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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Attitude in Selected Motivational Commencement Speeches

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Article Information

Abstract

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Commencement speeches are the ones that are delivered by public figures to graduates to influence their minds and behavior by means of attitudes reflected in these speeches. What urged us to study commencement speeches is that there isn't a balance between critical discourse analysis studies that investigate negative discourse and those investigating positive one. This study aims at revealing kinds of attitudes that are reflected in commencement speeches. The study adopts Martin and Rose's (2007) model which deals with language in social context that evolves within the field of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The study raises a question about types of attitudes that are reflected in commencement speeches. It hypothesizes that various types of attitudes are utilized in commencement speeches. Finally, study concluded that commencement speakers utilize three types of attitude, namely appreciation (which is first in frequency), judgment secondly) and affect (finally) in their positive and negative sense.

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تحليل خطابي نقدي للموقف في مختارات من خطابات التخرج التحفيزية

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مستخلص البحث

خطابات التخرج هي الخطابات التي تلقيها الشخصيات العامة على الخريجين للتأثير على عقولهم وسلوكهم من خلال المواقف التي تنعكس في هذه الخطابات. ان ما يدفعنا الى دراسة خطابات التخرج هو عدم وجود توازن بين دراسات تحليل الخطاب النقدي التي تبحث في الخطاب السلبي وتلك التي تبحث في الخطاب الايجابي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن أنواع المواقف التي تنعكس في خطابات التخرج. و تتبنى الدراسة نموذج مارتين وروز (٢٠٠٧) الذي يتناول اللغة في السياق الاجتماعي الذي يتطور ضمن مجال علم اللغة الوظيفي. و تطرح الدراسة سؤالاً حول أنواع المواقف التي تنعكس في خطابات التخرج. و تفترض أن أنواعاً مختلفة من المواقف تستخدم في خطابات التخرج. اخيراً، خلصت الدراسة إلى أن خطباء التخرج يستخدمون ثلاثة أنواع من المواقف، وهي التعبير عن المشاعر (الذي يأتي بالمرتبة الأخيرة من حيث التكرار) والحكم على الأشخاص (وهو بالمرتبة الثانية من حيث التكرار) وتقدير قيمة الأشياء (وهو بالمرتبة الأولى من حيث التكرار) بمعناها الايجابي والسلبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي، تحليل الخطاب الايجابي، خطابات التخرج، نظرية التقييم، الموقف

1. Introduction

The term critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) stands for an interdisciplinary approach for analyzing text and talk that considers language as a social practice which is ideologically driven (Fairclough , 2001:230 ; Wodak, 2002:6 ; Aschale, 2013:1 ; Muhammed & Flaifel, 2015:2 ; Sheyholislami , 2015: 2).

Furthermore, positive discourse analysis (henceforth PDA) is a branch of CDA that aims at "studying the subversion of power and developing understandings which can energize social change" (Huges, 2018: 196). It emphasizes positive discourses which make the world a better place and resist oppressive social structures. At the same time, it does not postulate that social problems such as gender inequality and racism are, in a way or another, disbanded and we need to "cool it down" (Majid, 2007: 2). Thus, PDA complements what CDA does (Martin, 1999: 29).

Moreover, a commencement speech is a kind of speech delivered by a public figure, student, or celebrity to the graduating students (Gault, 2008: 8-18; Martin Gonzalez, 2015:1; Ivanova, 2017: 159). This speech is presumed to inspire graduates to begin their new stage in the "real world", by urging them to trust their intuition and be confident in order to face life (Ortega Ribeiro, 2013: iii; Papova, 2014: 1).

This study investigates commencement speeches. This is due to the fact that researchers profusely focus on the negative role that dominant discourse plays in society which urges us to research positive discourse (motivational commencement speeches) that aim at making the world a better place to live in through affecting individuals' behavior.

2. Research Question

The study raises the following question
What are the types of attitudes that the speaker reflects in commencement speeches?

3. Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that the speaker reflects different types of attitudes in commencement speeches.

4. Aims of the Study

The study aims at discovering the types of attitudes that the speaker reflects in commencement speeches.

5. Data Collection

The data is to be collected from selected commencement speeches downloaded from the internet (YouTube channels). It involves five speeches presented in different universities such as Harvard, Houston and Stanford. It

should be mentioned that the duration of the speeches range from 30 to 40 minutes.

6. Model of the Study

The study adopts Martin and Rose's (2007) model. The model deals with language in social context which evolves within the field of Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL). It concentrates on discourse semantics rather than social context or grammar because Martin and Rose believe that the analysis that is going on around the world, at the levels of genre and grammar, is a lot. So, there is a need for a work that bridges these levels systematically. This model tries to fill that gap by analyzing meanings beyond the clause which make contact with social context.

Martin and Rose's model includes six groups of sources for making meaning as text. These sources of meanings are called "discourse systems". The current study deals with one of these systems which is appraisal system, especially attitudes.

Attitude is categorized into three kinds: affect (expressing feelings), judgment (judging character) and appreciation (valuing the worth of things).

I-Affect

Feelings are expressed by people in two ways. Firstly, people can have bad and good feelings, so affect can be negative or positive. Secondly, people can express their feelings directly, i.e. their feelings can be inferred from their behavior, hence affect can be expressed in a direct or an implied way.

II-Judgment

Judgments of people's character, as with affect, can be negative or positive, and people's character may be judged implicitly or explicitly. However, unlike affect, they differentiate between personal judgments of criticism or admiration and moral judgments of condemnation or praise.

III-Appreciation

Appreciation of things involves our attitude about inanimates. As with judgment and affect, things can be appreciated negatively or positively.

7. Analytical procedures

The data are to be analyzed as follows

1. Selecting commencement speeches that help in achieving the aim of the present study.
2. Analyzing the selected speeches separately based on the adopted model.
3. Measuring the frequency of each type of attitude in order to identify the most frequent one and its implications.

8. Data Analysis

The three types of attitude are utilized in commencement speeches in a way that serves the aim of commencement speeches.

8.1 Affect

Commencement speakers express their feelings and others feelings in commencement speeches. They utilize positive affect when they express good feelings in order to encourage and inspire the graduates and negative affect when they talk about bad feelings in order to show graduates that bad feelings are something normal and that being successful is not easy. Positive and negative affect are expressed either directly or indirectly in commencement speeches. The following examples will make this clear:

"I love this place."

The previous example is taken from a commencement speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, to the Harvard Class of 2017.

Zuckerberg expresses his positive feelings about Harvard University using positive affect by means of the word "love". He starts his speech with this sentence since praising the university the students are graduating from is one of the important things in commencement speeches. By expressing his love to Harvard, Zuckerberg influences graduates' minds, namely, he makes them feel more confident since Zuckerberg is one of the role models for a lot of graduates. In 2004, Zuckerberg dropped out Harvard to create Facebook, the biggest social media, and years later he became the youngest billionaire in the world. He shows the graduates that they are unique because they graduated from Harvard. So, Zuckerberg starts his speech with a positive affect that attracts graduates attention in order to prepare them for what comes in the speech.

As for the following example, it was taken from a commencement speech delivered by Arnold Schwarzenegger on May 12th, 2017 at Huston University.

"In the beginning every agent, every manager, every studio executive said, you will never become a leading man. Look at your body. You look like a monster. I was upset about that because I trained so hard and for so long and all of a sudden they call me monster."

Schwarzenegger utilizes negative affect that is realized by the word "upset" which reflects his bad feelings when he speaks about the difficulties that he faced when he got into movies. He speaks about the challenges he faced. The negative affect shows the graduates that Schwarzenegger was disappointed and unhappy at that time. So, he influences graduates' minds in an indirect way by means of the power of language. Schwarzenegger tries to show the graduates that he is just like them and that having bad feelings should not stop them from dreaming and trying

to make these dreams true. What he wants to achieve is to make the graduates trust their intuition and be confident, which is one of the main aims of commencement speeches. The negative affect may counter graduates expectancy, since they may not think that a talented actor like Schwarzenegger was upset one day because agents, managers and studio executives did not believe in him and they called him a monster.

Commencement speakers express their feelings directly utilizing the words that name specific emotions. This is evident in the following example:

"To say that I am honored does not even begin to quantify the depth of gratitude that really accompanies an honorary doctorate from Harvard."

The previous example was taken from a commencement speech delivered by Oprah Winfrey on May 30th, 2013 at Harvard's 362nd Commencement at Tercentenary Theatre. She utilizes her success as a media entrepreneur and talk show host to promote education, charitable works and civic engagement.

Winfrey expresses her emotional state through the word "honored" when she received an honorary doctorate from Harvard. Utilizing this expression reflects Winfrey's admiration and appreciation to Harvard University and the notable quality of education it provides. She affects graduates' attitude about themselves and their university positively, since Winfrey is one of the most successful women in the world and she has an inspirational life story. So, the word "honored" is a message to Harvard graduates. It indicates that graduates should be confident, since they receive an excellent education.

In addition, commencement speakers express feelings using physical expressions. Let us consider the following example:

"I shall never forget the African torture victim, a young man no older than I was at the time, who had become mentally ill after all he had endured in his homeland. He trembled uncontrollably as he spoke into a video camera about the brutality inflicted upon him."

The previous example was taken from a commencement speech delivered by J.K. Rowling the author of Harry Potter at Harvard University in 2008. In this speech she offers some heartening and powerful advice to over-achievers and dreamers.

Rowling utilizes the physical expression "trembled uncontrollably" to describe a man's state. She met the man at the African research department at Amnesty International's headquarters' in London. This physical expression expresses how fragile and frightened the man was. Rowling wants to attract Harvard graduates' attention to the fact that they are lucky since they live in a democratic country and they have received an excellent education. She wants

them to utilize their education to the greatest utility. Rowling makes graduates believe that they are responsible for making the world a better place.

Furthermore, feelings can be expressed implicitly in commencement speeches. This is realized in mentioning extraordinary behavior and using metaphor. This can be illustrated in the following extracts:

"I can tell you as one who employs a lot of people when I see Harvard I sit up a little straighter and say, where is he or she? Bring them in."

The above mentioned extract was taken from a speech delivered by Oprah Winfrey on May 30th, 2013 at Harvard's 362nd commencement at Tercentenary Theatre.

Winfrey utilizes the extraordinary behavior which is "sit up a little straighter". This behavior represents admiration and respect in Winfrey's and graduates' background knowledge. She wants them to be confident and to try to change the world for the better.

The following example illustrates how metaphor is utilized to express feelings:

"When you are down in the hole, when that moment comes, it is really okay to feel bad for a little while."

The previous example was taken from a speech delivered by Oprah Winfrey on May 30th, 2013 at Harvard's 362nd commencement at Tercentenary theatre.

Winfrey utilizes the metaphor of "when you are down in the hole" that indicates that you are in a difficult or embarrassing situation. This metaphor is used by Winfrey to encourage Harvard graduates. She wants to show them that feeling bad is normal and that they should keep trying until they succeed.

8.2 Judgment

Commencement speakers utilize various types of judgment in their speeches. They utilize personal judgments of criticism or admiration and moral judgments of praise. Let us consider the following extracts:

"I am an unlikely speaker today, not just because I dropped out, but because we are technically in the same generation."

The above mentioned extract was taken from a speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg to the Harvard Class of 2017 for commencement.

Zuckerberg criticizes himself by saying that he is "an unlikely speaker". This criticism attracts graduates' attention to the fact that Zuckerberg and the graduates are from the same generation and that he succeeded dropping out Harvard. So, Zuckerberg is utilizing this criticism to influence graduates' minds. He wants to show them that they can do great things in spite of their age. At the same time, Zuckerberg is showing the graduates that they are better than him in

that they finished their study in Harvard which will increase graduates' confidence.

Moreover, personal judgment of admiration is utilized in an extract taken from a speech delivered at the Stanford University commencement on August 3rd, 2019 by Tim Cook the CEO of Apple. He is a prominent voice of ethics in business and technology.

"No matter where you go, no matter what you do, I know you will be ambitious."

Tim Cook uses the word "ambitious" to express his admiration for Stanford graduates. He praises them and the education they received. Cook gives encouragement to Stanford graduates by utilizing the power of language, since showing admiration makes them feel important and special. He ties his admiration to the future work that Stanford graduates may do in order to influence their minds by motivating them to do it in a perfect way.

In addition, in an extract taken from a speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, to the Harvard Class of 2017 for commencement, Zuckerberg utilizes moral judgment of praise:

"Millennials are already one of the most charitable generations in history."

Zuckerberg is praising Harvard graduates implicitly by saying that their generation is "one of the most charitable generations in history". He wants to show them that they can change the world. Zuckerberg tries to encourage Harvard graduates to help others reach their potential which serves one of the main aims of motivational speeches which is changing audience's behavior to the better.

8.3 Appreciation

Commencement speakers express positive and negative attitudes about material inanimate items and images. This is clearly shown in the following excerpts:

"One of my favorite stories is when J.F.K. went to go visit the NASA Space Center. He saw a janitor holding a broom and he asked him what he was doing and the Janitor replied: "Mr. President, I am helping put a man on the moon"."

The previous excerpt was taken from a speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, to the Harvard Class of 2017 for commencement.

Zuckerberg expresses his positive attitude about the above mentioned story by saying "one of my favorite". He wants to affect graduates cognition by showing them that even if they do simple things they can help in making the world a better place. He wants them to feel that they are part of something bigger

than them, that they are needed and that they have something better ahead to work for. So, Zuckerberg is trying to encourage and inspire graduates by expressing his attitude towards this story.

As for the following excerpt, it was taken from a speech delivered by Oprah Winfrey on May 30th, 2013 at Harvard's 362nd Commencement at Tercentenary Theatre:

"So one year later after launching OWN, nearly every media outlet had proclaimed that my new venture was a flop. Not just a flop, but a big bold flop they call it."

Winfrey expresses media outlets' negative attitude about the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN). Media outlets viewed OWN as a "flop" a "big bold flop" at the beginning. She wants to show Harvard graduates that they may face challenges in the real world after graduation and they should not give up. She wants them to be confident and to trust their intuition. In mentioning this negative attitude, Winfrey attracts Harvard graduates' minds to the fact that if they want to succeed they should not listen to naysayers.

9. Findings

Through a detailed analysis of the selected commencement speeches, the study achieves specific findings that are illustrated in the following table which involves the frequency of each type of attitude.

Table 1

The Frequency of the Types of Attitude

Attitude	Frequency in Each Speech					Total Frequency
	Speech 1	Speech 2	Speech 3	Speech 4	Speech 5	
	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	
Affect	26	18	19	5	5	73
Appreciation	27	44	31	35	14	151
Judgment	12	42	12	25	4	95

Table 1 shows that appreciation is the most frequent type of attitude in the commencement speeches under investigation. This is due to the fact that commencement speakers utilize appreciation to convey deeper meanings. Appreciation adds reliability and depth to the speaker's message. What comes second in frequency is judgment because it creates an impactful and balanced narrative which resonates with the graduates, encouraging them to embrace the future with determination and confidence. Finally, affect comes last in frequency because the focus in commencement speeches is on delivering a message which is applicable to all graduates and universally relevant.

10. Conclusion

The hypothesis of the study is confirmed since different kinds of attitudes were utilized by commencement speakers. They utilized the three types of

attitudes, i.e. affect (emotional state, physical expression, metaphor), appreciation and judgment (admiration, criticism, praise) in its positive and negative sense. These types of attitude served the aim of commencement speeches which influencing graduates' minds positively.

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