

LINGUO-PRAGMATICS OF PERSONAL GROWTH IN CONTEMPORARY MOTIVATIONAL MEDIA

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The paper explores the stylistic and linguo-pragmatic features of TED Talks as a genre of contemporary media with specific emphasis on the motivational discourse. As the public demand for self-development and emotional intelligence rises globally, investigations into how these issues are communicated through media genres such as TED Talks are gaining timeliness. The research aims to dig up and interpret the pragmatic intentions of TED speakers' speeches and reveal the stylistic means used to achieve these intentions persuasively and engagingly. Methodologically, the study draws on a corpus of 10 TED Talks on personal development. The analysis brings together three interrelated approaches: corpus-based discourse analysis to identify structural and thematic patterns; pragmatic analysis, with appeal to Leech's theory of engagement strategies; and stylistic-rhetorical analysis with a view to identifying devices such as metaphor, anaphora, and rhetorical questions. The findings show that the most dominant pragmatic intentions are making an emotional impact (40%), evoking listener interest (15%), making the audience think (10%), and nudging action (10%). The realisation of these intentions is achieved primarily through lexical stylistic devices (55%), followed by syntactic (35%) and phonetic (10%) devices. Combining pragmatic goals and stylistic devices enables speakers to construct emotionally appealing, intellectually stimulating, and action-inducing messages. The study concludes that TED Talks represent a rhetorically structured genre that effectively balances cognitive and affective appeals through strategic uses of language. The results contribute to media linguistics by showing how motivational discourse functions at the intersection of personal relevance, stylistic charm, and pragmatic intention.

ЛІНГВОПРАГМАТИКА ОСОБИСТІСНОГО РОЗВИТКУ В СУЧАСНИХ МОТИВАЦІЙНИХ МЕДІА

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Ключові слова: промови TED, стилістичні прийоми, мотиваційний дискурс, прагматичні наміри, медіалінгвістика, залучення аудиторії.

У статті досліджуються стилістичні та лінгвопрагматичні особливості промов TED як жанру сучасних мотиваційних медіа з особливим акцентом на дискурсі особистісного зростання. Оскільки суспільний попит на саморозвиток та емоційний інтелект зростає в усьому світі, дослідження того, як ці питання комунікуються через такі медіажанри, як промови TED, набувають актуальності. Мета дослідження – виявити та інтерпретувати прагматичні наміри виступів спікерів TED та розкрити стилістичні засоби, що використовуються для досягнення цих намірів переконливим та захопливим чином. Методологічно дослідження спирається на корпус із 10 виступів TED про особистісний розвиток. Аналіз об'єднує три взаємопов'язані підходи: корпусний дискурс-аналіз для виявлення структурних та тематичних закономірностей; прагматичний аналіз зі зверненням до теорії стратегій залучення Ліча; стилістично-риторичний аналіз з метою виявлення таких прийомів, як метафора, анафора та риторичні питання. Результати показують, що найдомінантнішими прагматичними намірами є емоційний вплив (40%), викликання інтересу слухача (15%), спонукання аудиторії до роздумів (10%) та спонукання до дії (10%). Реалізація цих намірів досягається переважно за допомогою лексико-стилістичних прийомів (55%), далі йдуть синтаксичні (35%) та фонетичні (10%) засоби. Поєднання прагматичних цілей та стилістичних прийомів дозволяє ораторам створювати емоційно привабливі, інтелектуально стимулюючі та спонукаючі до дії повідомлення. Дослідження робить висновок, що виступи TED являють собою риторично структурований жанр, який ефективно балансує когнітивні та афективні звернення за допомогою стратегічного використання мови. Результати роблять внесок у медіалінгвістику, показуючи, як мотиваційний дискурс функціонує на перетині особистої релевантності, стилістичної чарівності та прагматичного наміру.

Problem Statement. Contemporary motivational media, in the form of websites like TED Talks, is today a leading arena for disseminating ideas related to personal growth. Such speeches, generally praised for their accessibility and impact, are an affluent linguistic context where speakers employ language strategically to inspire, persuade, and educate their audience.

Theoretical background. This study is grounded in three starting positions: linguopragmatics, stylistics, and communication theory. Within the field of linguopragmatics, Leech's maxims offer outstanding accounts of how speakers manage interpersonal relationships through the strategic application of language [Leech, 1983]. These pragmatic notions

are particularly relevant to public speaking contexts, such as TED Talks, where audience engagement must be preserved. Within the framework of our study, we are operating with the term 'motivational discourse', which is defined as "a form of verbal and non-verbal communication designed to positively influence an individual's attitudes, actions, and behaviour, effectively encouraging change and fostering motivation" [Yerznkyan & Harutyunyan, 2024, p. 100] and serves to exemplify the convergence of communicative intention and stylistic realisation. Therefore, a specific set of stylistic rhetorical devices (like metaphor, rhetorical questions, hedging, and applause cues) is not merely decorative but is employed for

achieving clarity, persuasion, and emotional appeal. In motivational speeches on the TED platform, these two levels, pragmatics and stylistics, converge meaningfully and are verbalised through the ‘language of personal growth’. For instance, TED speakers routinely use engagement strategies (e.g., personal pronouns, direct questions, imperatives) to evoke empathy and create a sense of co-experience, pragmatically merging intention and stylistic realisation, which operates to establish an open and authoritative voice. Research showed how TED Talks’ rhetorical cues directly relate to audience reactions like applause [Liu et al., 2017], and how body language and gestures serve to enable communicative purpose [Li & Li, 2021] and how pragmatic analysis helps map hedging phrases in TED speeches using AntConc webtool [Tri Nuraniwati & Permatasari, 2020]. Along the same lines, other studies pointed out TED speeches’ interactive and multimodal character, where meaning is collaboratively created through verbal and stylistic elements [Marchenko & Minenko, 2020]. Cumulatively, these analyses call attention to the benefits of applying a pragmatic approach and stylistic devices in crafting the ‘language of personal growth’ in motivational discourse.

Research aims and objectives. This study aims to investigate how TED speakers use the ‘language of personal growth’ to construct motivational discourse through pragmatic and stylistic means in this media genre. The following objectives reflect the research aim: first, to analyse the specific stylistic devices employed to verbalise themes of personal growth, moving beyond the broad treatment often given to motivational discourse; second, to examine the interaction between pragmatic, stylistic, and genre-specific media factors through a mixed-method approach, offering a more integrated understanding of how these dimensions work together in shaping communicative impact.

The **object** of study is the motivational discourse enacted in contemporary TED Talks speeches on personal development.

The **subject** of study is the linguistic enactment (i.e., pragmatic strategies and stylistic devices) through which speakers on the TED platform speak about personal development.

Methods. The research approach of the study integrates three complementary methods: corpus-based discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis, and stylistic-rhetorical analysis, which offers breadth and depth in examining the language of personal growth in TED Talks. The starting point is a corpus-based discourse analysis, in which a representative corpus of 10 TED Talks on personal development is created. This allows for detecting and quantifying recurring linguistic patterns and structural features in a collection of speeches [Li & Li, 2021]. Pragmatic analysis examines how speakers manage interpersonal relations through, for

instance, Leech’s markers of audience engagement (e.g., direct address, inclusive pronouns). These findings reveal the underlying communicative intentions and relational strategies used to construct audience rapport. Finally, stylistic-rhetorical analysis focuses on how rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, repetition, rhetorical questions, and applause cues, enhance the persuasive and emotional impact of the speeches. This triangulated approach ensures a multi-layer understanding of how TED speakers linguistically present personal growth in a media setting.

Research Material. TED Talk speeches are a good source of stylistic and pragmatic means. The creators of TED say that the platform is “*a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less)*” [TED]. However, it immediately becomes clear that “*persuasive speeches*” achieve their goal through visualisation, time reduction, and skilful use of communicative strategies that help listeners perceive speakers and listen to their advice. For our study, we chose the following 10 TED Talk videos on personal development, which have recently become extremely popular and relevant.

Elizabeth Lesser, in “*Say your truths and seek them in others*”, shares about how the death of a loved one taught her to be open to others and encouraged others to be authentic [Lesser]. **Susan David**, in “*The gift and power of emotional courage*”, emphasises the importance of being able to accept and experience both positive and negative emotions [David]. In “*10 ways to have a better conversation*,” **Celeste Headlee** discusses the critical lack of communication skills in modern society [Headlee]. **Adam Grant**, in “*The surprising habits of original thinkers*”, shares unusual ideas about the characteristics of “originals”, proving that “procrastinators” are more creative [Grant]. **Gill Hicks**, in “*I survived a terrorist attack. Here’s what I learned*”, shares a striking experience that teaches us that we must remember humanity and stop devaluing other people because they do not meet our criteria [Hicks]. **Reshma Saujani**, in “*Teach girls bravery, not perfection*,” encourages listeners to strive for courage and view each problem as a potential challenge that will take us one step closer to the goal [Saujani]. **Adam Grant**, in “*Are you a giver or a taker?*” Adam Grant suggests that we learn to succeed by helping others, not competing with them [Grant]. **Emily Esfahani Smith**, in “*There’s more to life than being happy*,” claims that the pursuit of happiness makes people unhappy, drawing attention to more essential things in life: belonging, purpose, transcendence, and the ability to tell your story [Smith]. **Angela Lee Duckworth**, in “*Grit: the power of passion and perseverance*,” discusses another possible key to success: having a passion for what you love [Duckworth]. **Kelly McGonigal**, in “*How to make stress your friend*,” encourages us to look at stressful situations from a positive perspective [McGonigal].

Because these topics are so diverse, they contribute to the theme of personal growth. By telling simple truths and drawing on examples from their own experiences, the speakers embody a variety of intentions, which we explore in this study.

Findings and Discussion. Based on the commonly encountered patterns, we distinguish several types of pragmatic intention in our TED Talks corpus:

- *making an emotional impact*
- *attracting attention*
- *evoking listener interest*
- *nudging action*
- *framing a particular worldview*
- *making the audience think.*

In the selected texts, pragmatic intentions were used repeatedly, but their impact varied depending on the context. Here, we will analyse the most distinct examples retrieved from the corpus.

The most commonly applied pragmatic intention is ***making an emotional impact***. Accounting for around 40% of the corpus, it helps presenters build rapport with emotionally engaging stories or shared struggles (e.g., failure, courage, vulnerability). This intention is usually expressed through lexical stylistic devices. For example: “*What stuck with me was this bedrock belief that each one of us comes into this world with a unique worth. When I looked into the face of a newborn, I caught a glimpse of that worthiness, that sense of unapologetic selfhood, that unique spark. I use the word “soul” to describe the spark, because it’s the only word in English that comes close to naming what each baby brought into the room. Every newborn was as singular as a snowflake, a matchless mash-up of biology and ancestry and mystery*” [Lesser]. This passage repeatedly uses the epithets “*bedrock belief*,” “*unique worth*,” “*unapologetic selfhood*,” “*matchless mash-up*,” and the simile “*every newborn was as singular as a snowflake*.” Stylistic devices enhance the logical and emotional emphasis, thus drawing attention to the speech and emotionally impacting the listeners.

The next two intentions, ***attracting attention*** and ***evoking listener interest***, usually follow each other and account for 30% of the corpus. The pragmatic intention ***attracting attention*** is often realised through occasionalisms because original words immediately attract listeners’ attention and make them listen to the expressed thought. Such occasionalisms are repeatedly used to create a humorous effect: “*No, it’s about being the kind of person who takes initiative to doubt the default and look for a better option. And if you do that well, you will open yourself up to the opposite of déjà vu. There’s a name for it. It’s called *vuja de**” [Grant]. In this case, the expression “*vuja de*” is an occasionalism. The author creates it to denote a phenomenon opposite the well-known *déjà vu*. This draws the listeners’ attention to the idea that the

speaker is trying to convey. Moreover, the speaker skillfully engaged the audience via repeated use of the pronoun “*you*”, which allowed him to point to the audience and make them the main character in this presentation, rather than just an observer.

The pragmatic intention ***evoking listener interest*** is similar to the previous one and can even be viewed as a result. This type of pragmatic intention involves the intellectual competence of the listener and the psychological characteristics of perception, which make him think about the meaning of the word or expression. Thus, at the beginning of her speech, Susan David addresses the listeners: “*Hello, everyone. Sawubona*” [David]. The word “*sawubona*” attracts attention and interests the listener. At that moment, the audience immediately awakens interest in the meaning of this word. Immediately after a short pause, the speaker explains this: “*In South Africa, where I come from, ‘sawubona’ is the Zulu word for ‘hello’*”. And this explanation interests the listeners even more because they want to know the purpose and meaning of using this word in speech.

The pragmatic intentions ***nudging action***, ***framing a particular worldview*** and ***making the audience think*** occasionally overlap, each taking approximately 10% of the corpus. They are usually employed to make the audience think and act, especially in aspects like resilience, creativity, emotional intelligence, and goal-setting. The pragmatic intention ***nudging action*** is straightforward to recognise, as it is expressed through imperative verbs. Speakers repeatedly use this intention to involve their audience in implementing new ideas: “*Go out, talk to people, listen to people, and, most importantly, be prepared to be amazed*” [Headlee]. All these expressions inspire and motivate us to act and try to change what we have done wrong.

The pragmatic intention ***framing a particular worldview*** is expressed by numerous linguistic means aiming to reflect the speaker’s conceptual picture of the world. This intention is often used to convey the absurdity of the modern picture and, in this contrast, to depict the desired state of affairs in society. This also calls on the listeners to analyse the information. At this stage, the audience compares their ideas about the world with the speaker’s. E. Lesser, at the beginning of her speech, characterises our life experience as a “*hamster wheel*”. Later, she calls on the listeners: “*Every now and then step off your hamster wheel into deep time*”. And finally, she talks about her own experience: “*I left the hamster wheel of work and life to join my sister on that lonely island of illness and healing*” [Lesser]. She begins by depicting the concept of the world through the metaphor of a hamster running around in a wheel. This means life is fleeting and monotonous, and we often do not know how to leave this routine.

The pragmatic intention of **making the audience think** is expressed through rhetorical questions. Such questions can arise at the beginning of a speech: *“Is there more to life than being happy? And what’s the difference between being happy and having meaning in life?”* [Smith] Asking direct questions to the audience, creating interest and arousing empathy increases the sense of unity between the speaker and the audience, which is an integral part of this event.

The analysis of pragmatic intentions across the TED Talks corpus reveals clear patterns that align closely with the genre’s communicative goals and thematic focus on personal development.

A set of stylistic devices supported all the pragmatic intentions. In the TED Talks corpus, we managed to extract the following types:

- lexical stylistic devices (metaphor, epithet, irony, oxymoron);
- syntactic stylistic devices (anaphora, parallel constructions, ellipsis);
- phonetic stylistic devices (alliteration, assonance).

The analysis of stylistic devices shows that **lexical devices** dominate (55% of the devices retrieved from the corpus), with metaphor and epithet as powerful tools of emotional appeal and worldview establishment. **Metaphors** help to characterise a phenomenon vividly, create imagery, and enhance the expressiveness of speech in the following fragments: *“uncover your soul”* [Lesser], *“the full weight of my grief”* [David], *“true belonging springs from love”* [Saujani].

Irony is a powerful device that shows a striking discrepancy between what is said and what the speaker means. Often, speakers use this stylistic device to create a comic effect and draw attention to the situation. Kelly McGonigal, inviting listeners to participate in an imaginary study and paying attention to their reaction to a stressful situation, ultimately stated, *“If you were actually in this study, you’d probably be a little stressed out”* [McGonigal]. However, she meant the opposite: this study would completely exhaust them.

In their speeches, speakers used **epithets** of different structures: *“demonizing stress”* [McGonigal],

“fragile, beautiful world” [David], *“life-or-death situation”* [Lesser] to emphasise certain features or properties of the described object and to reveal an emotionally coloured attitude to the phenomenon.

Based on the speeches we selected, we were able to investigate the use of an **oxymoron**: *“The only certainty is uncertainty”* [David]. In this case, the oxymoron is depicted by two antonyms in a predicative relationship. Susan David uses this stylistic device to reveal contradictory aspects of our lives and draw attention to their absurdity.

Syntactic devices (35%), especially anaphora and ellipsis, contribute to rhythm, repetition, and emphasis, to persuasiveness and audience involvement, often cited as purposes such as nudging to action or provoking thought on the listener’s part. **Parallel constructions** were frequent and created gradation: *“I was paid in love. I was paid in soul. I was paid in my sister”* [Lesser]. Each subsequent sentence is logically more important and expresses greater emotional force. Gradation helps penetrate the statement’s meaning deeper and creates vivid figurative associations.

Anaphora helps to make the statement emphatic: *“We are young until we are not. We walk down the streets sext until one day we realise we are unseen. We are healthy until a diagnosis brings us to our knees”* [David].

Phonetic devices are less frequent (10%) but often employed to attract attention and enhance memory. **Alliteration** is the repetition of homogeneous consonant sounds to express melody and emotionality. It is used in the following fragments: *“In other words, we need to be gritty about getting our kids grittier.”* [Duckworth]; *“It’s called the social stress test”* [McGonigal]. They emphasise the role of individual words, giving them extraordinary expressiveness.

Table 1 demonstrates the correlation between pragmatic intentions in TED Talks and the stylistic devices employed to realise them.

The findings of this research align with the number of studies on communication theories and pragmatics. We will analyse the ones that support our conclusions. The record of the most frequent inten-

Table 1

Pragmatic intentions in TED Talks and stylistic devices used for their realisation

Pragmatic intention	% (Corpus)	Stylistic devices used	Function in realising intention
Making an emotional impact	40%	Metaphor, epithet	Create vivid imagery and evoke empathy
Attracting attention	15%	Alliteration, metaphor	Capture attention and make the speech memorable
Evoking listener interest	15%	Metaphor, epithet, irony	Enhance engagement and sustain focus
Nudging action	10%	Anaphora, imperative constructions	Create persuasive calls to action
Framing a particular worldview	10%	Metaphor, epithet, and anaphora	Shape the audience perspective
Making the audience think	10%	Parallel constructions, metaphor, and irony	Invite reflection and guide interpretation

tion, *making an emotional impact*, realized primarily through metaphor and epithet, support the view that “metaphor serves not only as a decorative element but as a cognitive bridge, enabling abstract concepts to become experientially accessible” [Paliichuk & Lukina, 2021, p. 102], which is central to sustaining audience engagement in the TED Talks speeches viewed as a motivational discourse.

The frequent use of intentions *evoking listener interest* and *attracting attention* stimulated through metaphors and alliteration aligns with the idea that “sound patterns in public speech function as mnemonic anchors, ensuring that key messages remain in the listener’s memory” [Savchuk, 2024, p. 45]. This combination of vivid imagery and catchy sound amplifies the appeal of key ideas. More directive intentions, *nudging action*, *framing a particular worldview*, and *making the audience think* are realised via anaphora, parallel constructions and imperatives that create rhythm, emphasis, and cognitive engagement. These qualities are identified as “predictive markers of audience applause” [Liu et al., 2017, p. 3], which encourage immediate responses and reflective processing.

Overall, the results confirm that stylistic devices across phonetic, lexical, and syntactic levels function as targeted instruments for achieving pragmatic aims, which emphasises that stylistic choices are driven by speaker intent, audience expectations, and the interactional context [Yerznkryan & Harutyunyan, 2024].

Conclusion. The compelling interplay between pragmatic intention and stylistic device is a deciding factor in constructive motivational speech, particularly in TED Talks. Lexical stylistic devices like metaphors, epithets, and comparisons effectively bring about emotional appeal, simplify abstract concepts, and facilitate reframing. Using these resources, speakers can connect with their audience’s values and experiences, making ideas more tangible and memorable. Pragmatic intentions aim to establish rapport and maintain audience attention. TED speakers masterfully blend these elements to achieve their communicative goals, facilitating self-reflection, motivation, and change.

Cross-cultural comparison, as a further prospect for research, can provide insight into how speakers from different cultural backgrounds linguistically approach the topic of personal growth.

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