

Các biện pháp tu từ trong TED talks

Nguyễn Thị Thu Hiền^{1,*}, Hồ Nữ Như Ý²

Department of Foreign Languages, Quy Nhon University

²Undergraduate student, course 38, English Teaching Class, Quy Nhon University

Ngày nhận bài: 03/05/2019; Ngày nhận đăng: 03/06/2019

TÓM TẮT

Sự phổ biến của TED với tư cách là một kênh truyền bá ý tưởng đã thu hút sự quan tâm của các nhà nghiên cứu đối với các bài thuyết trình được chuẩn bị công phu, đặc biệt là những nghiên cứu xoay quanh giá trị giáo dục của các bài thuyết trình này. Bài viết này đã nhận diện các biện pháp tu từ được dùng trong 45 bài thuyết trình trên TED và sử dụng phương pháp định tính nhằm tìm hiểu tần số xuất hiện của chúng, từ đó khái quát những đặc điểm nổi bật của các biện pháp tu từ được áp dụng trong thể loại này. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng bài thuyết trình trong dữ liệu sử dụng rất đa dạng các biện pháp tu từ, trong đó nổi bật là hình thái tu từ. Hai thủ pháp dụng học tu từ và phép chuyển nghĩa được sử dụng khá ít trong thể loại văn bản này.

Từ khóa: Bài thuyết trình trên TED, các biện pháp tu từ, dụng học tu từ, phép chuyển nghĩa, hình thái tu từ.

*Tác giả liên hệ chính.

Email: nguyenthithuhien@qnu.edu.vn

An investigation into rhetorical devices in TED talks

Nguyen Thi Thu Hien^{1,*}, Ho Nu Nhu Y²

¹*Department of Foreign Languages, Quy Nhon University*

²*Undergraduate student, course 38, English Teaching Class, Quy Nhon University*

Received: 03/05/2019; Accepted: 03/06/2019

ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of TED as an idea-distributing platform has drawn its sharable and highly sophisticated presentations to the attention of recent research efforts, especially those focusing on TED's educational values. Keeping abreast of this trend, the researchers aimed to study the range and the frequencies of rhetorical figures used in TED talks, and thus make some broad generalizations on the prominent features of those figures. With this end in mind, the researchers have identified the rhetorical devices in 45 TED talks and analyze their noticeable features. At the same time, the study also resorts to quantitative method, which enables the researchers to gain a general picture of the occurrence frequencies of those rhetorical figures. The results reveal that TED presenters incline to use figures of speech, especially figures of repetition such as anaphora and anadiplosis, compared with the other two devices, namely figures of thought and tropes.

Keywords: *TED talks, rhetorical devices, figures of speech, figures of thought, tropes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

TED, as an abbreviation for Technology, Entertainment and Design, is a media organization whose mission is to nurture the spread of powerful ideas. With more than a billion views online and millions of listeners in lectures, TED is now hailed as a living fairytale of news media success. Their typically short talks, which feature a wide collection of topics, such as global issues, technology, design and entertainment, are considered a “*powerful way to convey an innovative idea to a giant global audience*” (Holly, 2013). The emergence of TED as a mainstream idea-spreading platform has placed its talks under the attention of recent research efforts. For example, Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara (2014) seeked to know whether TED talks should be teaching us

something, while Sugimoto (2013) looked into the characteristics and impacts of scientists taking the role of TED presenters. Regarding rhetorical devices, there were also some studies into this matter. Liu, Xu, Zhang, Mahmud, and Sinha (2017) investigated rhetorical devices being employed to provoke applause in TED talks, while Ludewig (2017) analyzed their reoccurring characteristics, including their thematic, rhetorical, argumentative features. However, there has still been a lack of organized studies into the wide range of rhetorical devices that TED presenters tend to adopt. To address this gap, this work aims to analyze and categorize rhetorical devices used in TED talks, thereby revealing the typical features of this genre.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Rhetoric and rhetorical devices

*Corresponding author:

Email: nguyenthithuhien@qnu.edu.vn

The concept of rhetoric has various meanings, most of which bear some relations to or even overlap each other to certain extent. Rhetoric can be “*the practice of oratory; the study of the strategies of effective oratory*” or “*the study of the relation between language and knowledge*” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001:1). In this paper, we would look on rhetoric from its most fundamental core meaning. Kennedy (2007) claims that the English term rhetoric, along with its variants in other European languages, was derived from the Greek word *rhetōr*, which meant a speaker in a court of law or a public meeting. Aristotle was the first person to define the term rhetoric as an art of communication, the power of exploring persuasive means on any given occasion (Kennedy, 2007). In a word, rhetoric refers to the strategic use of language in a manner that impresses the listeners and persuades them into or against a course of action.

Turning to rhetorical devices, Quintilian, as cited in Corbett (1965:425), explicitly argues that these devices are “*another means of lending ‘credibility to our arguments,’ of ‘exciting the emotions,’ and of winning ‘approval for our characters as pleaders’*”. This remark succinctly summarizes the powerful appeal that rhetorical devices hold towards listeners. At this point, a fundamental question may arise: What are rhetorical devices? According to Dickson-LaPrade (2011:11), a rhetorical device is “*an identifiable and repeatable configuration of either syntactical, semantic, or pragmatic/ illocutionary/contextual elements which deviates from more commonly encountered configurations of such elements in a manner that suggests intention and design.*”

2.2. Classification of rhetorical devices

In this study, the classification of rhetorical devices is mainly derived from the one proposed by Dickson-LaPrade (2011). He classifies rhetorical devices into three groups, including figures of speech, tropes and figures of thought.

➤ *Figures of speech* are syntactical deviations from the ordinary patterns or arrangements of words, phrases, clauses and sentences. They will be broken down into four smaller groups, namely figures of balance, figures of repetition, figures of permutation and figures of addition and omission.

➤ *Tropes* are deviations from the ordinary, principal meaning of words.

➤ *Figures of thought* are not deviations from either syntactic or semantic scheme. Instead, they deviate from schemas involving “*complex, real-world situations*” (Dickson-LaPrade, 2011:10), which deal with the pragmatic, contextual aspects of speech.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Data for this research are 45 TED talks selected in random from the website <https://www.ted.com/talks>. The talks’ duration varies greatly from five minutes and 26 seconds to 20 minutes and 27 seconds, with 10 short presentations (under 12 minutes long), 33 medium-length presentations (between 12 and 18 minutes long) and two long presentations (over 18 minutes long). Data analysis includes three main steps. Firstly, the researchers identified the rhetorical devices used in these 45 talks and then classified them into different groups. Next, the extracted data were quantitatively analyzed to work out the occurrence frequencies of the rhetorical figures. Finally, these devices were compared in terms of frequency so as to draw conclusions of the study.

3.1. A juxtaposition in the occurrence frequencies between different rhetorical devices

The analysis of forty-five TED talks shows that there are 32 rhetorical devices used by TED presenters under investigation. These devices are categorized into three main groups, namely figures of speech, tropes and figures of thought. The numbers of instances of each group are counted and presented in Figure 1.

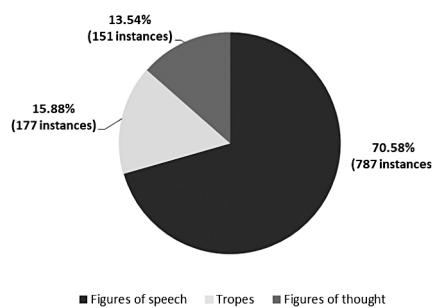


Figure 3.1. The distribution of rhetorical devices in groups

The first thing that seems to leap off the chart is the considerable proportion that figures of speech constitute, compared with the other two groups. In particular, figures of speech are the most prominent with 787 cases, nearly 4.5 times and five times bigger than the equivalent numbers of tropes (177 cases) and figures of thought (151 cases). The results also suggest that tropes are used more frequently than figures of thought, though the margin is comparatively narrow. The following are typical examples of each type.

(3.1) *When I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm bored, when I'm stressed, I listen to and create music. (figure of speech - Parallelism)*

(3.2) *I would get to roll around in my mouth not some baker's dozen of vowels like English has, but a good 30 different vowels scooching and oozing around in the Cambodian mouth like bees in a hive. (trope - simile)*

(3.3) *But how many Japanese-looking Koreans who speak with a Spanish accent or even more specific, Argentinian accent do you think are out there? (figure of thought- rhetorical question)*

3.2. The distribution of figures of speech employed in TED talks

The analysis of forty-five TED talks unfolds that there are 21 figures of speech used, all of which are categorized into four smaller groups, namely figures of balance (parallelism, tricolon and antithesis), figures of permutation (hyperbaton and apposition), figures of addition/

omission (polysyndeton, asyndeton, expletive and ellipsis), and finally figures of repetition (anaphora, epistrophe, symploce, anadiplosis, conduplicatio, diacope, epanalepsis, scesis onomatton, antimebole, epizeuxis, sound repetition and root repetition).

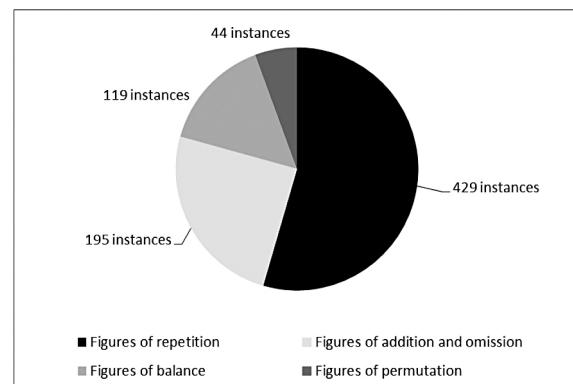


Figure 3.2. The distribution of four groups of figures of speech

It seems that the uneven distribution among figures of speech, tropes and figures of thought repeats itself when smaller groups of figures of speech are put side by side. Specifically, figures of repetition makes up the backbone of the pie with a total of 429 instances, roughly two times bigger than the equivalent number in figures of addition and omission (195 instances). Figures of balance come third at 119 instances, leaving a tiny fraction of 44 instances for figures of permutation. Here are some examples of figures of repetition, figures of balance, figures of addition and omission, and finally figures of permutation.

1. *He's crying. He's screaming. He's praying. [T25]*

2. *We ate the unleavened bread of affliction and tasted the bitter herbs of slavery. [T10]*

3. *We create those spiritual goods like friendship and trust and loyalty and love that redeem our solitude. [T10]*

4. *You can order pizza anywhere in this territory and it'll arrive to your house hot, fresh and delicious. [T12]*

There are two important points to make here. First is the overwhelming dominance of figures of repetition. A careful examination would indicate that all 45 TED talks being studied contain at least one figure of repetition. To a certain extent, this finding fits in with the common expectations, since according to Kast (2008), figures of repetition are fairly prominent in sales pitches, with which, as for Ludewig (2017), TED talks are identified. Another point to note is the negligible presence of figures of permutations, which stand no comparison with other groups of devices in the matter of frequency. However, the rare occurrence of figures in this group, in fact, comes as little surprise. It should be borne in mind that these figures are more associated with written than spoken language because they occur when we have sufficient time to make a proper choice of our word arrangements (Corbett, 1965). Another possible explanation for their low frequency is that unusual or inverted word orders may sound too formal or poetic and it takes some time for listeners to 'decode' the strange word orders by themselves.

A closer look at each group offers some noticeable points. Regarding figures of balance, the distribution of these figures is ironically nowhere near balanced. Specifically, parallelism makes up the backbone with 69 instances being counted, 35 instances more than the runner-up, tricolon, and 53 instances more than antithesis. In terms of the number of talks employing such devices, the pattern remains almost the same. On average, a staggering three in four speakers use parallelism in their speeches, while this number decreases to nearly one in three speakers using antithesis. However, it should also be noted that roughly 55 percent of TED presenters under investigation make use of tricolon, which means the use of tricolon is relatively common in TED talks, given that it is merely a special case of parallelism.

As for figures of permutation, there is a marked difference in the frequency of

occurrence between the two figures. Apposition takes the vast majority with 32 instances, 20 instances more than hyperbaton. Additionally, nearly 45% of TED speakers under analysis make use of apposition, while the corresponding figure is recorded at just 11% as for hyperbaton. That apposition has a fairly high frequency of occurrence could be explained by the fact that there is a lot of time and effort going into the preparation for a TED presentation, though there are some exceptions to the rule, including those in *TEDxRFT (jokes worth spreading)*. With the help of TED staff, presenters draw up a craft, fine-tune their messages, then memorize and rehearse the talk beforehand (Anderson, 2016). In other words, TED talks are products of thorough planning and preparing, which partly explains why apposition is used on many occasions.

Turning to figures of addition and omission, asyndeton and polysyndeton appear to constitute the majority of instances recorded. To be more specific, asyndeton takes the lion's share with 86 instances, comfortably beating polysyndeton down to the second place by a margin of 13 instances. Expletive comes third at a total of 20 instances, roughly four times smaller than that of asyndeton. Ellipsis has 16 instances, making it the least frequently used figure of addition and omission. Concerning the number presentations using each device, polysyndeton also comes second (32 talks), following the lead of asyndeton (38 talks) and beating expletive as well as ellipsis into the bottom (14 talks). To put it in another way, approximately four in five TED presenters use asyndeton, three in four using polysyndeton and one in three opting for expletive or ellipsis.

Finally, as regards figures of repetition, anaphora takes the lead with over 91% of presenters using this device at a total of 134 instances, while epanalepsis takes the bottom position with merely four cases counted. The second most popular figure of repetition is anadiplosis with 86 instances employed across 35

talks, while epistrophe, symbole, conduplicatio, epizeuxis and root repetition are used in roughly the same number of talks (from 18 to 24), though epizeuxis has a much more noticeable number of instances (60 instances) in comparison with the other four. The remaining four figures, namely diacope, scesis onomatopoeia, antimebole and sound repetition, are recorded with 33 instances in total, even fewer than the corresponding number in epistrophe (35 instances). Overall, it can be safely concluded that figures of repetition are more evenly split than figures of balance, in which parallelism takes the dominance.

It is also noted that figures of repetition were frequently combined with figures of balance or figures of addition and omission in TED talks. One probable explanation for the popularity of such mixtures is that they seem to serve so many useful purposes. While figures of balance such as parallelism and tricolon can generate rhythms pleasing to the ears and reinforce a paralleled element they claim, figures of repetition have the capacity of fixing the listeners' attention on the key ideas, maintaining focus and, again, producing rhythmic quality of the utterances. In the meanwhile, figures of addition (polysyndeton) and omission (asyndeton) could also deliver various effects, depending on the speaker's intention and listener's judgement. Specifically, they can put an emphasis on each item named on the list or, in contrast, highlight their numerosity as a whole; it also helps to regulate the utterance's pace and improve its musical rhythm. In light of the above-mentioned benefits, it is little wonder that TED speakers tend to use these devices side by side in order to amplify their potential effects to the full.

3.3. The distribution of tropes employed in TED talks

The analysis unfolds that there are eight tropes being employed, including simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, metonymy, oxymoron, litotes and hyperbole, with 177 extracted data in total.

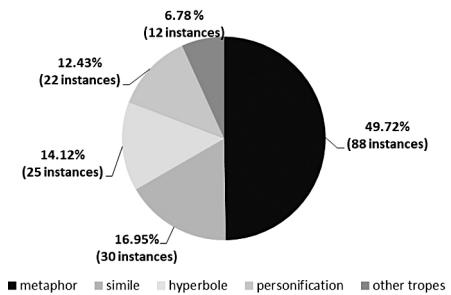


Figure 3.3. The number of instances of each trope

At first glance, what strikes most is the clear dominance of metaphor over other tropes. It is revealed from the pie chart that metaphor accounts for almost half the cases (49.72%), convincingly beating simile into the second position by a margin of 58 cases. Hyperbole and personification follow behind, at 14.12% and 12.43% respectively. Other tropes, including allusion, metonymy, oxymoron and litotes, take up the remaining 6.78%, which is even two times smaller than the proportion of personification. Regarding their distribution across 45 talks, on average, roughly four in five TED presenters spice up their presentations with metaphor, two in five going for simile, personification or hyperbole. By comparison, the occurrence frequencies of allusion, litotes, metonymy and especially oxymoron are substantially lower, which stands in direct proportion with their small numbers of instances. Here are some examples of metaphor, simile, hyperbole and personification.

5.. *You play on top of everything else, on top of the rhythms and the beat because you're the melody. [T4]*

6. *I would get to roll around in my mouth not some baker's dozen of vowels like English has, but a good 30 different vowels scooching and oozing around in the Cambodian mouth like bees in a hive. [T11]*

7. *Literally thousands of emails came in, from all different kinds of people from all over the world, doing all different kinds of things. [T29]*

8. *They stay still, and the vowels dance around the consonants. [T11]*

Clearly, a remarkable feature we can observe in this group is the regular appearance of metaphor, not to mention 22 instances of personification, “*a general category that covers a very wide range of metaphors*” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). There are some possible explanations for this phenomenon. It may be due to the fact that metaphors bring about multiple effects. They provoke vivid pictures in hearers’ mind and thus help to clarify ideas in an innovative way. In addition, Yoos (2009) argues that metaphors draw listeners’ attention to things which are challenging to express in literal words and bind authors and hearers together by putting them under the same feelings. It is also claimed that metaphors can function as a powerful tool of inspiration (Mio, 2005). A further rationale is their omnipresence in everyday life, not just in our language (literature, public speeches, everyday discourse) but even in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). In other words, metaphors are so pervasive in our ordinary life that TED presenters may have used them in their talks without any conscious intentions.

3.4. The distribution of figures of thought employed in TED talks

The study shows that there are three figures of thought being used in TED talks, including rhetorical questions, paraprosdokian and hypophora, with 151 extracted data in total.

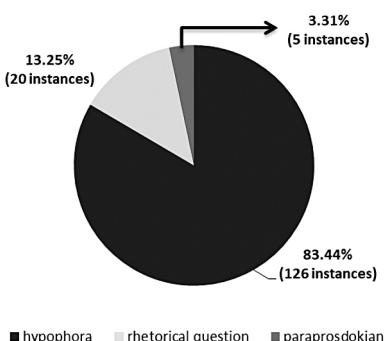


Figure 4.7. The number of instances of each figure of thought

It seems that the distributional pattern in figures of thought bears a close resemblance to that of permutational figures, in which one

device takes up the lion’s share of the pie. In this case, that significant majority belongs to hypophora at over 83%, roughly six times bigger than the corresponding proportion of rhetorical questions (13.25%) - the runner-up. Paraprosdokian completes the pie with a tiny fraction of 3.31%, the smallest figure across both graphs. Besides, it is clear from the table that on average, an impressive four in five TED speakers adopt hypophora, reflecting their strong preference for this figure. By comparison, the corresponding figures in rhetorical questions and paraprosdokian are calculated at respectively one in three and one in eleven. Here are some typical examples of rhetorical questions, paraprosdokian and hypophora.

9. *But how many Japanese-looking Koreans who speak with a Spanish accent, or even more specific, Argentinian accent, do you think are out there? [T6]*

10. *I enrolled myself in something called “sexual surrogacy therapy,” in which people I was encouraged to call doctors prescribed what I was encouraged to call exercises with women I was encouraged to call surrogates, who were not exactly prostitutes but who were also not exactly anything else. [T38]*

11. *I said at the beginning, we’re losing our listening. Why did I say that? Well, there are a lot of reasons for this. [T5]*

The overwhelming popularity of hypophora can be partially explained by its multifunctionality. The study points out that in TED talks, hypophora is adopted for three main purposes. Firstly, it can function as a transitional device, allowing the speaker to change directions or enter a new area of discussion by asking about it. This technique would help to walk the audience through the speech in a natural way and, at the same time, connect the whole talk together. Secondly, raising questions could stimulate interest from the audience by creating a moment of suspense. The speaker would present a little mystery

by asking a question that the listener cannot answer, at least not readily, and then solve it. Additionally, hypophora could be employed to suggest questions that the listeners may ask, creating a sense of involvement with the audience. On the same grounds of functionality, the rare occurrence of paraprosdokian, another figure of thought, can be partially explained since paraprosdokian usually functions as laugh provokers. On the other hand, though having many useful functions, rhetorical questions are employed much less times than hypophora. Perhaps, this boils down to TED approach or format; yet, at this point, we cannot give any solid explanation for this difference.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the range and the frequencies of rhetorical figures used in TED talks, and subsequently make some broad generalizations on the prominent features of those figures. The final results unfold that 32 figures are used in 45 chosen TED talks, including 21 figures of speech, eight tropes and three figures of thought. Besides, TED presenters show a strong inclination towards figures of speech, especially figures of repetition such as anaphora and anadiplosis. Other interesting findings are the recurring combination of figures of repetition with other devices and the clear prominence of metaphor and hypophora.

REFERENCES

1. Bizzel, P., & Herzberg, B. *The rhetorical tradition: Readings from classical times to the present* (2nd ed.). Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2001.
2. Corbett, E. P. J. *Classical rhetoric for modern student*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1965.
3. Dickson-LaPrade, D. *Toward an analytically useful taxonomy of the figures of speech*. Retrieved November 21, 2018 from https://www.academia.edu/3640262/Toward_an_Analytically_Useful_Taxonomy_of_the_Figures_of_Speech, 2011.
4. Holly, K. *Who makes it onto the TED stage? The inside scoop*. Forbes. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/krisztinaholly/2013/11/14/so-you-want-to-give-a-ted-talk/#444f002a64a4>, 2013.
5. Kennedy, G. A. *Aristotle on rhetoric*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007.
6. Liu, Z., Xu, A., Zhang, M., Mahmud, J., & Sinha, V. *Fostering user engagement: Rhetorical devices for applause generation learnt from TED Talks*. Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. Retrieved from <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1704/1704.02362.pdf>, 2017.
7. Ludewig, J. TED Talks as an emergent genre. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 19 (1). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2946>, 2017.
8. Romanelli, F., Cain, J., & McNamara, J. P. Should TED talks be teaching us something? *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 76(6). Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4140479/pdf/ajpe786113.pdf>, 2014.
9. Sugimoto, C. R., Thelwall, M., Larivière, V., Tsou, A., Mongeon, P., & Macaluso, B. Characteristics and Impact of TED Talk Presenters, *Scientists Popularizing Science*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0062403>, 2013.