Strategies of Opening A Speech: An Analysis of 20 TED Speeches

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Abstract—As giving English speeches becomes an indispensable part of many people’s lives, it is essential to seek for approaches to avoid the “nice-to-be-here” platitudes in the prologue. Although many researches have been done in this field, few of them have connected quantitative data with the specific strategies. How to summarize the most influential strategies of making a prologue in English speeches was regarded as the problem to be solved in this paper. Taking 20 TED speeches as data, this paper would analyze the most useful and important strategies of opening a speech with the help of American psychologist Lochin’ Primacy Effect theory. After the investigation, four kinds of strategies of making a prologue were listed out together with their use frequency and times of receiving positive reactions. In conclusion, “Humor and wit” prologue turned out to be the most popular strategy while the story-telling one being the most-used strategy, and asking questions may fail to bring positive effect sometimes.

Index Terms—TED speeches, primacy effect theory, strategies of making prologues.

I. INTRODUCTION

As making public speeches becomes an indispensable part of most people’s lives, speakers are trying every possible method to make their speeches impressive. However, most people always unconsciously make the “nice-to-be-here” platitudes in the opening of a speech, which would definitely bore the audience. Therefore, the opening of a public speech is crucial for the speaker to attract attention and avoid platitude.

Previous researchers have demonstrated a series of strategies of opening a speech and summarized their effects, but most of them failed to connect the theoretical knowledge with practical cases. Taking 20 TED speeches as examples, this paper aims to analyze the most useful and important strategies of opening a speech with the help of American psychologist Lochin’s Primacy Effect theory.

In the first part, this paper presents the general information of TED speeches, including the 20 speeches in concern and the selection criteria. The second part gives a clear illustration of Lochin’s theory of Primacy Effect and its application in prologue analysis. The third part makes an analysis of the 20 TED speeches and interprets in details the most significant strategies of opening a speech with the help of the Primacy Effect theory, so as to show their importance and influences with a combination of theoretical and practical analysis.

A. General Information of TED Speeches

TED talks include speeches from expert speakers of various fields, such as education, business, art and science, etc. Under the slogan “ideas worth spreading”, TED has presented hundreds of successful speeches with different styles. Thus, it is a reservoir of good speeches in English and has the value to be studied in terms of how to make an attractive prologue.

1) Origin and development

TED (Technology, entertainment, design) was founded in February 1984 as a conference, which has been held annually since 1990. At the very beginning, its emphasis was solely in technology and design, corresponding to its Silicon Valley origins. With time passing by, TED has broadened its focus to include talks on various topics like scientific, culture, academic fields and etc. How to express a highly concentrated idea in a precise and concise language within a limited time is the first problem that the speaker must face.

Since June 2006, TED talks have been offered for free viewing online. As each speaker is given only the maximum of 18 minutes to present their ideas in the most innovative and engaging ways, those speech videos have attracted an amazing number of online audience. Only by 2012, over one billion times had TED Talks been watched worldwide.

2) The 20 speeches in concern and the selection criteria

Since there are over 2500+ speeches on the TED official website while the research objects in this paper consist of only 20 of them, how do we choose the most representative and successful 20 speeches? In this paper, the selection criteria will be the popularity of those videos. By ranking the speech videos on the TED official website, the 20 most viewed ones are selected as the study objects of this thesis.

Since these 20 TED speeches have been already selected as the practical cases, it is not hard to analyze the strategies of making a speech prologue with the assistance of Lochin’s theory of Primacy Effect. In what follows, the theory and its connection with the analysis of speech prologue will be explained in detail.
II. AN INVESTIGATION OF 20 TED SPEECHES AND THE MOST SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES OF OPENING A SPEECH

A. Data

| Topics                                      | Views | Topics                                      | Views |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------|-------|
| Do schools kill creativity?                 | 47M   | The puzzle of motivation.                   | 19M   |
| Your body language may shape who you are.   | 43M   | The power of introverts.                    | 17M   |
| How great leaders inspire action.           | 35M   | What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness. | 17M   |
| The power of vulnerability.                 | 31M   | How to spot a liar.                         | 17M   |
| This is what happens when you reply to spam email. | 22M   | The happy secret to better work.            | 16M   |
| How to speak so that people want to listen. | 22M   | The thrilling potential of SixthSense technology. | 16M   |
| 10 things you didn’t know about orgasm.     | 22M   | How I held my breath for 17 minutes.        | 15M   |
| My stroke of insight.                       | 21M   | Inside the mind of a master procrastinator. | 15M   |
| Why we do what we do.                       | 20M   | The art of misdirection.                    | 15M   |
| Looks aren’t everything. Believe me, I’m a model. | 20M   | How to make stress your friend.             | 14M   |

The 20 selected TED speeches are listed in the following chart together with their number of views.

B. Method

After the leading 20 most viewed TED speeches were selected, it is time to find out what strategies of opening a speech in them lead to their popularity and success. As the theory of Primacy Effect is concerned in this study, the reaction of the audience to the prologue that the speaker made is of crucial importance. Fortunately, this paper is able to examine the audience’s reaction by their laughter and applause which are recorded in both the speech videos and transcripts, and also by the fact that whether they are following the speaker’s instruction or not in the prologue part.

First of all, all the significant strategies of making a prologue in the 20 selected speeches would be listed out after a minute investigation. And then their use frequency and
times of receiving a positive reaction (laughter, applause, or other audience’s reactions like following what the speaker asked them to do, etc) will be recorded in order to analyze what strategy used caused the best primacy effect in the beginning of a speech and its reason.

C. Results and Findings

1) The most used 4 strategies of opening a speech among the 20 speeches

a. “Humor and wit” prologue

Apparently, corresponding with its name, this strategy refers to starting a speech with being humorous in an intellectual way. It is easy to find that the speaker has different psychological variables, and the effect of the prologue is different. The most common thing is self mockery and telling jokes [9]. For example, making an appropriate joke or teasing the audience, just like what Ken Robinson did in the opening of his speech “Do schools kill creativity?”.

“I have an interest in education. Actually, what I find is everybody has an interest in education. Don’t you? I find this very interesting. If you’re at a dinner party, and you say you work in education -- Actually, you’re not often at dinner parties, frankly [10].”

Making the audience laugh from the second the speaker open his or her mouth is always a good way of start. This strategy opens their eyes to something different and even entertaining. It piques their interest and immerses them into the action from the opening second with a verbal splash of cold water.

b. Story-telling prologue

Everybody loves stories, no matter they belong to the speaker or other celebrities that they know. Telling a story which is directly connected with the coming topic would definitely do the speaker a favor of grabbing attentions of the audience. But one thing need to be noted here, that is to tell the story in a casual way. Like most successful speakers in these 20 TED speeches do, never tell a story as if it is a kind of lecture people or other audience’s reactions like following what the speaker asked them to do, etc) will be recorded in order to analyze what strategy used caused the best primacy effect in the beginning of a speech and its reason.

D. Suspenseful prologue

“So I want to start by offering you a free no-tech life hack, and all it requires of you is this: that you change your posture for two minutes. But before I give it away, I want to ask you to right now do a little audit of your body and what you’re doing with your body. So how many of you are sort of making yourselves smaller [13]? ("Your body. language may shape who you are," Amy Cuddy)

Curiosity is in the nature of every human being, so there is no doubt that creating suspense in the prologue of a speech could effectively draw the audience’s eyes and ears into the stage. As shown in the 20 speeches videos, when people are confronted with a suspenseful opening and do not know what will happen next, their faces are radiant and full of expressions of expectation. According to the Primary Effect theory, creating a suspense leaves a nice impression in the audience’s minds, which makes them super concentrated and have a lasting interest in the speaker’s topic [14].

2) The use frequency of these 4 strategies and their times of receiving a positive reaction

| Strategies          | Use frequency | Times of receiving positive reactions |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| “Humor and wit” prologue | 4             | 4                                     |
| Story-telling prologue | 8             | 7                                     |
| Prologue of asking questions | 4           | 2                                     |
| Suspenseful prologue     | 3             | 3                                     |

III. DISCUSSION

As we can see from the chart above, the most used strategies of opening a speech is the story-telling prologue, while the suspenseful prologue is the least used. Both “Humor and wit” prologue and prologue of asking questions are used for 4 times among the total 20 speeches, but only half of the speech starting with questions arouse the audience’s interests. If the effect of these prologue is regard as the criteria of ranking, “Humor and wit” and suspenseful prologue rank the first as the audience reacts posi-
tively as long as they are applied in the speech opening. Story-telling prologue comes next, and prologue of asking questions, the last.

In other words, most speakers prefer to apply the story-telling prologue which brings a considerable effect of grabbing the attention of the audience, with the other three strategies following behind. However, the most welcomed strategies of opening a speech is “Humor and wit” prologue and suspenseful prologue. Obviously these two prologues are most absorbing and appealing according to the audience’s reaction like laughing out loud and entirely following the speaker’s words with an expression of expectation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, as the proper strategies of opening a speech to a large extent help to make a successful speech, it is of vital importance for the speech givers to be aware of the most significant strategies of making a prologue. Relying on the theory of Primacy Effect and investigation of the 20 most popular TED speeches, this paper eventually fulfills the purpose of quantifying popularity extent of some important strategies of opening a speech, and also demonstrating these four strategies from the perspectives from the speaker and the audience. However, no matter which strategy of making a prologue in a speech is used, the solid mastery of English knowledge is the must for the speech-delivers. This research paper only looks into the field of prologues in English speeches, while a large deal of speeches in other languages are waiting to be analyzed based on the Primacy Effect theory. With more speeches in all kinds of languages as the research subjects, not only the most useful strategies of making a prologue will be analyzed, but also the different influence caused by a certain strategy in different languages will be discovered.

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