prayer to love one another enabling Christians to break down misconceptions and barriers between Catholics and Protestants. *The Little Engine That Could* (1990) is a moralistic children's story by W. Piper that used this phrase to teach children the value of optimism. In that story the little engine keeps bravely puffing faster and faster, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can” (p. 49). Thus, the phrase “Yes, we can” not only indicates something possible to be done or made in a particular way, but it also predicts several underlying possible meanings in politics, language, and literature.

In this paper, I focus on the analysis of the phrase “Yes, we can” from the speeches of President Obama, along with the phrase’s usage in various disciplines—music, sports, language, and literature in terms of grammatical patterns and collocations. Some of the research questions this paper will address are: What does the phrase “Yes, we can” suggest in different discourses of human language and culture? Does it represent the similar linguistic and cultural values across the registers? How does an ESL teacher include words or phrases like “Yes, we can” in language lessons? And where does the

phrase “Yes, we can” come from in Obama’s speeches? I use this key phrase as an element of corpus of speech to interpret and discuss the linguistics mechanism.

It is important to trace the relevant social and cultural values associated with popular words or phrases in teaching and learning. These values suggest the underlying grammatical and socio-cultural meaning of what is written or spoken in a language. Such knowledge is also important to facilitate the understanding of children about language learning in social community. At the present, there is a strong and growing interest in the social rules of language use on the part of ESL research, ESL teachers, and ESL publishers. Corpus linguistics has extended further significant analysis of any word in language study, for instance, by revealing hidden meanings or by exploring word usage and the structure of speech. The usage and structure of any word more accurately reflects how words and or phrases, for example “Yes, we can,” are used in the social groups.

The traditional entry of the word *can* in the dictionary seems insignificant: “Can is used to say that somebody knows how to do something. E.g. *Can* you play the piano?” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, p. 215); *Can*, a common modal verb in English, is “largely concerned with expressing ‘modality,’ such as possibility, necessity, prediction and volition” (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002, p. 28). *The New Merriam-Webster* illustrates the following examples of *can* to indicate ability or opportunity, to request or offer permission, and to show possibility or impossibility:

- I can ride a horse. ABILITY
- We can stay with my brother when we are in Paris. OPPORTUNITY
- She cannot stay out after 10 PM. PERMISSION
- Can you hand me the stapler? REQUEST

- Any child can grow up to be president. POSSIBILITY

In practice the modals like *will, can, would, could* are considered as invariable function words with no inflections such as *-ing* and *-ed*. A corpus based study has found that the frequency of modals like *can, could, may, might* are more common across the registers of conversation, fiction, news and academics. Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002) mentioned, “modals occur as the first verb in a clause, and are followed by the base form of another verb usually the main verb” (p. 28) across the registers. For example:

I can live here quietly. (Fiction)

They would have a different view. (Academic)

He could probably like it softer. (News)

She can't walk that far! (Conversation)

Besides *can* as a modal verb, according to *Microsoft Encarta Dictionary* (2008) it is a noun that refers to a food container, e.g. we used up three *cans* of beans. It is also used as a transitive verb (*canned, canning, cans*) to indicate three distinct meanings—1) to dismiss from a job 2) to stop something e.g. Just *can* the giggling, and 3) to put something into a metal container (“Can,” 2008). However, Obama has not used *can* as a noun or a transitive verb in his speeches. Rather he has used *can* as a modal verb.

This assertive buzz phrase “Yes, we can” is a combination of three words in which *yes* as an adverb or interjection indicates agreement or affirmation, *we* as a first person plural pronoun denotes a collective force or unity, and *can*, a modal auxiliary verb (function word) suggests ability, opportunity, possibility, permission, prediction and request. President Obama has used this phrase appropriately to incorporate these various

meanings into politics, economy, and language and power formation. When we explore usage and structure of this phrase usage in his speech, the analysis reveals a surprising result that indicates to his political ideology and hegemony. *The Global Language Monitor* mentioned: “Obama’s “Yes, we can” speech ranked in tone, tenor and rhetoric with memorable political addresses of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a Dream” and Ronald Reagan’s “Tear Down this Wall” (“Yes, we can speech,” 2008). This powerful phrase summarizes Obama’s whole speech as a theme of hope and vision of social construction and harmony building. In this manner, Obama addresses the contemporary war, economy and unemployment of the United States of America. Obama connects the phrase “Yes, we can” to his other political buzz words like “change”, “world,” “crisis,” “progress,” “government,” “history,” “liberty,” “peace,” and “nation” to inspire a vision among his followers.

For the purpose of this short paper, I have selected only a few paragraphs from Obama’s speech as a corpus of 101 words to analyze the use of “Yes, we can.” Using *Simple Concordance Program 4.09* (May 2009), the text (see Appendix 1) goes as:

One key word “can” into 11 citations of 101 vocabulary text:

Can 6 repair this world. *Yes, we can.* //

5 to the promised land: *Yes, we can,* to justice and equality.

1 spirit of a people: *Yes, we can.* Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

1 people: Yes, we can. *Yes, we can.* Yes, we can. /It was a creed

1 we can. Yes, we can. *Yes, we can.* /It was a creed written into

6 can heal this nation. *Yes, we can* repair this world. Yes, we

2 destiny of a nation: *Yes, we can.* /It was whispered by slaves

4 wilderness: *Yes, we can.*/It was the call of workers

3 darkest of nights: *Yes, we can.*/It was sung by immigrants

6 and equality. /*Yes, we can,* to opportunity and prosperity

6 and prosperity. *Yes, we can* heal this nation. Yes, we can

Table 1

Considering a section of Obama's speech as a text/corpus, the Concordance Program found 101 total vocabularies and 185 tokens (see appendix B) in the text with a word frequency of *yes* 11, *we* 14 and *can* 11. In this short text, the phrase "Yes, we can" is associated with "world," "promised land," "people," "a creed," "nation," "slaves," "darkness," "equality," "prosperity," and "healing."

Word frequency list of 101 Vocabulary

1 prosperity	1 opportunity	1 equality	1 try	1 destiny
2 they	1 ready	2 by	1 way	1 new
1 out	1 against	1 darkest	1 not	1 ballot
1 president	1 shouldn't	1 distant	1 can't	1 spirit
4 it	4 that	1 us	1 abolitionists	1 documents
1 immigrants	1 nights	1 wilderness	1 workers	1 pioneers
1 generations	1 americans	1 sums	2 this	11 yes
1 slaves	1 shores	1 towards	1 odds	4 was
3 as	1 our	2 for	2 or	1 repair
1 frontier	1 up	1 mountaintop	1 into	4 to
5 who	1 down	1 moon	2 nation	1 written
1 women	2 when	1 been	11 can	1 an
1 from	1 freedom	1 call	1 trail	1 heal
1 took	1 struck	1 with	1 through	1 sung
1 unforgiving	1 king	1 founding	5 of	14 we
1 we've	2 have	1 chose	1 we're	1 people
1 simple	1 impossible	10 the	1 justice	1 westward
1 land	6 and	1 world	1 told	1 organized
1 blazed	1 pointed	1 promised	1 whispered	1 declared
1 pushed	1 reached	2 creed	1 responded	1 faced

Table 2

The reason we find the modal verb *can* frequently used in Obama's speech is that modal verbs like *will*, *would*, and *can* are extremely common across the registers. Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002, p. 177) mentioned that central modal verbs are more common in conversation than they are in the written expository registers. The modals *can* and *could*

are relatively common in the passive voice. The structure of *can* + passive structure is very frequent in academic prose rather than in conversation. Nevertheless, the use of *can* is very frequent in the speeches of Obama.

The use of *can* as a modal in Obama's speeches has several distinctive characteristics. For example, acting as an auxiliary verb in verb phrases (e.g. Yes, we *can* heal this nation), preceding the negative particles in not negation (e.g. America, we *cannot* turn back. We *cannot* walk alone, quoted in "The American Promise," 2008) and coming as the subject in yes-no questions (e.g. *Can* we make America better? / *can* we work together, as one? /...YES! WE CAN, quoted in Grimes & Collier, 2008, p. 42).

While making an evaluation of the text in terms of collocations and grammatical patterns, we can see powerful rhetorical force in each sentence (see Appendix A): "All this we *can do*/free men and women *can achieve*/they *can afford*/ the market *can spin out of control*/we *can scarcely imagine*/we *can meet*/you *can build*/government *can do*/every faith *can join*/all this we *can do*."

Collocation from the text	Grammatical patterns
ds of a new age. All this we <u>can</u> do. All this we will do. Now, done, what free men and women <u>can</u> achieve when imagination is jo	adj n aux v Wh adj pl n aux v
s at a decent wage, care they <u>can</u> afford, a retirement that is d	N aux v
ght of day, because only then <u>can</u> we restore the vital trust bet	Conj adj adv aux v
ut a watchful eye, the market <u>can</u> spin out of control. The nation	N aux v
ers faced with perils that we <u>can</u> scarcely imagine, drafted a ch	Conj n aux adv v
hese principles once more, we <u>can</u> meet those new threats that	Adv n aux v
de	
le will judge you on what you <u>can</u> build, not what you destroy.	Aux v n wh n aux v
oy relative plenty, we say we <u>can</u> no longer afford indifference	N v n axu adj v
ring outside our borders, nor <u>can</u> we consume the world's	Conj axu n v n
resource	
l. For as much as government <u>can</u> do and must do, it is ultimate	Conj adj pron n axu v
of every race and every faith <u>can</u> join in celebration across thi	N conj n axu v np

served at a local restaurant <u>can</u> now stand before you to take a	Np axu adv v np
mands of a new age. All this <u>we can</u> do. All this we will do. Now,	Np axu v
others faced with perils that <u>we can</u> scarcely imagine, drafted a ch	Conj n aux adv v
y these principles once more, <u>we can</u> meet those new threats that de	N aux v
enjoy relative plenty, we say <u>we can</u> no longer afford indifference	N v n v adv v n

(Table 3)

Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002) listed two types of meaning associated with each modal—personal or intrinsic and logical or extrinsic. Intrinsic modal meaning suggests the control of actions and events by human and other agents whereas extrinsic modal meaning refers to the logical status of states. The personal and logical meanings in Obama’s speeches can be categorized by studying the structure of the clause. In modal verbs with personal meanings, the subject of the verb phrase usually refers to a human being and the main verb is usually a dynamic verb. Let’s consider the following examples in Obama’s speech:

Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.

<Personal ability with human subject *we* and dynamic verbs *heal* and *repair*>

In contrast, a modal verb with a logical meaning makes the subject of the verb phrase that refers to a non-human subject and the main verb will state:

... that can’t afford another four years without good schools, ... I organized with and stood with and fought with side by side for jobs and justice on the streets of

Chicago. So don't tell us change can't happen. <Necessity meaning with non-persona subject that and change with stative verb afford and happen>

Although “Yes, we can” is a complete sentence in itself, it has clearly helped to identify and discuss other central political concepts connecting the theme of hope in Obama’s speeches. Obama wants to progressively accomplish bigger and better things for his people. With the slogan “Yes, we can” he has a dream of illuminating the problems, making better changes, and creating opportunities for generations to come. This phrase further suggests that we should all help and stand by each other to work together as one nation to overcome any challenge. Obama makes reference to “unyielding hope.” Similar to the message of John F. Kennedy who said “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” Obama presents hope and optimism with his signature line “Yes, we can.” He reminds citizens to look on the bright side even in the contemporary insecure times.

“Yes, we can” is a popular repetition in President Obama’s speeches. This phrase shows his political power and strong authority to address the weakened era of the US to inspire and motivate citizens towards progress and prosperity. Whether Obama actually changes the system, repairs the world and transforms resources into progress and prosperity is another question for a political analyst. However, the use of a modal verb *can* in the phrase “Yes, we can” has become a popular catchphrase of promise, possibility and ability at present. And any ESL teacher and student can use the phrase in the class as a language learning resource.

This phrase also can inspire young children in language classes to achieve their potentials. They may doubt whether they can accomplish the class goals. A language

instructor may demonstrate grammatical items such as modal verbs by quoting from any popular speech or literary text. “Yes, we can” is a common expression in fairy tales and stories in the children books. For instance, Sam McBratney’s best selling, *Yes, We Can* (2002), has shown the importance of celebrating individual talents in an adorable tale of fun and friendship. The fictional characters namely Little Roon, Country Mouse and Quacker Duck became unable to perform a difficult task. When Roon’s mother told them “why don’t you [all] show each other what you *can* do?” (*Yes, We can*, p. 20) each of them again became very good friends realizing what they could do together. This story expressed the theme of unity among friends to face any challenge just as Obama seems to be telling citizens through the buzz phrase “Yes, we can” achieve many things as a group.

Where does this catchphrase come from in Obama’s speeches? Is there any book that triggers him to fit the phrase into his political speeches? While making a study of publications it is found that this phrase has used in sports, politics, music, language, and literature frequently from the 1960s to the present: *Yes! We can Solve the Farm Problem* (1967) by Carson E. Young; *Yes, We Can!* (1972) by Charles G. Spiegler and F. Clifton White; *Yes We Can!: How to Organize Citizen Action* (1980) by A. Elizabeth; *Yes We Can!: One Family’s Triumph Over Insurmountable Odds* (1981) by Wally Frost; *Yes We Can: We Can All Learn to Read and Write* (1988) by Ontario, Ministry of Education; *The Little Engine That Could* (1990) by W. Piper; *Yes, We Can: Drama and Poems* (1994) by O. Zewi; *Oh Yes, We Can!* (1995) by Robert L. Lawson and Gene Murphy; *Yes, We Can: Effective Practices in Achieving Compensatory Education Schools* (1995) by Department of Education, California; *Yes We Can Love One Another* (1997) by Warren Angel; *Yes We Can!* (2000) by Barbara Kupfer and et al.; *Cesar: Si, Se Puede! Yes, We*

Can! (2004) by Carmen T. Bernier-Grand and David Diaz; *Si, Se Puede!* (2005) by Diana Cohn and et al.; *Can We Color It? Yes We Can!* (2006) by Gavin Lines and et al.; *Yes! We Can* (2007) by Dr. Deborah D. Dancy; *Obama Yes We Can Hope* (2008) by Leon Cooper; *Yes We Can: Barack Obama's History Making Presidential Campaign* (2008) by Scout Tufankjian; *Yes We Can: A Biography of Barack Obama* (2008) by G. Thomas and so forth.

I asked school age children and adult Americans how Obama came up with “Yes, we can,” the battle cry in the presidential campaign. The adults guessed the phrase might come from *The Little Engine that Could*, a children story. For them, the little engine worked as a metaphor for the American dream. The tale of pulling a long train over a high mountain is treated anthropomorphically to foster hopes and possibilities for Obama. Respondents also largely assumed that Obama might have alluded to a specific historical speech or biography, or to a fairy tale to express his serious themes -- race, culture, war and development. From Obama's biographical perspective, it seems that he is highly influenced by African American culture and history. Deborah Willis and Kevin Merida (2009, p. 9) mentioned that Abraham Lincoln and Muhammad Ali were two men Obama has admired mostly. Biographers of Obama pointed out the fact that his “exotic” family history, for example, his father's story that Obama himself wrote in his biography *Dreams from My Father*, has become an inspiration for choosing his powerful buzz phrases (Klein, 2008 & Kellier, 2009). In addition, Amanda Riply (2008) put her views a little different way: “Obama's greatest influence was a woman most Americans know nothing about—how his mother's uncommon life shaped his views of the world” (p. 42). Riply also highlighted a number of historical books and movies that brought Obama

closer into African American culture, language and heritage. Obama got a positive change in his life from those books that his mother bought for him. In this regard, a distance allusion can be drawn between Wally Frost's *Yes We Can!*, a remarkable story of courage and determination of a man and his family who has honestly believed in "Yes, we can!"

In contrast to adults, some children gave me a different clue in response to Obama's buzz phrase. According to these respondents to my question, *Bob the Builder* and *Doors to Explore*, the children TV shows and music video, are the sources of this phrase, "Yes, we can." For them the lyric in *Bob the Builder* is a strong reference to the catchphrase, "Yes, we can":

Can we fix it?! Yes we can!

(chorus)

Bob the builder/ Can we fix it?

Bob the builder/ Yes we can! (Morrissey, 2001)

If so, did Obama watch the music video or TV show to get his buzz phrase? Perhaps, Sasha, 11, and Malia, 9, two daughters of Obama might have watched the show. It is also possible that these two young girls might have read fairy tales under the title "Yes, we can", and they might have shared the story with their parents. Sasha Obama's appraisal seems relevant: "That was a pretty good speech, Dad" (Klein, 2008, p.224). Further evidence is recorded in the words of Jonathan Tilove (2008): "For many of Obama's young supporters, "Yes, we can" may have resonated at a deeper, even subliminal level, the consequences of growing up watching the animated public television show "Bob the

Builder” (Para 9). As shown in the program, Bob’s messages, in one way or another way seem to be representing Obama, the builder of the United States of America.

Although the events I have just described seem remarkable, Garen Thomas, a biographer of Obama, wrote me an email that “the catchphrase “Yes We Can” came from Obama’s campaign advisor, David Axelrod” (G. Thomas, personal communication, April 9, 2009). Apparently, David Axelrod, an architect of Obama’s presidential run, oriented him to focus the campaign on “the twin pillars of hope and change” (Lexington, 2008 Para 1). *The Economist* mentions that Mr. Axelrod already achieved success intriguing racial concerns: “His list of back successes includes John Street, the former mayor of Philadelphia, and Deval Patrick, the governor of Massachusetts, whose speeches sometimes bear an uncanny resemblance to Mr. Obama’s” (Para 5). The spectrum of Obama’s political slogan “Yes, We can,” as Matthew Kaminski (2008) reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, was Patrick’s slogan: “The men are friends with similar backgrounds (raised by single mothers, educated at Harvard Law) and electoral appeal... More importantly perhaps, they share an image-maker and political guru, David Axelrod” (Para 3). It is Mr. Axelrod who has linked the ideology of Obama to contemporary American politics and society borrowing the catch phrase from others. Garen Thomas further mentions the fact about how the phrase “Yes, we can” came in Obama’s speeches in her book, *Yes We Can* (2008):

David Axelrod created television commercials for Barack that showed him in a very positive light. “Yes, we can” was the message that viewers came away with and started to believe. Barack hadn’t liked the slogan initially

because it was so simple, but he let those with more experience make the final decision. In the end, it paid off. People started to hope that “Yes, we can” change the course of American politics and improve lives, including our own. (p.156)

As an art of politics in Obama’s electoral war, *Yes, We can*, a collage-style music video by The Black Eyed Peas with a variety of music celebrity contributors came into popularity to support Obama (Walker, 2008). However, Garance Franke-Ruta (2009), reporter of *The Washington Post*, commented that Obama simply used the English translation of Spanish language “rallying cry” of the United Farm Workers slogan “Si, se puede” [“Yes, it can be done”] in his speech. Franke-Ruta further informed: “Chavez’s rallying cry, ‘Si Se Puede’--‘Yes We Can,’ was more than a slogan, it was an expression of hope and a rejection of those who said farm workers could not organize, and could not take on the growers” (Para 3). Above all, Catherine Philp (2009) reported that Jon Favreau, the speech writer of Obama, composed the powerful speech for Obama. This slogan dates back to 1972 when Ceasar Chavez, educator and civil rights leader, and the United Farm Worker’s co-founder, Dolores Hueta, came up with the slogan during Chaverz’s 24 day fast in Phoenix, Arizona (*Wikipedia*, “Yes We Can”). According to Jonathan Tilove (2008), a reporter from *Free Republic*, it was 1974 spring that “Dave Cash, second baseman in a New York League has used ‘Yes we can’ and threw the money in air” (Para 2).

In short, the phrase “Yes, we can” has become a powerful refrain in various genres of humanities. Before it was a song or a political slogan, it was used in sports by

Dave Cash, in a civil rights moment by Cesar Chavez, in language and music by the Black Eyes Peas, in the animated television shows by Morrissey, in the political realm by Deval Patrick, and in culture and literature by fiction writers. The catchphrase, nevertheless, became the theme of Obama's surging campaign whether guided by David Axelrod or influenced by his ideal political leaders and or used by his friend and supporter, Governor Patrick of Massachusetts. The phrase "Yes, we can" is meaningful linguistically and culturally in every single context as in quoted in Tilove's report (2008):

As to why something as simple as "Yes We Can"—with only eight letters it is ...--is so powerful, Cash breaks it down: 'Yes' is making a commitment. And then using word 'We,' it's more than one. And the 'Can,' it's just the opposite of 'can't.' It's just so powerfully positive.

(Para 20)

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Appendix A:

For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can.

It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality.

Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.

Appendix B:

Analysis based on the whole vocabulary

Total vocabulary = 101 types

Project wordcount = 185 tokens

Types/tokens = 0.54594595

Types/sqrt(tokens) = 7.42566768

Yule's k = 197.51643535

Word frequency of 101 words based on the whole vocabulary

Word Frequency	Number of Words	Cumulative Vocabulary	Cumulative Word Count	Percentage Vocabulary	Percentage Word Count
1	79	79	79	78.21782	42.70270
2	9	88	97	87.12871	52.43243
3	1	89	100	88.11881	54.05405
4	4	93	116	92.07921	62.70270
5	2	95	126	94.05941	68.10811
6	1	96	132	95.04950	71.35135
7	1	97	139	96.03960	75.13514
10	1	98	149	97.02970	80.54054
11	2	100	171	99.00990	92.43243
14	1	101	185	100.00000	100.00000