Explanation Genre in the Mostly Viewed TED Talks:
Contribution of the Generic Structure to the Appeal of the Talks

Iwa Lukmana*, Riesky, Luthfi Variant Hanif

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Corresponding author. Email: iwa@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

The control over the way a genre is structured is meant to achieve the social function of the text, i.e., the purpose for which the text is written. A good generic structure provides the audience with logical cues so that they can easily follow the flow of ideas presented in the text. This study aims to analyse the generic structure of the mostly viewed explanation genre in TED Talk, a public speaking program which has been widely known for its audience engagement. Being largely descriptive, this study applies genre theory as it is discussed in Systemic-Functional Linguistics. Data were collected from TED YouTube channel and were analysed through the identification of how information was organised, leading to the generic structure of the talks. This study finds three occurrences of explanation genre in the top five TED Talks. It is also found that the compulsory and optional stages in the genre appear to support to the appeal of the talks.

Keywords: *Explanation, genre, generic structure, TED Talk*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public speaking includes an exchange of information between a speaker and one or more addressees. Public speaking differs from everyday communication with regard to several concerns (Coopman & Lull, 2014). First, the speaker in public speaking holds a special status. In a normal everyday communication, people can freely take turns. However, in public speaking, the communicative event is dominated by the speaker (Rossete-Crake, 2019). Second, unlike everyday communication, public speaking is almost always a planned communicative event (Beebe & Beebe, 2010).

Public speaking has several intrinsic elements including message and structure (Coopman & Lull, 2014). Message further contains topic and purpose. Topic is what the speaker wants to discuss. In contemporary time, the selection of topic considers the nature of the audience (Mehl, 2017). Purpose concerns what the speaker wants to achieve with his/her speech (Beebe & Beebe, 2010). It includes both general and specific purposes. The general purpose is the total objective of a speech (Coopman & Lull, 2014). Public speaking, in general, has one of the three identified general purposes: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain (Zarefsky, 2016). The specific purpose concerns the speaker's expectation on the listener after hearing his/her speech (Beebe & Beebe, 2010). Both general and specific purposes will influence the way a speaker develops his/her topic.

The structure of public speaking often follows the formula of introduction, content, and conclusion (DeCoske & White, 2010). Structure serves to help the speaker deliver ideas systematically. DeCoske and White (2010) claim that structure in public speaking provides logical cues for speakers to deliver their ideas more clearly. Structure also helps the audience understand what the speaker is talking about. A clear and coherent organization of thought will help the audience trace ideas and expect what to appear next in the talk. Both message and structure work together to create an engaging public speech. What first engages the audience in public speaking is the topic (Coopman & Lull, 2014). However, the topic alone cannot maintain the interest of the audience. What is needed further is a clear and easy-to-understand train of thought, i.e., the structure of public speaking (Beebe & Beebe, 2010). In short, an interesting topic and a clear structure are two inseparable aspects of an engaging public speech. Examples of engaging public speeches can be found in TED Talks, which discuss a broad range of topics. With the slogan 'ideas worth spreading', TED Talk has become a platform in which public speakers deliver their ideas on topics regarding global issues. As explained in their website, TED has so far published

more than 3400 talks attracting a total of 1.5 billion viewers as of November 2012. Speeches in TED Talks have been so engaging and effective that many scholars have been trying to use TED Talks as learning materials (Aravind & Rajasekaran, 2019; Leopold, 2016; Hayward, 2017).

Several aspects of TED Talks have been studied. Some studies focused on what characterized TED Talks. It is found that TED Talks are typically a poetic-yet-informal, educative, energetic, engaging, and personal way of public speaking (Kedrowicz & Taylor, 2016; Ludewig, 2017). There are also studies that examine TED Talks' role in reshaping scientific discourses. Comparing TED Talks with academic lectures, Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara (2014) explain that while TED Talks seem to be a simplification of scientific discourse, they also provide examples of how the scientific community communicates with non-specialists. Delivery and design, they argue, is the key to this transformation. Other scholars have also argued that TED Talks have resulted in a new form of knowledge dissemination that allows scientists to speak directly with a larger audience in a conversational manner (Scotto di Carlo, 2014; Sugimoto & Thellwall, 2013).

The structure of TED Talks, furthermore, is worth investigating. Structure, as discussed previously, is one of the elements that can hold audience's attention. In that matter, TED Talks have succeeded in packaging scientific discourse for the general public (Kedrowicz & Taylor, 2016; Romanelli, Cain, & McNamara, 2014). To investigate such phenomenon, generic structure analysis can be utilized. Generic structure makes people realize the kind of situation or text type they encounter (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Generic structure also helps people understand the social purpose or motive that arises from a certain situation or text type (Martin, 1997). Generic structure analysis has been done in many different contexts. Applications in educational contexts have shown that making explicit the generic structure of a text helps students/writers to be more creative and better at their writing (Arancón, 2013; Iddings & de Oliveira, 2011). In professional context, it is shown that making explicit the generic structure of professional encounters helps businesses and industries further develop their employers' skill (Xu, Wang, Forey, & Li, 2010). Considering the benefits of exploring the generic structure of a text, this study aims to analyse the structure of 5 most viewed TED Talk videos with reference to the theory of genre developed by Martin & Rose (2008) and Eggins (2004). It is expected that this study could help explain why TED Talks attract wide attention.

2. METHODS

This study examines the most popular genres that appear in the TED Talks. As a start, this study seeks to identify the 5 mostly viewed talks (Top 5), then focuses on the genre that appears most in the Top 5. This study further examines how generic structure is realised in the genre that appears most as mentioned above. This study applies a qualitative-descriptive method supported by descriptive quantification. Descriptive method aims to answer the 'what' question rather than 'why' (Nassaji, 2015). Qualitative method complements the descriptive method by aiming to explore and understand a phenomenon through interpretation of the data acquired (Creswell, 2009). Descriptive statistics is a tool that can help identify trends in data by showing how something is distributed in the data (Gries, 2013).

The data used in this study are obtained from https://www.ted.com. The website is the official website of TED. It contains more than 3500 talks. To obtain the data, all of the talks are sorted based on most-viewed criterion. This study firstly examines the top five of the most-viewed talks as of 19 November 2019, then identifies the most frequent genre employed in the talks. The website also offers information about the chosen talk such as the title, the number of viewers, speaker's name, and synopsis of the speech. The top 5 talks include *Do schools kill creativity?* by Sir Ken Robinson (65,581,724 views), *This is what happens when you reply to spam email* by James Veitch (59,414,198 views), *Your body language may shape who you are* by Amy Cuddy (57,631,623 views), *How great leaders inspire action* by Simon Sinek (50,373,245 views), and *the power of vulnerability* by Brené Brown (48,352,741 views).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The mostly appearing genre in the Top 5 Ted Talks

The data analysis shows that the 5 mostly viewed TED Talks are realized in different genres, i.e., Explanation with 3 occurrences (60%), Anecdote with 1 occurrence (20%), and Hortatory Exposition with 1 occurrence (20%). Therefore, the genre that appears most in the top 5 TED Talks is Explanation. The three Explanation texts in the talks include Amy Cuddy's *How Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are,* Simon Sinek's *How Great Leaders Inspire Action,* and Brenne Brown's *The Power of Vulnerability*. These three texts are further examined with regard to their generic structure.

3.2. Generic Structure of Explanation

As discussed previously, the generic structure is realized to attain the purpose for which the genre is produced, i.e., the social function. The purpose of an explanation text is to explain how a process takes place. To achieve such a purpose, an explanation text refers to cause, condition, and/or means that makes a process happen (Martin & Rose, 2008). Basically, the generic structure of explanation text consists of two stages, i.e., Phenomenon and Explanation. These two basic stages of Explanation text are found in the data. However, this study finds that the talks employ four other stages that serve to support the function of the two basic stages. The generic structure of the three explanation texts is formulated as we can see in Equation 1.

$$PB^\wedge\{(EP)^\wedge<\{SP^\wedge PE\}>^\wedge(EE)\}>^\wedge(PR) \qquad (1)$$

The generic structure shown above describes the possible staging of Amy Cuddy's, Simon Sinek's, and Brenne Brown's talk. There are six stages found from the analysis of the three talks: Providing Background (PB), Establishing Point (EP), Stating Phenomenon (SP), Providing Explanation (PE), Evaluating Explanation (EE), and Providing Recommendation (PR). There are three obligatory stages, those are PB, SP, and PE, which are symbolized as having no round brackets. An obligatory stage is a stage that always occurs in each talk. There are three optional stages, namely EP, EE, and PR as symbolized by round brackets. An optional stage means that the stage can appear or not in a talk. The order of the explanation text is expressed by the caret symbol (^) which means 'followed by'. For example, SP^PE means that SP stage is followed by PE stage. Furthermore, there are four stages that are recursive, i.e., EP, SP, PE, and EE. They are recursive in that they can appear more than once in the text. The recursive stages which are symbolized by curly brackets inside angle brackets (<{ }>) occur as one unit. For example, $<\{(EP)^\wedge<\{SP^\wedge PE\}^\wedge(EE)\}>$ means that EP, SP, PE, and EE occur together with fixed order: EP followed by SP followed by PE followed by EE. A more detailed analysis of each Explanation text is presented in the following sections.

3.2.1. Generic Structure of Amy Cuddy's Talk

The generic structure of Amy Cuddy's talk is shown in Equation 2.

$$PB^\wedge EP^\wedge<\{SP^\wedge PE\}>^\wedge EE^\wedge PR \qquad (2)$$

The generic structure of Amy Cuddy's talk appears to be consistent with the possible staging of Explanation text described previously. The first is that the talk contains all the possible six stages, namely Providing Background (PB), Establishing Point (EP), Stating Phenomenon (SP), Providing Explanation (PE), Evaluating Explanation (EE), and Providing

Recommendation (PR). The second is that both SP and PE stages occur recursively as shown by curly brackets inside angle brackets.

PB stage has two purposes. The first is to establish a relatable background and introduce a phenomenon. To achieve this purpose, Cuddy starts by including the audience in her observation. She notes that everyone has an interest in body language. The second one is to establish credibility. To achieve this purpose, Cuddy introduces herself as a social scientist and she cites some of her fellow researchers and explains what their research is about. EP stage has one purpose, i.e., to make a point regarding the phenomenon introduced in PB stage. To achieve this purpose, Cuddy narrows the phenomenon, i.e., body language, down into a more specific one, i.e. non-verbal expressions of power and dominance. She then puts forward the point of her talk in interrogative mood. She wonders whether it is possible for people to fake it until they become the person they aspire.

SP stage has one purpose, i.e., to provide a phenomenon which is related to the point of the talk. It is done by stating a phenomenon in form of research question. Amy Cuddy breaks down the point of the talk into several research questions. Each of these questions sheds light to the point of the talk, i.e., how people are affected by their own body language. PE stage has one purpose, i.e., to provide an answer or explanation for the phenomenon stated in SP stage. It is done by sharing the findings of the research. Cuddy shares her findings about how people are affected by their own body language. The explanation includes the interaction of hormone inside the body and actions that can influence people's own thought.

EE stage has one purpose, i.e., to evaluate the whole series of SP and PE stages. To achieve this purpose, she evaluates the research by showing that it is woven into everyday life. She shares her own personal narrative on how she meets someone who can do exactly what Amy Cuddy thinks the research shows, i.e., to fake it until you become it. PR stage has one purpose, i.e., to offer recommendations based on the research explained in the talk. To achieve this purpose, Cuddy draws from the findings of the research which are explained in the series of SP and PE stages. She asks the audience to do what she finds in the research to cope with stressful moments.

3.2.2. Generic Structure of Brenne Brown's Talk

The generic structure of Brenne Brown's talk is shown as we can see in Equation 3.

$$PB^\wedge EP^\wedge<\{SP^\wedge PE^\wedge(EE)\}>^\wedge PR \qquad (3)$$

The notation above appears to be consistent with the notation of Explanation text described previously. The consistency concerns the number of stages and characteristics of several stages. The first is that Brenne Brown's talk consists of all the possible stages of Explanation text, i.e., Providing Background (PB), Establishing Point (EP), Stating Phenomenon (SP), Providing Explanation (PE), Evaluating Explanation (EE), and Providing Recommendation (PR). The second is that SP, PE, and EE stages are all recursive. They occur together as a unit in this stage. The third is that EE stage is optional, meaning that it can occur in the pattern or not.

PB stage in Brown's talk has two purposes. The first is to establish Brown's identity. To achieve this, Brown shares her story of being insecure about her academic identity. She tells the audiences how she was unsure whether she was a storyteller or a researcher. She then settles to combine both: a researcher-storyteller. The second is to introduce the topic of the talk. To achieve this purpose, this stage states the topic and relates it with Brown's life as a researcher. EP stage has one purpose, i.e., to narrow the topic of the talk further into one specific phenomenon. This is done in two steps. The first is by introducing two phenomena. Brown introduces connection as the main focus of her academic career. She then tells the audience that she finds something that she never understood before, i.e., shame. The focus shifted to shame which became the subject of research. She then states the point of the talk, that is to understand what shame is and how it works.

SP stage has one purpose, i.e., to provide a phenomenon related to the point of the talk. It is done by stating a phenomenon in form of research question. Then Brenne Brown breaks down the point of the talk into several research questions. Each of these questions sheds light to the point of the talk, i.e. what shame is and how it works. PE stage has one purpose, i.e., to provide an answer or explanation to the phenomenon stated in SP stage. It is done by sharing the findings of the research. Brown shares her findings about what shame is and how it works. The explanation includes explanation about how we numb vulnerability.

The talk is closed with PR stage which has one purpose, i.e., to provide a recommendation based on Brown's research. Brown draws from the conclusion of her research and offers a piece of advice on how one should live peacefully with the feelings of shame. She encourages people to raise their kids so that they can accept shame rather than being burdened by it.

3.2.3. Generic Structure of Simon Sinek's Talk

The generic structure of Simon Sinek's talk is presented as we can see in Equation 4.

$$PB^\wedge<\{EP^\wedge<\{SP^\wedge PE\}>\}>^\wedge EE \qquad (4)$$

Relevant to the generic structure of Explanation text described previously, the generic structure of Simon Sinek's talk consists of 5 stages: Providing Background (PB), Establishing Point (EP), Stating Phenomenon (SP), Providing Explanation (PE), and Evaluating Explanation (EE). The conformity also lies in the recursive characteristics of the stages, as shown by the curly brackets inside angle brackets. The PB stage has two purposes. The first is to introduce the topic of the talk, i.e., the golden circle. This is done by briefly describing it in PB stage. The second is to introduce the examples, those are Apple, Martin Luther King, and Wright Brothers. All of the examples mentioned in the PB stage are used throughout the talk to explain the idea of golden circle.

The talk moves into EP stage, which has one function, i.e., to narrow the point of the talk, i.e., the golden circle, down into one point which was then developed in the SP and PE stages. EP stage is followed by SP stage, which has one purpose, i.e., to propose a phenomenon which needs explanation or is going to be explained. In the text, Simon proposes different phenomena in each SP stage. The phenomena include how Apple might communicate and how it actually communicates, how the Wright Brothers invent airplanes, how TiVo fails, and how Martin Luther King convinces people to believe what he believes. SP stage is followed by PE stage, which has one purpose, i.e., to provide an explanation to the phenomenon proposed in SP stage. Explanations found in the PE stage concern how the phenomenon in SP stage took place. For example, the first SP stage states how Apple might communicate if Apple communicates as people usually communicate, which is considered uninspiring.

The EE stage has one function, i.e., to evaluate the whole series of SP and PE stages. It is done by summarizing all SP and PE stages. Its summary states that great leaders and organizations start with why and they attract people to believe what they believe. Sinek then relates it to a phenomenon outside the point of the talk, i.e. The Golden Circle. He relates his explanation to politicians who are not inspiring anyone. He concludes that today's politicians are not inspiring anyone because they do not communicate in the way that has been explained by Sinek in the talk, i.e., applying The Golden Circle.

3.3. Discussions

There are two points to be noted from the findings. The first is that Explanation is the genre that appears most in the Top 5 TED Talks, with three occurrences (60%). The second is that the talks employ the basic structure of Explanation, i.e., Phenomenon and Explanation. However, these two basic stages are accompanied with four supporting stages, i.e., Providing Background (PB), Establishing Point (EP),

Evaluating Explanation (EE), and Providing Recommendation (PR).

That Explanation genre is found to be the most popular appears to stem from the fact that TED Talk is a highly successful science popularization attempt (Sugimoto, & Thellwall, 2013). Explaining natural and/or social phenomena has been one of the purposes of science. A variety of scientists take part in TED Talks explaining how phenomena in their own fields take place. That there are additional stages that support the basic stages of Explanation can be explained with regard to the audience. In this regard, the scientists talk to audience with different educational backgrounds. Therefore, a talk needs to be appealing to the audience since the topic is potentially not familiar to most of the audience. In other words, the presenters need to popularize the science they are discussing, and among the possible strategies to do so is exploring how information is organized into stages (the generic structure).

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion shows that a genre has its own purpose, which can be attained among other things through organization of information into stages. The Explanation genre, that appears most in the Top 5 TED Talks, has two basic stages, i.e., phenomenon and explanation. In the three Explanation texts that have been the focus of the study, some supporting stages are used. Apparently, the use of these stages relates to the fact that TED Talks is an attempt to popularize science to audience with different educational backgrounds: the basic stages are used to present ideas explicitly, while the supporting stages are used to make the talks more appealing.

REFERENCES

Arancón, P. R. (2013). The use of SFL genre theory for the analysis of students' writing skills in ESP. Revista Española De Lingüística Aplicada, 1, 245-262.

Aravind, B. R., & Rajasekaran, V. (2019). Technological Modality to Influence Persuasive and Argumentative Vocabulary for Effective Communicative Reference to Selected TED Talk Videos. International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering, 7(5), 165-170.

Beebe, S. A., & Beebe, S. J. (2010). Public Speaking Handbook. Allyn & Bacon.

Coopman, S. J., & Lull, J. (2014). Public Speaking: The Evolving Art. Cengage Learning.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). Research Design: Qualitative and Mixed Methods Approaches. London: Sage Publications.

DeCoske, M. A., & White, S. J. (2010). Public Speaking Revisited: Delivery, Structure, and Style. American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy, 67(15), 1225-1227.

Eggins, S. (2004). Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics. A&C Black.

Gries, S. T. (2013). Statistics for Linguistics with R: A Practical Introduction. Walter de Gruyter.

Halliday, M., & Hasan, R. (1989). Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hayward, P. A. (2017). Incorporating TED Talk Assignments Into a Public-Speaking Course. Communication Teacher, 31(4), 239-244.

Iddings, J., & de Oliveira, L. C. (2011). Applying The Genre Analysis of a Narrative to The Teaching of English Language Learners. INTESOL Journal, 8(1).

Kedrowicz, A. A., & Taylor, J. L. (2016). Shifting Rhetorical Norms and Electronic Eloquence: TED Talks as Formal Presentations. Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 30(3), 352-377.

Leopold, L. (2016). Honing EAP Learners' Public Speaking Skills by Analyzing TED Talks. TESL Canada Journal, 33(2), 46-58.

Ludewig, J. (2017). TED Talks as An Emergent Genre. CLCWeb-Comparative Literature and Culture, 19(1).

Martin, J. R. (1997). Analysing Genre: Functional Parameters. In Christie, F., & Martin, J. R., Genre and Institutions: Social Processes in The Workplace and School (pp. 3-39). A&C Black.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). Genre Relations: Mapping Culture. London: Equinox.

Mehl, M. (2017). Principles of Communication: Public Speaking. Pearson Learning Solutions.

Nassaji, H. (2015). Qualitative and Descriptive Research: Data Type Versus Data Analysis. Language Teaching Research, 19(2), 129-132.

Romanelli, F., Cain, J., & McNamara, P. J. (2014). Should TED Talks Be Teaching Us Something? American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 78(6).

Rossete-Crake, F. (2019). Public Speaking and the New Oratory. Springer International Publishing.

Scotto di Carlo, G. (2014). The Role of Proximity in Online Popularizations: The Case of TED Talks. Discourse Studies, 36(2), 591-606.

Sugimoto, C. R., & Thellwall, M. (2013). Scholars on Soap Boxes: Science Communication and Dissemination in TED Videos. Journal of The American Society for Information Science and Technology, 64(4), 663-674.

Xu, X., Wang, Y., Forey, G., & Li, L. (2010). Analyzing The Genre Structure of Chinese Call-Center Communication. Journal of Business nd Technical Application, 24(4), 445-475.

Zarefsky, D. (2016). Public Speaking: Strategies for Success. Pearson.