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The Linguistic Strategies of Motivational Speakers in Shaping Human Development

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ABSTRACT

The paper contains a discourse analysis of the language strategies used by motivational speakers in order to influence and shape perceptions of human development. Beyond the psychological or self-help approach, this paper takes a linguistic approach to unravel the way language is used as a major instrument of writing the stories of personal change. Using a qualitative comparison of a curated collection of popular inspirational speeches, this study identifies and discusses the presence of frequent linguistic formulas within three major areas, including (1) lexical and semantic, including the use of empowering language, contrastive pairs (e.g., "failure" vs. "success"), and the use of strategic vagueness; (2) syntax, including the use of imperative mood, agentless formations, and future-oriented modals to order the action and make the project look possible; and (3) pragmatic and rhetoric. The results demonstrate that motivational speakers do not just tell about development but also act it out through the discourse, creating a new identity with the audience and modeling a model of a journey struggle to success. This paper will posit that motivational speaking is effective because it uses these linguistic strategies effectively combined in order to evoke a decreased cognitive dissonance, the feeling of agency, and, finally, the engagement of the audience in adopting a new story about their own lives. The paper concludes that genre of motivational speaking is a special and potent type of persuasive speech, the language mechanics of which are the focus of its influence on the listeners of the world.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Motivational Speaking, Persuasion, Linguistic Strategies, Pragmatics, Rhetoric, Personal Development, Performance.

Introduction

Motivational speaking is a widespread and powerful genre of speech, which has the capacity to influence modern definitions of selfhood, agency, and the process of human development (Lowe, 2019; Van Dijk, 2021). Although the psychological implications of such discourse have often been researched (Ryan and Deci, 2000b), the actual mechanics of it, the particular tools of language that trigger persuasion and induce identity change, are under theory of applied linguistics analysis in a crucial undertone (Charteris-Black, 2018; Flores, 2021). The persuasive architecture of political rhetoric (Atkinson, 1984; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986) and religious sermonics have been successfully deconstructed using extant research, but the

specific discursive ecosystem of motivational speaking, in which performance, therapy, and social entrepreneurship intersect, requires a focused linguistic study (Lichtenstein, 2020; Cameron, 2000). The paper fills this gap in the scholarly literature by making the argument that the effectiveness of motivational speakers is not in how new the ideas being conveyed are, but in how well they utilize a repertoire of linguistic strategies, including the use of lexical means with careful calibration, syntactic structures, and the pragmatic means, which have an overall effect of creating a convincing narrative of personal change (Gee, 2014; Block, 2013). This paper rather hypothesizes, by performing a discourse analysis of inspirational speeches they curate, that these inspirational speakers enact development in a performative way, through the use of language modeling a stereotypical experience of struggle and success and interpellating the audience into a new, agentic identity (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Fairclough, 2013). Combining approaches of Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) and pragmatics, the given analysis aims at shedding light on the exact linguistic processes that support this powerful mode of contemporary persuasion.

This performativity of the language is consistent with the idea of the so-called technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) discourse as a means through which people can change themselves to attain a particular state of being. This metamorphosis is also created in the sphere of motivational speaking with the help of the planned combination of narration and rhetorical art. The narrative of the speaker, which is usually a personal story on how he or she overcame a challenge, serves as a masterplot (Brooks, 1984) to be followed by the audience and so the distinction between the self and the identity projected by the listener is blurred (Goffman, 1981; Wortham, 2001). The tactical application of metaphorical frames heavily enhances this process because abstract struggles are reimagined as real fights or journeys, an approach that has proven extremely powerful in influencing the cognitive and emotional processing (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Semino, 2008). Moreover, the discursive creation of a common society among the audience, which is among the main strategies of inclusion and alignment, appeals to the theories of the membership categorization and taking a stance (Du Bois, 2007; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015) and places the speaker not only as an orator but as a head of a new movement toward self-improvement. The online broadcasting of these speeches makes the issue even more complicated, with the commodification of the language and even the algorithms of the platform themselves defining the dissemination and acceptance of those inspirational messages (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Page et al., 2014). Thus, the multifaceted nature must be included in a profound analysis, as the micro-linguistic features are not only studied but also their inclusion into greater discursive units and ways in which they spread across digital ecosystems in order to be able to perceive the full expression on how motivational discourse has created consent on certain models of human development and success (Gill, 2009; McGuigan, 2014).

This is a complex persuasive mechanism that requires a multi-dimensional model of analysis to decipher. The research, thus, is based on a synthesis of methodological practices to represent the granular features of the language as well as their macro-discursive operations. At the micro-level, the analysis will rely on the corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) (Baker et al., 2008; Partington et al., 2013) to determine statistically significant lexical patterns and keywords, which are the foundations of motivational rhetoric. Such quantitative base is supplemented with a qualitative, finer-grained approach to the study of the pragmatic acts (Mey, 2001) in a manner that utterances are regarded as performative acts of speech (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969) aimed at creating particular cognitive and emotional responses in the audience. Moreover, the narrative system of these speeches will be characterized with the

help of the instruments of narrative analysis (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Bamberg, 2012) to learn how the life stories are strategically emplotted to become the ideal examples. Most importantly, this micro-analysis would be put into a much broader Critical Discourse Analytic (CDA) paradigm (Fairclough, 1995; Van Leeuwen, 2008) to question the ideological nature of these linguistic options, namely, how they naturalize neoliberal concepts of individualism, incessant self-optimization, and commodification of personal development (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; M. N. Fairclough, 2018). With the incorporation of these different, yet simultaneously complementary methodological lenses, this study will furnish an account of motivational discourse as an operation of linguistic technology that has proven powerful and useful in the formation of subjectivities today.

Methodology

The research methodology to be used in the research is qualitative in nature as it will incorporate the principles of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) in combination with the interpretive framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). With the help of this synthesis, it is possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of motivational speeches, shifting beyond the systematic identification of recurring linguistic patterns in a set of texts to a critical analysis of their persuasive and ideological roles in a larger socio-cultural framework. The data was chosen using a purposive model of sampling as the purpose was to make sure that the corpus was rich in information and was pivotal to the phenomenon being studied. The corpus that has been collected includes fifteen publicly available speeches of five world-renowned motivational speakers with the unique rhetorical style and emphasis on personal growth, i.e., Tony Robbins, Les Brown, Eric Thomas, Mel Robbins, and Brené Brown. Each speaker was chosen three full-length speeches on their official online platforms to present the primary message of each speaker, which gave a wide but narrow range of corpus to compare the speeches of the speakers and analyze them in terms of the themes, amounting to about fifteen hours of audio-visual content.

After the selection, the speeches were taken verbatim and then transcribed through a standard orthographic transcription protocol to make a machine-readable textual corpus. To ensure the continuity of the integrity of the performative and interactive character of the live speeches, the transcription process saved important elements of paralinguistic information very pertinent to motivational speech, such as considerable pauses, emphasis stress, repetition, audience response, and non-verbal or non-lexical expressions. The formulation of the analysis was based on three continuous and complementary steps. The initial step was a corpus-based examination with the help of such computational resources as AntConc and LancsBox with the aim at creating a quantitative summary of the discourse; in that case, the word frequency analysis and keyword analysis were carried out to determine the main thematic themes and collocation and concordance analysis were performed in order to reveal the main semantic prosodies and phraseologies. The quantitative results of this prelim step in turn informed a second round of qualitative discourse analysis where the transcripts were manually coded under NVivo software according to a scheme formulated out of the theoretical framework and emerging patterns with emphasis on lexical-semantic strategies, syntactic strategies and pragmatic-rhetorical strategies.

The last step was critical interpretation of the linguistic patterns identified during the first two steps applied to the CDA and theoretical concepts such as technologies of the self and neoliberal ideology; this macro-level analysis answered what models of success and personhood were being produced, how the speaker-audience relationship was linguistically achieved, and how the discursive practices were evangelizing particular ideological values. In

the process, the ethical standards were followed as the study has used publicly available data only and addressed speakers by their public names which is a usual practice in academic discourse analysis of public figures. To further support analytical rigor and credibility, the study used investigator triangulation, had a clear audit trail of all the analytical decisions, and will supply thick description and extensive quoting of the data to enable the readers to assess the interpretations and hold the findings to be based on the evidence.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on a three-part theoretical framework aimed at the analysis of motivational speaking as the level of language, social practice, and ideological functions. The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2021) is the key lens and is the main principle according to which language is a type of social practice that influences and is influenced by power relations and ideologies. Instead of being neutral, discourse is employed to create a certain version of reality, develop power, and advance certain worldviews. It is possible to study the impact of motivational speakers on their audiences through the use of language to persuade and influence them using this lens, and their advice can be regarded not as a helpful piece of advice but, in fact, as the truth they need to succeed in life.

The framework takes into consideration the idea of the technologies of the self of Michel Foucault to understand the particular vision of the self that this discourse advances (Foucault, 1988). This theory explains the procedure and way of doing things wherein people are motivated to change themselves so as to reach a state of fulfillment or perfection. Motivational speaking is examined as contemporary, mass-mediated technology of self, in which the speaker provides an expert guidance. They guide their audiences through their language techniques, as to how to watch, evaluate, and rework their thoughts, actions, and purposes on a model of an ideal and high-performing person as prescribed by them.

Lastly, the model applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) in order to decode the particular linguistic processes of persuasion. According to this theory, human thinking is fundamentally metaphorical, it is to be understood in more concrete terms. What the analysis reveals are the ubiquitous metaphorical frames that organize the motivational discourse like LIFE IS A JOURNEY, SUCCESS IS A BATTLE, or THE MIND IS A TOOL and how such metaphors organize the view of the audience to their own struggles and possibilities and render the otherwise complicated processes of development tangible and manageable. The combination of these three theories offers a solid framework to the analysis of motivational language functioning to create a strong and compelling image of individual change.

Literature Review

Motivational speaking is a field that lies at the cross-section of linguistics, psychology, and communication studies, but it is still a little-researched field of discourse analysis. Research that has been conducted so far has viewed the phenomenon in two dimensions: psychological effects of motivation and stylistic aspects of persuasive speech. The General Psychological constructs, especially the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000b) offer an imperative construct within the internal and external motivating factors of human behaviors. The difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (motivation which is based on inner satisfaction and externally rewarded respectively) provided by Ryan and Deci is a great tool to understand the effectiveness of motivational speakers: perhaps, it is in their ability to appeal to both systems at once.

Persuasive genres Linguistic study of persuasive genre has centred mostly on political speech and religious preaching. The utilization of rhetorical devices, including the three-part list (tricolon), contrastive pairs, and metaphor, has been widely studied in the literature on

political rhetoric as one of the effective methods of creating an argument and shaping group identity (Atkinson, 1984; Charteris-Black, 2018). In the same way, the study of religious sermonics has also emphasized the effectiveness of narrative and storytelling to generate an emotional connection and ethical orientation in a flock (Irvine, 2022). Although this study will offer a powerful analysis of persuasive language, directing it to the distinct and hybrid form of motivational speaking, the combination of preaching, coaching, and performance, is scarce. A little, yet expanding literature has started to explicitly deal with motivational speeches. There are even stylistic analyses of speeches given by such leaders as Jack Ma, which evaluate the use of rhetorical questions and figurative language in them (Rahayu and Kurniawan, 2020). Critical discourse analysis has also been used by others to explore the ideological foundation of self-help discourse, claiming that it tends to propagate neoliberal ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and the commodity of self (Lowe, 2019; Fairclough, 2018). This study is critical because it goes beyond explaining the nature of linguistic properties to evaluating their role in society and can be proposed that motivational language may help to naturalize a particular competitive model of success.

Nevertheless, there is still a big gap. No such research has been done which syntactically integrates the micro-linguistic analysis with a critical theoretical approach to specifically deconstruct the way motivational speakers manipulate language as a means of identity making and ideological persuasion. Past research tends to concentrate on an individual speaker or rather a limited number of linguistic devices without connecting them to some wider social power theory. Moreover, the discussion of digital platforms as productive and receptive tools of production and reception of motivational discourse is a new agendum, with the aesthetics and limitations of the social media shaping the rhetorical strategies (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

This paper will attempt to fill this gap by means of a critical discourse analysis of motivational speeches which will be based on theoretical frameworks of Foucault, in his theory of technologies of the self and Conceptual Metaphor Theory. It tries to expand with the work of SDT and stylistic analysis and include the critical view of CDA to understand not only what linguistic strategies are employed, but how they work between discourses, such as religious, political, and therapeutic discourses, in order to construct the perception of the audience and advance a specific vision of human progress in a neoliberal world.

Results

The overall linguistic examination of the motivational speech corpus displayed a multifaceted and highly tactical compounding of discursive elements, all of them aimed at creating the impact of a strong story of self-change and a deep sense of power and urgency in the audience. The results indicate that persuasion is not produced by the use of separate rhetorical tools but rather their combination to form a unified discursive edifice that will be experienced at a cognitive level as well as an emotional one. One of the most significant observations was that personal pronouns were used in overwhelming numbers and were the foundation of the interpersonal aspect of the speeches. The second person pronoun you was used with impressive frequency, as it is a personal form of address that makes the message more personal and gives an illusion of a one-on-one, unfiltered communication between the speaker and each listener thereby increasing the effects of personal responsibility and personal accountability to change. This has always been accompanied by the tactical usage of the first-person plural of we, which was used to break down the separations between speaker and listener and form a collective identity and a shared path to a better place. The alternation between the use of the pronouns you (direct responsibility and suggest a sense of deficit) and

we (solidarity, common struggle, common victory), calculated and managed by the speakers, enabled them to balance the speaker-audience relationship between challenge and support, between individual culpability on the one hand and group possibility on the other.

Moreover, the language formality also was significantly marked by high level of imperative force and deontic necessity. Directive speech acts, which served as verbal action catalysts, were saturated with verbal means such as explicit commands (Get up right now and do something), strong obligation modals (you must, you have to, you need to), and eliminative modals and proscribed certain actions or even mindsets (you can't, stop waiting, quit complaining). This is not just a suggestive linguistic scheme, but a discursive one that works by disconstituting perceived states of passivity and imposing a non-negotiable imperative of immediate action and thus positions inaction as an active act of a state with an undesired result. This was usually accompanied by a futuristic speculation on volitional and dynamic modals such as will and can, which were used to present a clear image of a possible future that would only be achieved once the audience did what was required of them to ensure that there is an end to the current struggle and a beginning of a success.

At the conceptual level the discourse was crowded with a network of replicated metaphorical frames, which ordered the abstract and frequently intangible process of personal development in concrete familiar and struggle-oriented arenas. The leading metaphorical mapping that was found was the one of LIFE IS A BATTLE or A Competitive Struggle. This was achieved by a ruthless vocabulary of battle and war, such as words, which connote fighting, war, enemy, attack, win, conquer, destroy. This shot put the doubts and challenges in the audience in the correct context of an adversary that must be beaten, and allowed a culture of ruthless aggression and persistence to be justified. Intimately connected was the widespread metaphor of THE PURSUIT OF SUCCESS IS A JOURNEY which was a way of conceptualizing goal success as a journey (your journey, the right road), a step-by-step process (the next step, keep moving), or an climb (climb the mountain, reach the top). That frame gave it a feeling of movement and direction, that a big vision was not immediately overwhelming, but would be addressed in small steps. A third important metaphor was of THE MIND IS A MACHINE OR A TOOL which is manifested in expressions such as, program your mind, rewire your thinking, switch on, and unlock your potential. This metaphor diminishes psychic conditions to those of technical issues, positioning the self as a system, which can be hacked, improved, and engineered by the right thinking methods and thus making appeal to the urge to be the master and in charge of his or her cognition.

The metaphors were based on a consistent employment of stark, binary opposition pairs that created a Manichean worldview in which there was little room to be nuanced and little room to be in the middle. The speeches were full of polarised lexis like victory and defeat, champion and loser, extraordinary and average, greatness and mediocrity and passion and excuse. This rhetorical device was used strategically to polarize the audience on the life choices they made in a dramatic and simplified way and made high stakes binary choices that the audience is forced to choose between two mutually exclusive identities. It was an effective motivational mechanism in that it capitalized on the desire of the human to approach a positively represented ideal and, possibly more effective, to eschew the stigmatized, negatively represented role of the loser or the average.

The rhetorical outlay of the speeches always had a strong narrative trajectory that resembled to the classical redemption and rebirth in the story. Orators took great pains in personal narration, and told personal stories with specific and emotionally colored anecdotes of their own failures, their lowest moments, their time of great difficulty, and how they finally got on

their feet again. This storytelling activity was much more than anecdotal, as it served as the main generator of the ethos and authenticity of the speaker, which is objective evidence of the workability of ideas that the same strategies they teach have been tried and tested in the furnace of their own personal experience. These stories offer a familiar model of the journey recommended to be followed as the audience emulates the prescribed journey and the abstract process of change becomes concrete and attainable. The paralinguistic characteristics that were sharply dramatized and transcribed and analyzed enhanced the linguistic content of these stories significantly. In order to build tension and emphasis, dramatic pauses were implemented, sudden changes in volume (a whisper to a shout) were used to indicate the intensity of emotion and urgency, and the rhythmic movement of speech was controlled by pace, and the selected repetition of essential phrases in the minds of the audience was used to brand concepts. These aspects were not peripheral but were part and parcel of the persuasive power, which turned the speech into a monologue that became a monologue with stakes and an emotional feeling.

Discussion

The results of the given analysis create a clear image: the charm of the motivational speaking is neither a question of the charismatic presentation but a highly developed and thoughtful use of the words. The patterns that the corpus reveals to be consistent, i.e., the tactical use of pronouns, the imperative form of the verb, the omnipresent metaphorical framing, binary oppositions, and the redemptive narrative structure, all work together as a discursive machinery aimed to interpellate, persuade, and transform the audience. This discussion comments on these findings in the context of our theoretical framework claiming that motivational discourse is a powerful contemporary technology of the self that uses linguistic means to market a certain, neoliberal vision of identity and success.

This excessive use of personal pronouns, especially the alternation between the use of the personal pronouns, you and we, is a direct support of the idea of discourse as a social practice that operates relational relations proposed by Fairclough (1995). The personal appeal of the word you makes it individual and each listener is personally responsible of his present condition and his future change. This constitutes a disciplinary gaze, which Foucault (1988) would term as linguistic, in which the subject is instilled to watch and compare to the ideals of the speaker. On the other, the application of the we creates what Van Dijk (1998) calls an in-group identity, which creates a feeling of equal struggle and shared cause that counters the alienation that might result with constant scrutiny of the individual. This tactical swapping enables the speaker to play two roles: the one that places blame and responsibility on the individual (you are not working hard enough) and the one that places them on the same side and celebrates the success jointly (we will win together).

This power dynamic is further enforced by the high mode of imperatives and obligation. The must, have to, need to language is not only suggestive but it commands and does what Austin (1975) referred to as directive speech acts. This power of the language is the key to the role of the discourse as a technology of the self; it offers the exact guidelines of the process of the self-transformation. Framing the inaction process with the eliminative modals (you can't quit), the discourse pathologizes passivity and normalizes the state of all-time striving. This is exactly what Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) and Fairclough (2018) criticized in their neoliberal ethos, making the self a business venture that constantly needs to be invested in, maximized, and worked. The language of motivation then is transformed into the language of forced self-capitalization.

Conceptual metaphors that are revealed are not incidental; they form the basis of the way discourse creates reality. The metaphor of LIFE IS A BATTLE, according to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), offers a sensible thinking model to the personal struggle. By the metaphor of enemies that have to be destroyed, the discourse justifies the mentality of aggression and brutal competition, not just with the external forces but with a former self. The JOURNEY metaphor allows one to have a feeling of agency and direction, and the abstract objective of success can now appear as a journey with an obvious destination. More importantly, the metaphor of the MIND IS A MACHINE simplifies human psychology of a complex system into a set of levers and buttons which can be reprogrammed. This effectively disemphasizes structural, social or economic impediments to success and makes the whole burden of change lie in the capacity of the individual to a mastery of his or her own inner life, which is technical. This is a classic manifestation of neoliberalism ideology, in which structural problems are re-packaged as individual mental attitude and coding problems.

The ideological drive of this discourse is the binary oppositions (which are: champion vs. loser). They establish a high-stakes, compelling world that has no neutral position, which they essentially make a crisis of identity that the speaker in question then offers to solve. It is a simplistic Manichean worldview that renders the complicated social reality and inspires with the fear of being classified as a negative. Lastly, the personal accounts of the speakers about redemption are the most convincing one. As discussed here in terms of the narrative structure created by Labow and Waletzky (1967), these tales give a concrete roadmap of change. They confirm the authority of the speaker and are living witnesses that the prescribed technology is working. These stories, including the paralinguistic intensity of their performance, turn the speech into an experience, overcoming the critical examination and going right to the heart, to emotion and identification.

To sum up, as it has been discussed the linguistic tactics of motivational speakers do not simply consist of the devices of engagement; these are the mechanisms of a compelling discursive practice. This practice interpellates people as entrepreneurial subjects, who have a role to play in their own fate by being undeterred by hard work that they can engage in, and it also obscures the larger social and economic frameworks in which they are placed as the self. The discourse does not merely describe things as being transformed, but actually performs transformation, through all the means of grammar and metaphor and story and persuasion, to get the audience to agree to and internalize a particular and highly ideological way of human development and success.

Conclusions

This paper has conducted a critical linguistic analysis of motivational speaking, which transcends the ordinary understanding of motivational speech and attempts to interpret it as an organized and tactical type of persuasive speech. It has been shown throughout the analysis that the effectiveness of this genre does not reside in a single and mystical quality of charisma but rather is created by an elaborate synthesis of linguistic strategies that can be replicated. The extensive application of personal pronouns manages the relational force which directly interpellates the listener into a sense of responsibility and identity. The imperatives and obligation are high-modality language, where sentences carry a discursive work, that is, give orders, which pathologize inaction and naturalize a condition of incessant effort. The cognitive structures that re-form the abstract development into a concrete struggle in need of technical self-mastery are the conceptual metaphors of battle, journey, and machine. Also, the extreme binary oppositions create high-stakes worldview creating a

crisis of identity, and the personal redemption plotlines offer an authenticating blueprint of transformation, with paralinguistic intensity.

These linguistic formations have been shown, using the prismatic perspectives of Critical Discourse Analysis, technologies of the self as developed by Foucault and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, to be more than rhetorical flourishes; they are indeed the major engines of a contemporary technology of the self. This technology is entwined with the neoliberal philosophy, which advocates a format of the subject as an entrepreneurial enterprise - one that needs to continuously invest in, optimize and capitalise on its own human resource. This systematizes individualization of success and failure, placing the whole burden of success on the shoulders of an individual and at the same time masks the larger societal, economic and structural contexts that influence the outcomes of life. In such way, motivational speaking represents a strong cultural bidding that does not only stimulate one to make personal improvements but also naturalizes and replicates a particular, competitive, and highly individualistic image of self and self in relation to society.

The research does not only have implications in the academic field. To mass consumers of inspirational content, this critique offers a critical toolkit through which they can disassemble the persuasive appeals they are subjected to with the view to becoming more media-literate and critical of a genre that has a strong impact on shaping the modern ideals of success. To theorists, the research fills gaps between linguistics, social theory, and critical studies, providing a sound structure of further dissection of the discourse of self-help, coaching, and other literature of personal transformation. The future studies may be fruitful development of cross-cultural differences in motivation discourse, its interaction with algorithms of digital platforms, and longitudinal research of the long-lasting impact of its linguistic forms on the beliefs and behavior of the audience. In conclusion, this paper achieves that to grasp the power of motivational speaking we need to go to its language since it is in the complexity and the conscious use of words that the task of constructing the modern self is actually achieved.

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