

Original Paper

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and His Message of “Hope”

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Abstract

Shinzo Abe, the longest-serving prime minister of Japan, was assassinated on July 8, 2022, while delivering a campaign speech. As news of the violent event spread, many Japanese people as well as governments and citizens from around the world expressed their deepest sorrow and condolences. Abe's charisma, his dynamic personality, and his extraordinary political talent give him an enduring place in the imagination of the Japanese public. Many in Japan are outraged at the cowardly and vicious act and its threat to free speech and the country's democratic ideals. This paper examines several of Abe's prominent speeches during his years as prime minister of Japan. Our focus will study how, and through which linguistic applications, Abe's speeches have achieved a lasting influence on the general public and politicians in Japan. Utilizing both a speaker-oriented and a listener-oriented inclination, Abe is able to inspire and attain a reassuring contribution, both politically and personally, while conveying a message of “hope” in Japanese socio-economic society.

Keywords

assassination, emotion, hope, Japanese prime minister, political discourse

1. Introduction

At the age of 67, Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, was shot to death in the middle of the afternoon while delivering an outdoor public speech in the city of Nara, Nara prefecture Japan. This horrific act of violence occurred while Abe was campaigning on behalf of a local parliamentary candidate in front of the Yamato Saidaiji train station entrance. The station, a major terminal between Osaka and Kyoto, caters to a large number of local and business passengers. The terminal forms part of the large Kintetsu Department Store and links to other shopping malls. The gunman, identified as 41-year-old Tetsuya Yamagami, was apprehended at the scene. He later explained that his motive for

shooting Abe stemmed from a grudge he held against the Unification Church which allegedly had caused his mother's bankruptcy. He shot Abe out of a belief that Abe was closely associated with the group (Bunshun Online, 2022a; Daily, 2022; Yomiuri Shinbun, 2022) and was spreading the church's influence throughout Japan (e.g., HTB News, 2022).

2. Terrible News

The shocking and horrifying news rang out across Japan and the entire world. Historically, Japan has been considered one of the safest countries in the world since its gun laws are among the world's strictest. Therefore, the newscasts of the appalling event seemed initially unbelievable and unfathomable. However, as the reality sunk in, the world responded with outrage and sorrow. The author, by chance, happened to be in Japan at the time of the tragedy. Two days following the incident, on July 10, 2022, the author traveled to the site in Nara and took pictures of the event's location. Large numbers of Japanese people gathered at the site to lay flowers in honor of Abe and to pay their respects.

The method for this paper will review the assassination incident, based on the author's visit to the Nara site as well as the author's analysis of various newspaper reports and TV commentary on the subject (e.g., Mainichi Shinbun, 2022b; Nishi Nihon Shinbun, 2022; Daily Shinchoo, 2022b). In addition, by examining some of Abe's public speeches, the paper will explore Abe's political legacy, specifically, his desire, willingness and ability to convey a sense of "hope" to his audience members.

The word "hope" essentially means an optimistic state of mind based on the anticipation or expectation that a positive outcome will occur or be true. Positive feelings fuel inspired actions and inspired actions often propel us to achieve our goals. Thus, several questions follow: What do Abe's speeches tell us about his political legacy? How did Abe generate positive feelings and cause inspired actions in his audiences? How was Abe able to convey a shared sense of "hope" in his speeches? Which of Abe's speeches are good examples of this style?

3. The Assassination Incident

The following photograph shows the exact site of the tragedy, with detailed explanations. The photo was reported in Kyodo News (2022a), citing the New York Times (2022a).

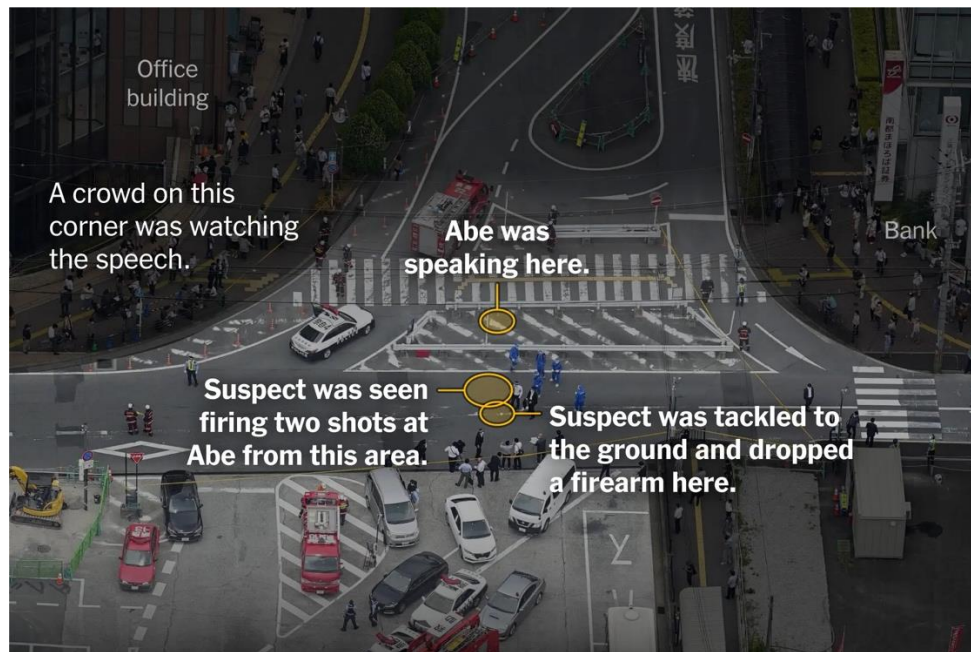


Figure 1. Assassination Site at Nara, Japan (Taken from Kyodo News, 2022a)

Abe was standing and speaking to the public at the marked spot surrounded by the white traffic guard rails. The gunman fired shots from a location only 5 or 6 meters away.

The attached video link captures the scene immediately after Abe was assassinated (The New York Times 2022b—please note that the footage contains scenes of graphic violence).

The following three photos were taken by the author at the site. The first two photos show the white guard rails which surrounded the place where Abe was standing. The third photo shows the memorial spot where people have laid flowers and offered prayers to honor Abe. A large, framed picture of Abe is seen at the center.



Figure 2. The Section Surrounded by the White Guard Rails with Red Arrow Markings Is the Spot of the Assassination



Figure 3. The Section Surrounded by the White Guard Rails with Red Arrow Markings Is the Spot of the Assassination



Figure 4. People Visit the Memorial Site, Directly Adjacent to the Incident’s Location, to Offer Flowers and Prayers for the Deceased Abe

U.S. government officials visit the current prime minister’s office in Tokyo on the 13th of July 2022, five days following the assassination, to personally convey their condolences to Japan. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, hails Abe as a “man of vision” (Japan Times, 2022b).



Figure 5. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken (Center) Speaks to the Media after Meeting with Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo (Taken by Japan Times, 2022b)

Similar condolences were provided by government officials from all over the world including China, Taiwan, Russia, France and Great Britain (e.g., Kyodo, 2022b; Aljazeera, 2022; Bunshun Online, 2022b). President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan paid tribute to Shinzo Abe by ordering flags to fly at half-mast and visiting Japan's de facto embassy in Taipei, the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, to personally pay tribute to Abe. She called him a "forever good friend of Taiwan". The following picture shows her visit and tribute.



Figure 6. President Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan Offers Flowers before a Photo of the Late Prime Minister Abe (Taken from Kyodo News, 2022b)

As these photos attest, Abe's shocking death is mourned by citizens and leaders of countries around the world.

4. State Funeral

The current prime minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, proposed holding a state funeral for Abe on the 27th of September 2022. Kishida highlighted several positive aspects of Abe's political legacy, namely, Abe's rebuilding of the Tohoku region following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Abe's reviving of the Japanese economy, and Abe's strengthening and bolstering of Japan's relationship with the United States. Kishida argued that a state funeral for Abe will show Japan's determination to defend democracy and to stand up to violent actors. He also argued that Abe's accomplishments in the international arena, including his political and diplomatic profile among the United States, Russia, the European Union, and

African and Asian countries, is clearly deserving of a national funeral. Abe has personally visited 81 nations around the world, which is the most visited by any prime minister of Japan (Gaimushoo, 2022). Nevertheless, the Japanese public is divided over Abe's political legacy and the appropriateness for a national funeral. While recognizing his accomplishments, some also point to Abe's political scandals (e.g., Asahi Shinbun, 2022a; Japan Times, 2022b; Too Supo Web, 2022; Sports Hochi, 2022; Gendai Business, 2022; Kyodo News, 2022c). For example, many Japanese citizens grew frustrated with an annual, Abe-hosted, costly, taxpayer-funded "Hanami" (cherry blossom viewing) party (e.g., Azuma, 2022). Also, the Moritomo Gakuen issue implicated the government's sale of national land for an incredibly low price to an academy endorsed by Abe and his spouse. In addition, Abe was largely absent from the public eye as COVID-19 cases ticked up and the pandemic wiped out many of the economic gains of Abe's so-called "Abenomics" or economic-reform plan (e.g., Shuukan Asahi, 2022).

Mizuho Fukushima, leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, claims that a state funeral clearly violates the "freedom of thought and conscience" protected under the Japanese Constitution. The Japanese Communist Party leader, Kazuo Shii, stated that his political party is opposed to a state funeral (Japan Times, 2022b). Another opposition party leader, Ichiro Matsui, from the Japan Restoration Party, argues that whether to have a state funeral or not should be formally discussed in the upcoming Diet session. Several other opposition parties also clash with the state funeral idea (e.g., Sankei Shinbun 2022, News Post Seven 2022, Mainichi Shinbun 2022b, Kyodo News 2022d). By contrast, some members of the LDP (the largest political party in Japan) such as Toshimitsu Motegi, the chief secretary, contends that the negative comments by leaders of the opposition parties are "all wrong and out of focus" (e.g., Jiji, 2022; AERA, 2022; Asahi Shinbun, 2022a; TBS News, 2022; Josei Jishin, 2022).

5. Conveying a Sense of "Hope"

Abe's political legacy is showcased through his various accomplishments in numerous domestic and international activities during his extended tenure as Japan's prime minister (the longest in the Japan's history). Yoshiko Sakurai, a well-known journalist, commented that Abe truly believed in the possibility of real happiness for all of Japan's people (Daily Shinchoo, 2022a). Given Abe's amazingly active participation in politics, we may wonder what kept him going. What motivated him to achieve his accomplishments? Why was he so committed and enthusiastic in the way he did politics? From a sociolinguistic perspective of political language, Azuma (2022) and Azuma (2019) argues that Abe's talking style in his political speech can be viewed as "speaker-oriented." Essentially, this means that Abe focuses his speech to be from his own perspective, a speaker talking about himself, rather than speaking from the viewpoint of a listener. To put this differently, we can say that politicians tend to speak about themselves (i.e., speakers) and not so much about listeners (i.e., addressees). However, in some of Abe's speeches, we can also notice that he speaks **both** about himself and about the listeners. In other words, Abe may sometimes be **both speaker-oriented and listener-oriented**. Abe may speak about himself but

also speak about listeners at the same time. Let's examine two of Abe's speeches which utilize both a speaker and listener orientation.

5.1 Abe's Graduation Speech at Kindai University

Abe's 2022 graduation speech to the students and parents at Kindai University, one of the largest private universities in Osaka (Kindai, 2022), is considered a prominent example of Abe's speech style and demonstrates his common message of hope. The graduation speech, given in the main gathering hall at the university, lasted approximately 15 minutes (without the use of any notes). Spoken in Japanese, it was both speaker-oriented and listener-oriented at the same time.

The beginning of Abe's speech started with a video recording of his own piano solo of the song *Hana wa Saku* (Flowers Will Bloom). The song, originally produced to support recovery efforts after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, has been translated into 11 languages (English, Indonesian, Russian, Swahili, Vietnamese, Burmese, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Hindi and Chinese), and the lyrics and music have been sung and performed around the world. Many artists have seized the hopeful message that "yes, flowers will bloom again" and have performed their own rendition of the song in an effort to sow seeds of "hope" to others in the future.

Typically, when a politician gives a speech, it will contain his/her political jargon. The speech will align with certain political views derived from economics, diplomacy, and other social norms and concepts. Often their speech will reflect their own viewpoint. In other words, the usual speech from a politician is likely to be speaker-oriented and filled with political information and ideas.

In the case of prime minister Abe's speech at Kindai University, the use of the "recovery" song *Hana wa Saku* (Flowers Will Bloom) has no clear connection to politics per se. Instead, the song lays the foundation for Abe's message of "hope." The song sets the stage for Abe's hopeful outlook for the future of Japan, beyond the tragic earthquake and tsunami disaster. Following the video presentation, Abe continues the theme by recalling memories from the site of the catastrophe. He remembers his personal conversation with one of the fishermen from the local union affected by the calamity. The fisherman had just concluded the funeral for his wife, a victim of the earthquake. The man told Abe, with sincere resolve, "I will not be lost. I will revive the city".

Abe recalled being overwhelmed by the strength and majesty of this person. He was impressed with his commitment and strong determination. In particular, Abe found remarkable the fisherman's fervent "will" and "hope" for the survivors. Although the survivors of the disaster were experiencing unimaginable hardships, Abe knew, through their tenacity, faith and hard work, they would eventually overcome.

Next, Abe spoke about his own personal trials. He mentioned that during his first year after being elected prime minister, due to an intestinal disease (ulcerative colitis), he had to give up and leave his position. It was a very sad time for him and the members of his political party. At that time, everyone thought that his political career was over. However, in time, he surprised many and through his strong will and determination he stayed in politics and eventually was re-elected prime minister again. He fought to

re-build the country after the disaster and to put the economy on a strong footing. He said he has asked himself how he was able to regain the prime minister's position. His response is very simple and straightforward. His own words are as follows:

Abe: It was not because I was an exceptionally good person. But one thing! I was extraordinarily strong. I had the courage to never give up. It is important not to give up and be confident that you can do it.

Abe explained further that he is not exceptionally talented nor especially skilled. Rather, he argued, he had excellent colleagues much better than himself who helped him reach the prime minister position. He insisted that his colleagues endured numerous hardships together for his benefit. The following citation, though lengthy, shows Abe's enthusiasm and passion on this subject.

Abe: Many of my colleagues (*nakama*) together as a team were able to move in the same direction. This was the reason for our success. Many of my colleagues watched patiently as I made the same mistakes as my first administration. Though frustrated, they bit their lips.

You [speaking to the students] have a long life ahead. Failure is an inherent part of it. Some people may fail over and over again. But the important thing is to **get up** when you fall. And it is even better if you can learn from it.

Walt Disney, the American entrepreneur, went bankrupt repeatedly, but he achieved great success based on his experiences at failing. That is the great part of American society. Japan is also such a society. Japan will change to a society where we can **achieve the best in ourselves many times over**, but only if there are people who are willing to fail. So, I expect everyone will overcome difficulties. You have completed four years of studies at this important college. It wasn't easy. I remember I couldn't go to my hometown to spend time with my friends. It was challenging to make new friends. But overcoming such hardships, and you, being here today, achieving your dream, this special experience will surely be useful. It will be a source of accomplishment for you. And the bonds of friendship will last. You have spent this difficult time together, at the same place, at this university. You share a special connection. This will become an important asset for your life.

Abe's mention in his speech of the American entrepreneur Walt Disney reflects Abe's own persevering attitude. Walt Disney, as many know, experienced his fair share of failures including bankruptcy, a mental breakdown, and a devastating labor strike. As Walt himself put it, "It is good to have a failure while you're young because it teaches you so much. For one thing, it makes you aware that such a thing can happen to anybody, and once you've lived through the worst, you're never quite vulnerable afterward" (Flores, 2022).

Abe's citation of Walt Disney reinforces his message of "hope". Through "hope", and never giving up, Abe was able to regain the position of prime minister after his initial failure. Abe's personal examples and Walt Disney's story resonated deeply with the listeners attending Abe's speech. They saw and believed that failures may eventually reach some success in the end.

Abe's speech conveys a message of belief and hope in the future, that people can overcome hardship and find success. In particular, Abe communicates confidence and optimism to the university students

and their parents and family. He concludes his speech as follows (citing his speech in the original Japanese followed by its English translation):

Abe: Dooka challenge shite, soshite shippai shitemo tachiagatte kudasai. Minasan no afureru wakai chikara de yoriyoi sekai o tsukutte kudasai. Sotsugyoo omedetoo. Goseichoo arigatoo gozaimashita

“Please stand up and create a better world with your youthful power. Congratulations on your graduations. Thank you for your attention.”

Abe’s speech at Kindai University serves as a source of encouragement not only for the graduating students but for future generations. Some have suggested that it should be distributed to new incoming students as a source of motivation and “hope”, since it contains an optimistic narrative and inspires an emotional commitment among its listeners. Others have recommended that the speech be broadcast during the politician’s funeral or at other major political meetings (Kuhn, 2022).

5.2 Abe’s Speech to a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress

Another of Abe’s remarkable and powerful speeches capturing his speech style and demonstrating his common message of hope was to a joint meeting of the United States Congress in 2015. Lasting about 45 minutes and delivered in person in Washington, D.C., it left a lasting impression on the US audience (Abe, 2015). Abe spoke of the turbulent history between Japan and the U.S. during World War II when the two countries fought against each other. Specifically, he mentioned the Battle of Iwo Jima as an epic military campaign between U.S. Marines and the Imperial Army of Japan in early 1945. The battle is considered one of the bloodiest campaigns of the war. It is believed that nearly 22,000 Japanese forces on the island were killed, and 7,000 U.S. Marines.

In the U.S. Congress meeting chamber, Abe introduced Yoshitaka Shindo, Diet member and a former member of Abe’s cabinet. Abe explained that Shindo’s grandfather, Tadamichi Kuribayashi, was the commander of the Japanese garrison during the Iwo Jima battle. The audience was astonished realizing the incredible miracle that the grandson of the Japanese commander was then sitting in the U.S. Congress chambers, after so many years following the fierce battle between the two countries. Abe used the opportunity to conclude that hardened enemies finally had become good friends.

Continuing in his speech, Abe mentioned the tragic 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, which, when it hit, U.S. military forces instantly offered aid and generous help. The assistance was life-saving to the people of Japan and Abe remarked “Yes we got a friend in you,” to which thunderous applause broke out in the chamber.

Other inspiring quotes from Abe’s speech appear below:

Abe: Together with the victims, you shed tears. You gave us something, something very, very precious. It was hope, hope for the future. Ladies and gentlemen. The finest asset the U.S. has is to give the world “hope”, it will be and must always be “hope”.

This statement was met with deafening applause and a standing ovation. Abe was heartily cheered by all members of Congress.

Abe concluded his speech with the following statement:

Abe: Let us call the U.S.-Japan alliance, an alliance of hope. Let the two of us, America and Japan, join our hands together, and do our best to make our world a better, a much better place to live. An alliance of hope together. We can make a difference. Thank you so much.

Abe again was surrounded by the applause from Congress. The speech would go down as one of the most outstanding and memorable speeches of his political career.

One of the reasons for this successful speech is Abe's attention and focus on the idea and power of "hope". This theme helped unite American senators, representatives and citizens, who, though quite different from their Japanese counterparts, found and seized the common ground. Their overwhelming acceptance of Abe's message of "hope" stands as a witness to Abe's emphasis, desire and determination to share and convey a hopeful optimism with his audiences.

Linguistically speaking, a memorable speech has various components. Gumperz (1982), Tannen (2007) and Lakoff (2009), each well-respected linguists, point out several aspects of effective and noteworthy speeches. For example, Lakoff (2009) suggests that an effective speaker goes beyond the simple "facts, truth and logic." Furthermore, he states "**emotion** is central to legitimate political persuasion". Similarly, expanding her conversational analysis, Tannen (2007) argues that "emotion and cognition are inseparable. Understanding is facilitated, even enabled, by an **emotional experience of interpersonal involvement**." She emphasizes the fundamental importance of "emotion" in our understanding of anybody's speech. In any analysis of conversational talk, one thing which becomes clear is the fact that emotion or emotional experience of interpersonal involvement is crucial for our understanding of any speech. Gumperz (1982) points out that "involvement" is not a given but an interactive achievement in conversational interaction between participants. In other words, an emotional involvement around the message of "hope" is crucial for an effective speech on "hope" between speakers and listeners. Abe's speeches using "hope" exemplifies how anyone, including politicians, must have emotional involvement in their messages in order to be effective.

6. What will Happen after Abe's Death

It is certain that Abe's death will bring a political shift in Japan. At present, no clear successor has emerged from Abe's conservative faction (the largest in Japan currently) of the Liberal Democratic Party (Toyo Keizai, 2022). It is expected that running Abe's faction without him will pose some difficulties, but nothing has been seriously discussed at this time. Finding another charismatic leader who can handle domestic as well as international issues and problems appears challenging. Abe's reputation as the longest-serving prime minister, able to lead and generate enthusiasm among the Japanese people, is formidable.

Perhaps Abe's determination to spread a message of "hope," as exemplified in some of his speeches, can be instructive for those dealing with the void of his leadership. It is often suggested that political speech tends to be speaker-oriented, since it is focused on the speaker/politician. However, this paper has suggested that it can be both speaker- and listener-oriented and, when the message conveyed

includes emotional involvement, the likelihood for effective communication increases. Indeed, a common and shared sense of “hope” between the general public and politicians is achievable and may go a long way, as Abe has modeled in his speeches.

7. Conclusion

While not everyone in Japan, or even within the LDP leading party, agreed with Abe’s vision or policy direction for the country, competing ideas have not shaped any better means for plotting Japan’s course in politics, economic policy, and international relations. For the foreseeable future, there will likely remain no alternative to Abe. Nevertheless, we can learn from Abe’s utilization of linguistic emotional involvement for both speakers and listeners in his speeches, especially his speeches involving “hope”. Such model and interplay should help guide Japanese politics and society into the future. That the late Abe will remain a major force in Japanese politics makes clear that his determination to convey a message of hope in mutual interactions and among individuals will have a lasting influence on the public life of the Japanese nation as well as the private lives of any conversationalists.

In his study of humanistic approaches to linguistic analysis, Becker (1988) pointed that any linguistic approach should not exclude an analysis of the personal and particular examples when it is done in a scientific, rigorous, disciplined, and systematic manner. This paper suggests that a study on **the personal and the particular** case of Abe’s speeches can be a source of future linguistic research. Abe’s humanistic speeches are indeed personal and particular, yet the idea of hope in his speeches generate, trigger and activate emotional involvement and mutual participation among his listeners, including the Kindai University students, the American Congress, and many others. We must wait to further discover how Abe’s message of “hope” may contribute to the future of Japan society as well as the entire world.

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