
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rhetorical Strategies and Ideologies in Saudi TEDx talks

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to perform a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on ten TEDx talks in Saudi Arabia. The analysis aims to reveal how linguistic choices shape or are shaped by ideological assumptions and power relations, particularly the use of rhetorical strategies such as rhetorical questions, repetition, figurative speech, religious phrases and pronouns. While previous studies have explored persuasion in TEDx talks in various languages, including Aravind and Rajasekaran (2019), Di Carlo (2015) and Petiy (2017), limited research has focused on persuasion in Arabic TEDx talks. The analysis of the rhetorical strategies used can enhance individuals' awareness of persuasive techniques employed in political discourse, media and other communication contexts. This awareness can facilitate informed decision-making by enabling individuals to critically evaluate messages they receive. The study argues that Islamic ideologies and power relations, as well as ideologies associated with the Saudi 2030 vision, play a significant role in shaping the rhetorical strategies employed in Saudi TEDx talks.

KEYWORDS

TEDx talks, Saudi 2030 vision, ideology, power relations, persuasive strategies.

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1. Introduction

TED is a non-profit organisation that originated from the acronym 'technology, entertainment and design.' TED talks involve a presenter delivering a prepared speech to an audience with the aim of persuading them of a particular viewpoint (Petiy, 2017). These talks are translated into more than forty languages, making them accessible to people worldwide through various platforms such as mobile and tablet applications, smart TV applications, smart speaker applications and podcasts.

In 2009, the TED organization authorized third parties to independently host local events, called 'TEDx talks', in an effort to expand the hosting of these talks (Gallo, 2014). The TED talk usage policy¹, available on their official website, indicates that the usage of TEDx talks is permissible for educational purposes but not for commercial purposes. This study attributes all the TEDx videos discussed to the TEDx organization and incorporates them solely as part of the analysis, rather than for commercial purposes.

Given the TED and TEDx topics' motivational and innovative nature (Gallo, 2014), this paper argues for the relevance of the TEDx talks presented in Saudi Arabia to the Saudi 2030 vision², launched on April 25th, 2016, which aims to achieve a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. The talks analysed were delivered in 2017 and 2018, after the launch of the vision. This study's significance lies in contributing to the understanding of how the analysis of persuasive strategies in Saudi TEDx talks reveals cultural ideological assumptions and power relations.

¹ <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/our-policies-terms/ted-talks-usage-policy>

² <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/overview/>

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1.1 Persuasive strategies in Arabic: Background

Rhetoric is a powerful tool used by speakers to influence and persuade their audience towards a particular viewpoint. One way to analyse rhetoric in discourse is through the examination of persuasive strategies (Suchan, 2014). Rhetorical linguistics is often employed to enhance the persuasiveness of an argument, thereby increasing its persuasive power (I. Fairclough, 2017). Several researchers have investigated the use of rhetorical strategies in Arabic, including rhetorical questions, repetition, figurative speech, religious phrases and pronouns (Koch, 1983; Johnstone, 1991; Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Suchan, 2014; Shakour, 2014; Alduhaim, 2019). This study aims to identify the rhetorical strategies employed in ten Saudi TEDx talks to uncover how language in these talks shapes or is shaped by ideological assumptions and power relations. This section explores the definitions of these rhetorical strategies and highlights relevant literature related to them.

Rhetorical questions are a type of question that speakers use to draw the audience's attention to a particular point, without expecting an answer (Bajtková, 2017). By utilising this device, the audience is prompted to reflect on their own lives and become more engaged with the topic of the speech. Shakour (2014) argues that rhetorical questions are crucial in persuasive speeches, citing the use of rhetorical devices by Arab high school students.

Additionally, repetition is a linguistic feature frequently found in Arabic texts, referring to the recurrence of words and phrases within a conversation or text (Suchan, 2014). Its various functions include persuading the audience of a particular claim and displaying strong emotion during arguments (Johnstone, 1991). Cacioppo and Petty (1989) suggest that repetition is used by speakers to attract the audience's attention towards a specific point of view.

Figurative speech is another linguistic strategy that is highly regarded in Arabic persuasion (Suchan, 2014). Figurative language is employed to enhance the persuasiveness of an argument, and includes devices such as metaphors (a comparison between two things), similes (a comparison between two things using 'like' or 'as'), personification (attributing human qualities to non-human entities), hyperbole (an exaggeration to emphasise a point), irony (the use of language to express the opposite) and alliteration (the repetition of the same sound or letter at the beginning of words). Zaharna (2009) posits that the use of figurative speech in Arabic originates predominantly from the *Qur'an*, which employs various examples of similes, metaphors and analogies. Suchan (2014) also suggests that the use of metaphors in Arabic, particularly those connected to the *Qur'an*, may indicate a person's commitment and close relationship to God. In Saudi Arabia, where Islam and the *Qur'an* dictate all moral values and rules, the use of figurative language or phrases may augment a speaker's credibility and enhance the ability to persuade their audience of their claims.

Another linguistic strategy utilised to sway the audience is the use of religious phrases (Alduhaim, 2019). Speakers may use religious phrases to demonstrate power and authority, or to establish an emotional connection with the audience (Suchan, 2014). Since Islam is the predominant religion in Saudi Arabia, speakers may incorporate Islamic-related phrases or arguments to guide the audience towards a specific course of action. Kammoun (2015) asserts that the primary reason for the use of religious expressions is that the *Qur'an* is written in Arabic. Alduhaim (2019) also suggests that speakers in most persuasive discourses incorporate a *Qur'anic* verse.

Arabic speakers also use pronouns to steer the audience towards a favourable idea (Alduhaim, 2019). Like religious phrases, speakers may employ pronouns to bridge the gap between themselves and the audience, thereby creating an emotional bond with them (Wang, 2010). El Samie (2016) suggests that pronouns may also be used to enhance power and solidarity.

1.2 Ideology and power relations

This paper aims to explore the relationship between language use, ideology and power relations. The approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) follows the framework of N. Fairclough's (1992), who considers discourse a mode of ideological practice. This framework involves three interrelated features: textual analysis of the linguistic features, discourse practice analysis of the social practices and socio-cultural analysis of the broader cultural and historical context in which the text is situated. Together, these three dimensions allow analysts to explore how language both reflects and shapes ideologies, and how it can be used to comprehend power relations in a society.

Eagleton (2007: 9) argues that ideology is best realised through 'discourse' rather than 'language,' as claims cannot be deemed ideological in isolation from their discursive context and language use. Furthermore, Van Dijk (2001b) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016) emphasise that ideologies are not individual beliefs, but rather shared beliefs expressed through language use. While these beliefs and concerns may not be naturalised by all the members of the society, they must be normalised by a significant number of individuals within that society (Isabela Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of ideology in CDA, it is necessary to consider the relationship between language and power (i.e., how language use reflects unequal relations of power). The term 'power' in the context of language does not imply

that language itself is inherently powerful, but rather that language expresses power and creates power through its effective use (Wodak, 2001). Therefore, CDA focuses on the ways in which linguistic structures are used in various manipulations of power.

To link power to ideology, N. Fairclough (2003: 9) argues that 'ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can contribute to changing, maintaining or establishing social relations of power, domination and exploitation'. Thus, ideological assumptions are shaped by relations of power, as they depend on differences, inequalities or struggles for power and domination. In line with Thompson's (2007: 7) perspective, 'ideology is meaning in the service of power.' While ideology is conveyed through language use, power is exercised through ideology (N. Fairclough, 2003). In other words, speakers use language to seek power and influence their audience by presenting ideological assumptions that either dominate public opinion or challenge the prevailing ideologies.

2. Data analysis

This paper seeks to analyse the function of persuasion in Saudi TEDx talks, not by considering their frequency but by examining their purpose. Drawing on Fairclough's (1992) framework for CDA, the aim is to investigate how the use of rhetorical strategies in these talks may shed light on the ways in which language shapes or is shaped by ideological assumptions and power relations.

2.1 Persuasive strategies in Saudi TEDx talks

This section examines the rhetorical strategies in ten Saudi TEDx talks performed in 2017 and 2018. The study suggests that the presenters of these talks have the authority to choose which rhetorical strategy to use and for what purpose, placing them in a higher authority with the audience and giving them the power behind discourse. The speakers' authority to choose which rhetorical strategy to use contributes to making their argument more persuasive.

2.2 Rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are frequently employed by speakers to assert or elaborate on a particular point in their speech. They can be a powerful tool to capture the audience's attention and frame the speech's claim (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Shakour, 2014). For example, in one speech, the speaker asks:

(1a)

I made a dress for my dolly. Wow! Why? Because I used to look at things differently.

متخيلين انو انا بهذا المنديل صممت فستان لعروستي، او، عشان ليه؟ عشانى كنت انظر للاشياء بنظرة مختلفة.

The speaker, in this instance, employed a rhetorical question, 'Why?', to direct the audience towards the primary claim of the speech, which is the importance of perceiving things from a different perspective in order to foster innovation. By utilising 'why' in this context, the speaker provided more comprehensive background information and justification for their thought process to the audience. This rhetorical technique is recognised as a persuasive tool in communication (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Shakour, 2014). The assertion of 'because I used to look at thing differently' is linked to the third aim of the Saudi 2030 vision, which is building an ambitious nation. By highlighting the primary claim and guiding the audience towards it, the speaker was able to make a more compelling argument.

Another speaker asks:

(1b)

Why? Because it is passion, I developed myself with this passion, and I reached my goal.

ليش؟ لأنه شغف، وأنا طورت نفسي بذات الشغف، ووصلت للشيء اللي أنا أبيه.

The speaker posits that their success can be attributed to their passion, which has driven them to develop themselves and ultimately achieve their goals. By asking 'Why?' in this context, the speaker seeks to emphasise the significance of passion as a key ingredient for success, thereby making a persuasive argument. This statement aligns with the objectives of the Saudi 2030 vision, which aims to foster a nation of ambitious individuals.

2.3 Repetition

The present study finds that repetition was a common rhetorical device employed by all ten speakers analysed. Scholars such as Cacioppo and Petty (1989) and Sameer (2017) posit that linguistic repetition or paraphrasing can effectively capture individuals' attention and enhance the speaker's persuasiveness. As an illustration, one speaker said:

(2a)

Broadcast supervisor, 'I want to be on broadcast'. I continued insisting 'I want to be on broadcast'.

"يا مشرف الإذاعة، أنا أبيع أطلع بالإذاعة"

كنت لروح عليه "أبيع أطلع بالإذاعة".

The use of repetition in this statement emphasises the speaker's strong desire to be on broadcast. By repeating the statement 'I want to be on broadcast,' the speaker is making it clear that this is their goal and they are determined to achieve it. Therefore, the speaker is arguing for the importance of perseverance, which is in alignment with the Saudi 2030 vision's aim of building an ambitious nation.

Furthermore, repetition was also utilised as a rhetorical strategy to underscore specific circumstances, thereby emphasising the main argument. For example, on speaker said:

(2b)

All of our training took place in the street, mall parking, under the light of yellow bulbs.

تمريننا كله كان الشارع، في مواقف مولات، تحت لمبة صفراء.

Remember that I began playing under a yellow bulb and at mall parking.

وأنا كنت ألعب تحت لمبة صفراء بمواقف مولات.

In the provided statement, repetition is employed to emphasise the significance of the speaker's training and upbringing in the street and mall parking lot, under the illumination of yellow bulbs. By repeating the phrase 'under a yellow bulb' in both sentences, the speaker underscores the importance of this specific detail in their training and development.

Additionally, disclosing the negative aspects of one's personal life can help establish an emotional connection with the audience, thereby increasing the likelihood of eliciting a favourable response (McKee & Fryer, 2003). The repetition observed in the speech serves to underscore the central argument, which emphasises the significance of perseverance in attaining success. This assertion is in line with the Saudi 2030 vision's emphasis on fostering an ambitious and determined society.

2.4 Figurative speech

Another rhetorical technique utilised by speakers to underscore their argument is the use of figurative language. According to Suchan (2014), this strategy can enhance the persuasiveness of the message by providing a memorable and engaging way of conveying the claim. For example, one speaker said:

(3a)

This was a hobby running in my blood.

هذه هواية في دمي.

The phrase 'running in my blood' is a metaphorical phrase used to describe the strong passion or natural inclination the speaker has for the hobby. The phrase suggests that the hobby is an essential part of the speaker's personality or character, much like the way blood runs through one's veins and is essential to their physical being. The use of metaphors can add colour and depth to language and help convey complex ideas or emotions, thus becoming persuasive (Zhumadilova, 2020).

Another speaker said:

(3b)

The good impact grows.

ينمو الأثر الطيب.

In this sentence, the word 'impact' is being used as a metaphor for the positive effects or results of something. By saying that the impact 'grows,' the speaker is suggesting that the positive effects become more significant over time or increase in magnitude. Employing figures of speech to underscore the significance of a particular point can enhance the persuasiveness of a message, as it provides a memorable and engaging way of conveying the argument to the audience. The utilisation of figurative language observed in the Saudi TEDx speeches is particularly related to the importance of perseverance and creating a positive impact, which aligns with the objectives of the Saudi 2030 vision.

Additionally, in Islam, doing good and having a positive impact is highly emphasised and encouraged. Islam teaches that every action we take should be done with the intention of pleasing Allah and benefiting ourselves and others. This includes both our words and our deeds. Allah says in the Quran: "And whatever good you do, it will never be forgotten by Allah" (Qur'an 2:110). Muslims believe that they will be held accountable for their actions in the Hereafter and will be rewarded or punished accordingly. Therefore, doing good and having a positive impact is not just a moral obligation, but also a religious duty. The use of a metaphor with religious connotations can represent the significant influence that Islam holds over its followers, in terms of their beliefs, values, and behaviours. This influence can be likened to the power and authority of Islam over Muslims.

2.5 Religious phrases

In the ten Saudi TEDx speeches analysed, the speakers utilised various religious phrases. This practice is commonly associated with building an emotional connection with the audience or conveying authority and power, as noted by Suchan (2014), in the context of persuasive Arabic speeches. For example, several speakers said:

(4a)

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ.

(4b)

In the name of Allah, and peace and blessings be upon our Prophet, Mohammed.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَالسَّلَامِ عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ.

These phrases are Islamic religious phrases that are commonly used at the beginning of various Islamic rituals, prayers and daily activities (Alduhaim, 2019). They are considered as one of the most important phrases in Islamic culture. These phrases are a way of invoking the name of God and acknowledging His attributes of mercy and grace, which are considered to be central to the Islamic faith. The use of these phrases is a reminder of the importance of being grateful for the blessings of God, seeking His mercy and guidance, and aligning oneself with His will. They are also a way of showing respect and reverence for God's name and a recognition of His supreme authority.

Overall, the use of this religious phrase reflects the strong influence of Islam in the culture and society of those who use it. It serves as a reminder of the importance of faith, humility and gratitude in the lives of Muslims. Since the speakers are presenting their speeches in a context where Islam is a shared religion, the use of Allah's name at the beginning of the speech contributes to triggering a shared ideology, leading to having a shared identity with the audience, thus building an emotional bond with them and becoming persuasive (Lahlali, 2012).

Some speakers used religious phrases to provide evidence of their claim. For instance, one speaker used the Qur'anic verse:

(4c)

{In an Assembly of Truth, in the Presence of a Sovereign Omnipotent}.

{مَقْعَدُ صِدْقٍ عِنْدَ مَلِكٍ مُقْتَدِرٍ}.

This is a religious phrase that is commonly used in Arabic persuasive speeches to convey a sense of power, authority and truth, thus persuading the audience of a certain point (Suchan, 2014). This phrase is often invoked to emphasise the importance of speaking the truth and upholding moral values in the presence of a higher power. By using this verse in the speech, the speaker seeks to establish their own credibility and authority, as well as to connect with the audience on a spiritual level. The use of such phrases is a common rhetorical strategy employed in Arabic persuasion to evoke emotion and reinforce the speaker's argument.

2.6 Pronouns

In Arabic persuasion, the use of pronouns such as *I, you, yours* and *we* is a common rhetorical strategy. The speakers in the Saudi TEDx talks analysed employed deixis, such as *you* and *our*, and phrases like *my life was like yours* or *you all know* to create a sense of involvement in the speech, thus effectively directing the audience towards the intended conclusion or away from an opposing claim for action. For example, when one speaker wanted to highlight his main claim around the importance of taking action to make a change in the world, he used the pronoun *we* in:

(5a)

We all have the capabilities.

In Arabic persuasion, the inclusive pronoun 'we' is frequently employed to establish a sense of unity and shared purpose between the speaker and the audience, as noted by Alduhaim (2019). This rhetorical technique is intended to communicate that the speaker and the audience are aligned, with shared objectives and values. By utilising the word 'we,' the speaker is effectively conveying that they are part of the same team as their listeners.

The speakers also utilised the pronoun *yours* several times in their speeches to indicate a shared identity with the audience. For example, one speaker highlighted his circumstance in the following:

(5b)

My life is simply like every one of yours.

حياتي كانت مثل حياتكم بالضبط.

The possessive pronoun 'yours' is also used in Arabic persuasion to emphasise the importance of the audience's role in the message. By using the word 'yours,' the speaker is effectively saying that the message is not just important to them, but to the audience as well. Additionally, the linguistic choices made by the speaker show the power dynamic at play in the discourse. For instance, the use of 'like yours' demonstrates that the speaker and the audience share a similar level of power in the conversation. This can be a powerful way to create a sense of shared purpose and commitment. Furthermore, sharing a personal struggle or 'dark side' of a person's narrative and connecting it to the audience can foster an emotional bond with the listeners and enhance the speaker's persuasive power (McKee & Fryer, 2003). This strategy involves using the speaker's personal experience to establish common ground and relatability with the audience. By doing so, the speaker can elicit empathy and compassion from their listeners, ultimately bolstering their persuasive appeal.

Speakers also used the pronouns *He* or *Him* to refer to Allah (God). For example, one of the speakers recounted how his wife provided him with advice by saying:

(5c)

He needs you, go back to Him.

الله أشفاق لك، إرجأ ليه.

In Islam, the pronoun *He* and *Him* are commonly used when referring to Allah, the one and only God. This is because Allah is considered to be beyond gender and is not limited by any human characteristics or attributes. This represents a Muslims' shared ideology towards God and that Allah dominates everything (Muqit, 2012). Using such a shared ideology contributes to building an emotional bond, thus becoming persuasive. Overall, the use of pronouns in Arabic persuasion can be a powerful rhetorical strategy for creating a personal connection with the audience and building a sense of unity and shared purpose.

3. Discussion

The analysis of the use of these rhetorical strategies reveals insights into the underlying ideologies and power relations in Saudi Arabian society. The main ideologies presented in the talks include perseverance, passion, innovation, success and infinite impact, which align with the Saudi 2030 vision's aim of building a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. Additionally, the speakers incorporate Islamic ideologies and phrases in their speeches to appeal to the audience's shared religious identity and beliefs. The use of these ideologies creates a shared identity between the speaker and the audience, which enhances the persuasive power of the discourse. By highlighting shared values and beliefs, the speakers can influence the audience to accept their arguments and ideas.

The analysis of power relations was revealed through the speakers' utilisation of figurative speech, religious phrases, and pronouns. The use of figurative speech was at times linked to Islamic ideology, as exemplified in sample (3b). Employing an Islamic ideology to persuade the audience is an approach that mirrors the authority that Islam holds among Muslims. The use of religious phrases in persuasive discourse underscores the authority that Islam holds over Muslims. Moreover, the use of pronouns such as 'we' and 'like you,' as seen in samples (5a) and (5b), denotes an egalitarian power relationship with the audience, while using pronouns such as 'He' and 'Him,' as seen in sample (5c), referring to Allah, signifies the higher authority that Allah holds over people.

4. Conclusion

The present study examined the use of rhetorical strategies employed by speakers in Saudi TEDx talks with the aim of persuading their audience to a particular conclusion. The strategies analysed in this study include rhetorical questions, repetition, figurative language, religious phrases and pronouns. The analysis reveals that these strategies are not used randomly by the speakers, but

rather are utilised to emphasise certain points, show authority or establish a shared identity with the audience. The ultimate goal of using these strategies is to establish a connection with the audience, thereby influencing their thinking and behaviour.

Overall, the study adds to the field of Arabic discourse by offering a comprehensive analysis of the use of rhetorical strategies in Saudi TEDx talks. It also contributes to the field of CDA by providing an examination of ideology and power relations in Arabic persuasion. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the analysis focused solely on the use of rhetorical strategies, and future research should explore other linguistic features to acquire a more nuanced understanding of ideology and power relations in persuasive discourse.

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