



eISSN 3090-7012 & pISSN 3090-6822

**JURNAL ILMIAH LITERASI INDONESIA**

Vol. 2, No. 2, 2026

[doi.org/10.63822/15gk8718](https://doi.org/10.63822/15gk8718)

PP. 661-669

Homepage <https://ojs.indopublishing.or.id/index.php/jili>

## **How Public Figures Use Language to Inspire: A Pragmatic Analysis of TED Talks by Book Writers and Its Implications for Effective Public Speaking Skills in the Digital Age**

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Submitted: 06 28, 2026 | Received: 07 05, 2026 | Published: 07 07, 2026

### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines how public figures who are primarily known as book authors use language pragmatically to inspire audiences in their TED Talks, and what implications these strategies hold for public speaking instruction in the digital age. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study analyzes the transcripts of five widely circulated TED Talks delivered by book writers: Brené Brown's "The Power of Vulnerability," Elizabeth Gilbert's "Your Elusive Creative Genius," Susan Cain's "The Power of Introverts," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story," and Simon Sinek's "How Great Leaders Inspire Action." The utterances were segmented and coded using Searle's (1976) taxonomy of speech acts, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, and a deictic-marker analysis of person and temporal deixis. Findings show that assertive and directive speech acts jointly account for the majority of coded utterances, that speakers strategically flout the maxims of quantity and relation through extended personal narrative before returning to their communicative point, and that inclusive person deixis ("we," "you") is used at a markedly higher rate than exclusive or distancing forms to build audience solidarity. These pragmatic patterns are then discussed in relation to the demands of digital-age public communication, where short attention spans, algorithm-driven platforms, and parasocial audience relationships require speakers to establish relevance and credibility within the opening seconds of a talk. The study concludes with practical implications for public speaking pedagogy, including the deliberate teaching of narrative-led openings, strategic maxim flouting, and inclusive deixis as trainable pragmatic competencies.*

**Keywords:** pragmatics; speech act theory; Cooperative Principle; TED Talks; public speaking; digital age

### **How to Cite:**

Nuryafitri, A., & Djuharie, O. S. . (2026). How Public Figures Use Language to Inspire: A Pragmatic Analysis of TED Talks by Book Writers and Its Implications for Effective Public Speaking Skills in the Digital Age. *Jurnal Ilmiah Literasi Indonesia*, 2(2), 661-669. <https://doi.org/10.63822/15gk8718>



## INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) has become one of the most influential global platforms for public speaking, transforming an eighteen-minute talk into a genre with its own conventions of storytelling, structure, and delivery. Among the thousands of speakers who have taken the TED stage, a distinct group consists of book writers — novelists, memoirists, and non-fiction authors — who step outside the medium of print to communicate their ideas orally to a live and, subsequently, an online audience of millions. This shift from page to stage is pragmatically significant: a writer accustomed to controlling meaning through carefully revised prose must instead rely on real-time linguistic choices, audience-directed reference, and strategic cooperation (or calculated non-cooperation) with Gricean conversational norms in order to move a live audience emotionally and intellectually within a strict time limit.

Pragmatics, as the study of meaning in context, offers an appropriate lens through which to examine this phenomenon, because inspiration is rarely achieved through propositional content alone. Rather, it is achieved through what speakers do with words: the promises they imply, the assertions they make with calculated confidence, the emotions they perform, and the audience they linguistically construct as "us." Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1976) and Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle provide complementary frameworks for uncovering these mechanisms, while the study of deixis (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996) helps explain how speakers position themselves and their audience within the discourse to create intimacy on a stage that is, physically, anything but intimate.

The urgency of this inquiry is amplified by the conditions of the digital age. TED Talks are no longer bound to the auditorium; they are consumed as short-form video content, clipped into social media excerpts, and re-circulated algorithmically to audiences with famously short attention spans. A speaker's pragmatic strategy — how quickly a hook is established, how directly the audience is addressed, how a maxim is flouted for dramatic effect — has direct consequences for whether a talk is watched to completion, shared, or abandoned within seconds. Understanding these strategies analytically therefore has both theoretical value for pragmatics as a discipline and practical value for the growing field of public speaking training, communication coaching, and English language education, where TED Talks are already widely used as teaching material.

Based on this background, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What types of speech acts dominate the discourse of TED Talks delivered by book writers?
- 2) How do these speakers observe or deliberately flout Grice's Cooperative Principle to construct an inspirational effect?
- 3) What pragmatic strategies emerging from this analysis can be adapted into effective public speaking training for the digital age?

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) classify and quantify the speech acts used across five TED Talks delivered by book writers, (2) analyze instances of maxim observance and flouting within these talks, and (3) derive pedagogically actionable implications for public speaking instruction. The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of pragmatic research on scripted-yet-performed public discourse, a genre that sits between prepared writing and spontaneous speech. Practically, it offers public speaking trainers, communication students, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)



instructors an empirically grounded set of language strategies that can be explicitly taught rather than left to speakers' intuition.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Pragmatics and Meaning in Context

Pragmatics is generally defined as the study of speaker meaning as it is communicated, interpreted, and negotiated within a particular context (Yule, 1996). Unlike semantics, which concerns itself with literal, context-independent meaning, pragmatics accounts for the gap between what is said and what is actually meant or accomplished by an utterance. This distinction is central to the study of persuasive and inspirational public discourse, where the illocutionary force of an utterance — what a speaker is doing in saying something — frequently carries more communicative weight than its literal propositional content.

### Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962) proposed that utterances do not merely describe reality but perform actions, distinguishing between the locutionary act (the literal utterance), the illocutionary act (the intended function, such as promising, warning, or asserting), and the perlocutionary act (the effect produced on the hearer, such as being persuaded or inspired). Searle (1976) later refined this framework into five general categories: assertives (committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition), directives (attempting to get the hearer to do something), commissives (committing the speaker to a future course of action), expressives (expressing the speaker's psychological state), and declaratives (bringing about a change in reality through the utterance itself). This taxonomy remains the most widely applied instrument for classifying illocutionary force in discourse analysis and is adopted as the primary coding framework in this study.

### The Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims

Grice (1975) proposed that conversation is governed by a Cooperative Principle, operationalized through four maxims: quantity (be as informative as required, but no more), quality (say only what is true or evidenced), relation (be relevant), and manner (be clear, brief, and orderly). Crucially, Grice observed that speakers frequently and deliberately flout these maxims to generate conversational implicature — additional, unstated meaning that the hearer is invited to infer. In prepared public speaking, such flouting is rarely accidental; extended personal narratives that appear to violate the maxim of quantity, for instance, are often a calculated rhetorical device intended to build emotional investment before the speaker's central claim is delivered.

### Deixis and Audience Positioning

Deixis refers to linguistic elements whose meaning depends on the context of utterance, most notably person deixis (I, we, you), spatial deixis (here, there), and temporal deixis (now, today) (Levinson, 1983). Person deixis is particularly consequential in public speaking, since a speaker's choice between an exclusive "I" and an inclusive "we" can position the audience either as passive recipients of information or as active co-participants in a shared narrative and, by extension, a shared call to action.



### TED Talks as a Discourse Genre

TED Talks constitute a hybrid genre situated between scripted writing and live oral performance, combining features of scientific popularization, personal narrative, and motivational rhetoric (Caliendo, 2012; Scotto di Carlo, 2014). Prior discourse-oriented research on TED Talks has examined strategies of audience involvement and simplification used to render specialized or personal knowledge accessible to a lay, global audience, noting a consistent reliance on narrative framing, direct address, and rhetorical questioning. The present study extends this line of inquiry specifically to talks delivered by book writers, a subgroup whose professional relationship to language — as authors who compose meaning in a revisable, private medium — offers a distinctive point of contrast with the live, unrevisable, and audience-responsive medium of the TED stage.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that inspirational public speaking is not simply a matter of eloquence or content, but of systematic pragmatic choices: which speech acts to foreground, which maxims to observe or flout, and how the audience is deictically positioned within the unfolding discourse. This study operationalizes these three frameworks jointly to analyze a purposively selected corpus of TED Talks delivered by book writers.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design combined with a small-scale quantitative content analysis, a common approach in pragmatic and discourse studies that require both frequency counts and interpretive depth (Scotto di Carlo, 2014). The quantitative component allows the study to report the relative distribution of speech act types and deictic markers, while the qualitative component allows for contextualized interpretation of how these forms function pragmatically within each talk.

### Data and Corpus

The corpus consists of the official English-language transcripts of five TED Talks delivered by speakers who are primarily recognized as published book authors, selected purposively based on (a) view count and continued cultural circulation, (b) thematic relevance to personal transformation or inspiration, and (c) the speaker's status as the author of a widely known book published before or shortly after the talk.

Table 1 summarizes the corpus.

Speaker	Talk Title	Venue / Year	Associated Book	Approx. Views (TED.com)
Brené Brown	The Power of Vulnerability	TEDxHouston, 2010	Daring Greatly	~63,000,000
Elizabeth Gilbert	Your Elusive Creative Genius	TED2009	Eat, Pray, Love	~24,000,000
Susan Cain	The Power of Introverts	TED2012	Quiet	~30,300,000

Speaker	Talk Title	Venue / Year	Associated Book	Approx. Views (TED.com)
Chimamanda N. Adichie	The Danger of a Single Story	TEDGlobal, 2009	Half of a Yellow Sun / Americanah	~29,700,000
Simon Sinek	How Great Leaders Inspire Action	TEDxPugetSound, 2009	Start With Why	~63,000,000

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

Transcripts were retrieved from the official TED.com talk pages and segmented into individual utterances, operationalized as one independent clause or functionally complete communicative unit. Each utterance was then coded independently along three analytical dimensions: (1) illocutionary act type, following Searle's (1976) five-category taxonomy; (2) maxim status, coded as "observed" or "flouted" with respect to Grice's (1975) four maxims, together with the inferred implicature where flouting occurred; and (3) deictic person reference, coded as first-person singular (I/me/my), first-person plural inclusive (we/us/our), or second-person (you/your). To support analytical reliability, a 20% subsample of utterances was independently re-coded, and disagreements were resolved through discussion and reference to the surrounding co-text, consistent with standard practice for manual pragmatic coding in discourse studies.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Distribution of Speech Acts**

Coding of the five transcripts yielded 350 analyzable utterances. As shown in Table 2, assertive speech acts were the single most frequent category, followed by directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives.

*Table 2. Distribution of speech acts across the five talks.*

Speech Act Type	Frequency	Percentage
Assertive	138	39.4%
Directive	84	24.0%
Expressive	63	18.0%
Commissive	39	11.1%
Declarative	26	7.5%
Total	350	100%

The dominance of assertives is consistent with the speakers' shared identity as authors whose authority rests on research findings, lived experience, or documented observation. Brown, for example, repeatedly frames her claims about shame and connection as conclusions drawn from years of qualitative research, an assertive strategy that borrows the evidentiary credibility of academic writing while remaining accessible to a lay audience. Adichie's talk likewise proceeds through a sustained assertive strategy, cataloguing personal and literary examples to build the case that a single narrative about a place or people inevitably produces incomplete and often damaging understanding.



Directives, the second most frequent category, cluster heavily toward the closing minutes of each talk, where speakers shift from description to exhortation. Sinek's talk is illustrative: after establishing his explanatory model of leadership, he moves into direct imperatives urging the audience to act from a stated sense of purpose rather than from surface-level tactics. This late-talk concentration of directives suggests a recurring structural pattern across the corpus — an extended assertive or narrative build-up followed by a comparatively brief but pragmatically forceful directive close, functioning as the talk's call to action.

Expressives, comprising personal disclosures of fear, joy, anxiety, or wonder, are especially prominent in Gilbert's talk, where she repeatedly voices her own uncertainty and apprehension about sustaining a creative career after unexpected literary success. This self-disclosure performs a dual pragmatic function: it lowers the perceived power asymmetry between a celebrated author and her audience, and it models the very vulnerability that several of the other speakers, notably Brown, explicitly thematize as valuable. Commissives and declaratives are comparatively rare, appearing mainly at moments where a speaker commits to a shared future action ("we will," a commissive) or performatively redefines a concept for the audience, as when Adichie's narrative act of naming "the single story" functions declaratively, creating a shared conceptual category that did not exist for the audience prior to the utterance.

### **Observance and Flouting of the Cooperative Principle**

All five speakers observe the maxim of manner overall, structuring their talks with a clear narrative arc, parallel three-part illustrations, and a recognizable rhetorical closing. However, the maxim of quantity is deliberately flouted in every talk through extended personal anecdotes that, on the surface, appear to over-elaborate a single illustrative point. Gilbert's lengthy narration of a single conversation with an older poet, and Cain's detailed recollection of a childhood summer-camp experience, both extend well beyond what would be strictly necessary to convey their propositional point. This apparent over-informativeness generates an implicature of authenticity and trustworthiness: audiences infer that a speaker willing to spend scarce stage time on seemingly tangential personal detail is speaking sincerely rather than performing a rehearsed generic argument.

The maxim of quality is managed through visible epistemic hedging rather than outright flouting. Brown and Cain in particular qualify strong claims with phrases that foreground their research basis, allowing them to make sweeping, emotionally resonant generalizations about human behavior while preserving an appearance of evidential caution. The maxim of relation is the most frequently and productively flouted maxim in the corpus: personal narratives that initially seem unrelated to the talk's stated topic are consistently and explicitly reconnected to the central argument in a later turn, producing a satisfying implicature of coherence that rewards audience attention — a pattern well suited to a genre competing for a distracted, digitally mediated audience.

### **Deictic Positioning of the Audience**

Table 3 reports the raw frequency of first-person singular, first-person plural inclusive, and second-person deictic markers across the five talks.

*Table 3. Frequency of person-deixis markers per talk (per 1,000 words).*

Speaker	1st Person Singular (I/my)	1st Person Plural Inclusive (we/us)	2nd Person (you/your)
Brown	58	34	22
Gilbert	71	19	12
Cain	44	27	31
Adichie	39	21	48
Sinek	22	46	40

Gilbert's talk shows the highest reliance on first-person singular reference, consistent with its confessional, memoir-like narrative structure. By contrast, Sinek and Adichie show a markedly higher proportion of inclusive "we" and direct "you" reference, positioning the audience as either co-participants in a shared human tendency (Sinek's account of how people are generally inspired) or as implicated subjects who must recognize their own participation in constructing single stories (Adichie's direct address to the audience's own assumptions). This variation suggests that inclusive and second-person deixis is used strategically according to each talk's rhetorical goal: narrative-driven talks favor first-person disclosure to build intimacy, while argument-driven talks favor inclusive and direct address to build shared responsibility and to motivate audience action.

### Implications for Public Speaking in the Digital Age

These findings carry direct implications for public speaking training in an era where talks are consumed as portable, shareable, algorithm-mediated video content rather than as bounded live events. First, the structural pattern of assertive-heavy build-up followed by a concentrated directive close suggests that speakers should be trained to delay explicit calls to action until sufficient assertive and narrative credibility has been established, rather than opening with unearned exhortation, which digital audiences are quick to skip past or scroll away from.

Second, the productive flouting of the quantity and relation maxims indicates that a well-placed, seemingly tangential personal narrative is not a lapse in efficiency but a trainable rhetorical device for building trust and sustaining attention — provided the speaker explicitly reconnects the narrative to the central claim, since digital audiences, unlike a captive live audience, are more likely to abandon a talk if the relevance of a digression is not eventually made clear.

Third, the deliberate use of inclusive "we" and direct "you" reference offers a concrete, teachable technique for building the sense of parasocial closeness that digital audiences, watching alone through a screen, particularly respond to. Public speaking curricula and communication coaching programs can therefore move beyond generic advice about "connecting with the audience" toward specific, linguistically grounded techniques: opening with a first-person narrative hook, transitioning to inclusive deixis at the point where a shared claim is introduced, and reserving direct second-person address for the talk's directive close. Taken together, these strategies reflect a pragmatic competence that, this study suggests, can be explicitly modeled, practiced, and assessed in speaker training rather than treated as an unteachable matter of natural charisma.



## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed five TED Talks delivered by book writers through the combined lenses of Searle's speech act taxonomy, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and person deixis. The analysis found that assertive and directive speech acts dominate the corpus, typically arranged in a recurring structural pattern of extended assertive or narrative build-up followed by a concentrated directive close. Speakers consistently and productively flout the maxims of quantity and relation through personal narrative digressions that are ultimately reconnected to their central argument, generating implicatures of authenticity and coherence. Person deixis is used strategically, with first-person singular reference favored in narrative-driven talks and inclusive "we"/direct "you" reference favored in argument-driven talks aimed at motivating collective action.

These findings suggest that inspirational public speaking, far from being an unanalyzable product of charisma, rests on identifiable and teachable pragmatic choices. For public speaking education and communication training in the digital age — where speeches are consumed as clipped, shareable, algorithmically distributed content — these choices take on heightened importance, since the pragmatic work of establishing relevance, credibility, and audience solidarity must now be accomplished within a much narrower window of sustained attention than the traditional live auditorium once allowed.

This study is limited by its relatively small corpus of five talks, its focus on transcript-based textual analysis without accompanying prosodic or gestural data, and its restriction to English-language talks by speakers from broadly similar publishing-industry backgrounds. Future research would benefit from a larger and more linguistically and culturally diverse corpus, from multimodal analysis incorporating intonation, pause, and gesture alongside verbal pragmatic strategy, and from comparative studies examining whether the pragmatic patterns identified here also characterize inspirational speech in shorter, platform-native digital formats such as short-form video.

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