How does Obama use language and rhetorical devices to make the listening public feel as though they share both power and responsibility for the future of the country in his speech?

Obama’s speech is clever, decisive and uses language creatively to engage his audience in their responsibilities for the four years ahead. He opens my addressing the audience as ‘my fellow citizens’, the noun phrase ‘fellow citizens’ expressing solidarity from the get-go, united by being Americans. He scatters these sorts of phrases in his speech, using even the country name, ‘America’ to represent the nation as united under one banner, so that the audience can feel as if they are in unison, holding power over America.

Throughout the speech, Obama uses structural devices, such as listing and parallelism to tap into a core message, and we see this in the first paragraph: ‘humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors’. This parallelism between the clauses, using an adjective then explaining it, allows Obama to deepen the fact that he is conscious of his responsibility, and also conscious of the powers and responsibilities of the American people, as looking at his language: ‘the task before us’, Obama uses the first person plural pronoun ‘us’ to create a sense of joining together as a nation and collaborating to solve the ‘task’, leaning into the idea of responsibility. Another parallel structure which strikes me is in the fourth paragraph – ‘So it has been. So it must be.’ This reflects on the power and might of the American people to have ‘carried on’, and looks to continue this, and this parallel structure emphasises the precedent of the power invested in the people, which Obama relies on.

These themes continue through the speech, as Obama talks of ‘our nation’, bringing people together in a patriotic way, and tells people that they have responsibility for their nation too, just as for ‘our schools’. He also lists areas in which the US is in crisis: ‘Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered’, to express a desire for change, that there can be a better future for the US, with the help of the citizens listening to him. He rallies his audience with telling them to have confidence, as its loss is ‘less measurable, but no less profound’, cutting to the core of his desire for a better future, and placing responsibility for that in Americans’ confidence.

The final paragraph opens ‘On this day’, which rallies his US audience to pay attention to this specific moment as a turning point, when they will have more power, as expressed through the noun phrase, ‘unity of purpose’, purpose possibly implying a goal, which then again implies responsibility. He also states, ‘we have chosen hope over fear’, yet again collectivising him and his listeners in a battle against fear, and for hope.

Overall, Obama’s speech uses varying linguistic tactics, including choice of pronouns, listing and parallel structures, to bring the people of the US together to effect change and give them responsibility and power after such a pivotal election.