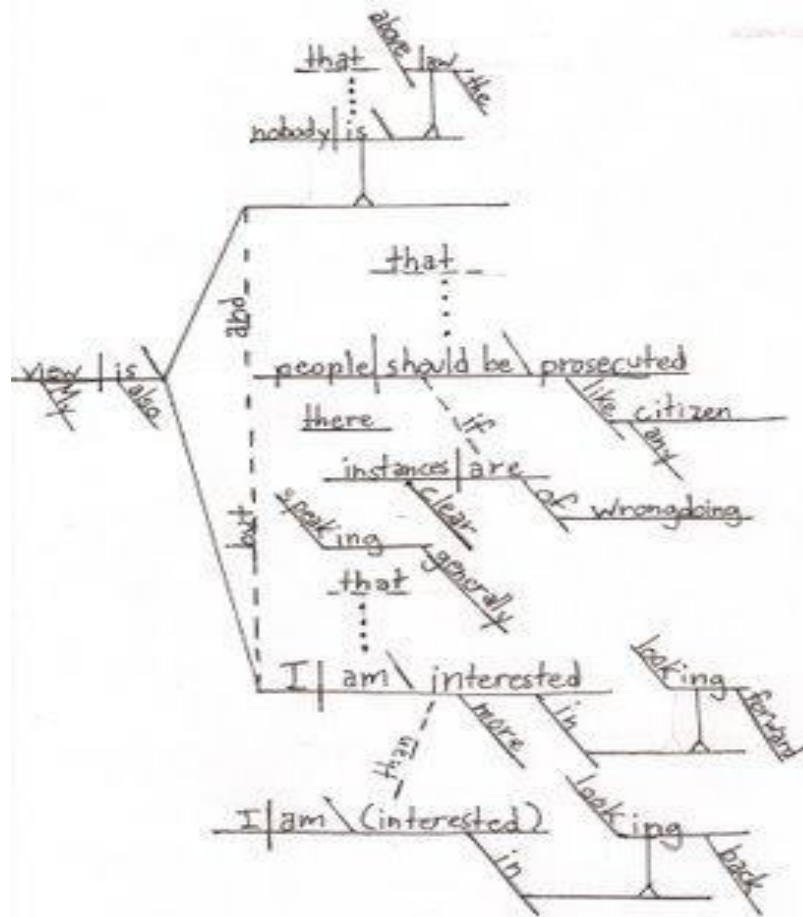


## How Obama's sentence-structure works

By [Cory Doctorow](#) at 10:19 pm Tuesday, Feb 17

Garth Risk Hallberg diagrams Obama's sentences and detects the Obaman power-grammar trick: tucking away the controversial part between inspiring mottos:



"My view is also that nobody's above the law, and, if there are clear instances of wrongdoing, that people should be prosecuted just like any ordinary citizen, but that, generally speaking, I'm more interested in looking forward than I am in looking backwards."

The diagram, though, offers several insights. First, the elegant balance of the central construction (My view is that x, and that y, but also that z) shows that Obama has a good memory for where he's been, grammatically, and a strong sense of where he's going. His tripartite analysis of the problem is clearly reflected in the structure of the sentence, and thus in the three main branches of the diagram. (Turn it on its side and it could be

a mobile.) The third "that" - thrown in 29 words into a 43-word sentence - creates three parallel predicate nouns. And then there's a little parallel flourish at the end: "I am more interested in looking forward than I am in looking back..."

This may be the essential Obama gift: making complexity and caution sound bold and active, even masculine... or rather, it may be one facet of a larger gift: what Zadie Smith calls "having more than one voice in your ear." Notice the canny way that the sentence above turns on the fulcrum of what may be Obama's favorite word: "but." What appears to be a hard line - "My view is... that nobody is above the law" - turns out to have been a qualifier for a vaguer but more inspiring motto: "I am more interested in looking forward than I am in looking back." The most controversial part of the sentence - "people should be prosecuted" - gets tucked away, almost parenthetically, in the middle...if comedians ever overcome their Obama anxiety, this may be his Achilles heel: "The beef, assuming it's in a port wine reduction, sounds, uh, amazing, but on the other hand, given that the chicken is, ah, locally grown, I'd be eager to try it."

See the link: <http://boingboing.net/2009/02/17/how-obamas-sentences.html>