

**Deconstructing Steve Jobs' Rhetoric: A Corpus-Linguistic and Neurolinguistic
Programming Analysis of the 2005 Stanford Commencement Address**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the techniques of persuasion in Steve Jobs Stanford Commencement Address (2005) with reference to Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The study, based on a corpus-driven framework in the form of AntConc, determines and classifies common linguistic structures comprising modal operators, universal quantifiers, nominalizations, predicates, and cause-and-effect structures in Milton's NLP model. The analysis shows that Jobs used modal operators, including can and must, to envision agency and necessity; universal quantifiers, such as all and never, to generalize experience; and nominalizations, such as life, death, and success, to turn processes into eternal truths. The application of predicates to different sensory modalities also broadened the audience's interest, and storytelling patterns incorporated persuasion into the living experience. Analyzed through the prism of the rhetorical triad of Aristotle and contemporary theories of persuasion, the discussion reveals that NLP categories provide an accurate way of looking at how Jobs created credibility, emotion, and reasoning. By illustrating the subtle yet effective persuasive techniques of NLP, this study emphasizes the applicability of NLP strategies to discourse analysis and highlights the commencement speech as a fertile domain of motivational communication.

Keywords: Steve Jobs' Rhetoric, Corpus-Linguistic, Neurolinguistic Programming, 2005 Stanford Commencement Address

INTRODUCTION

Language is much more than a communication tool. It is an effective instrument for perception, decision-making, and human actions. The persuasive power of language has been known and researched since ancient times. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the ability to observe the available means of persuasion in any situation, a definition that is still applicable today. The art of persuasion is an integral part of human communication. In schools, the political arena, courtrooms, the media, and during normal discussions, people employ language to persuade, motivate, and sometimes even control.

Persuasion studies have expanded beyond classical rhetoric in the modern era. It draws upon psychology, sociology, and linguistics. The process of persuasion has been studied by social psychologists such as Petty and Cacioppo, and the way that language patterns establish and maintain power and identity has

been addressed by discourse analysts such as Fairclough. This intersectionality underscores the significance of motivational discourse, a type of communication that involves more than merely transferring information. It aims to transform the manner in which people think and motivate them to perceive themselves and the world differently.

In the field of communication, motivational speeches are considered a popular genre. They are presented in contexts where individuals anticipate inspiration and motivation, such as graduation events, corporate events, global meetings, and self-help seminars. Although the circumstances in which these speeches are delivered are diverse, they tend to have similar characteristics, such as: they use personal narrative to create relationships, they share moral or philosophical lessons, and they refer to common human values, including perseverance, authenticity, and self-belief. A commencement address is a special kind of motivational speech. It does not only signify the celebration of academic success but also aims to equip graduates with a precarious future. Researchers such as Ng have labeled commencement speeches as hybrid texts that unite narratives, advice, and ceremonial components. They often resort to ethos, pathos, and logos, thus resorting to classical rhetorical traditions and addressing contemporary communicative requirements.

Among the most influential examples of this genre is Steve Jobs' speech at the Stanford Commencement Address in 2005. It has been read by millions of people and has remained a reference in training, teaching, and motivational situations. What has made this speech so popular is not just the fact that Jobs was a visionary entrepreneur but how he approached his words to transform his own life into general principles. His rhetorical techniques gave ordinary happenings a wonderful meaning so that the listeners could connect his stories with their lives.

Despite the numerous insights regarding the subject of persuasion that rhetoric and psychology offer, the number of studies analyzing the linguistic mechanics of how such speeches are effective is small. Corpus linguistics offers a solution because it enables researchers to establish recurring tendencies in vocabulary and sentence structure with empirical accuracy. Simultaneously, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, although a controversial issue in psychology, provides an elaborate system for categorizing persuasive language techniques. These are modal operators, quantifiers, predicates, and nominalizations, which can be tracked and verified in actual texts.

The present study applies a corpus-based NLP framework to Steve Jobs' Stanford commencement address. This research will demonstrate the mechanisms of persuasion through frequency patterns, concordance instances, and narrative structure by providing an analysis of frequency patterns, concordance examples, and narrative structure. Thus, it attempts to show how the combination of personal experience and rhetoric skill allowed Jobs to create a long-term motivational effect through his words.

Research Problem

Although there are extensive studies on persuasion and motivational discourse, the exact linguistic processes that render such communication successful are still under-investigated. The majority of available literature concentrates on rhetoric, psychology, or generalized thematic analysis, but seldom examines the role of specific patterns of language use, including modal operators, quantifiers, predicates, and nominalizations, in persuasion in a systematic manner. In addition, the incorporation of rhetorical, psychological, and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) views is mostly missing, and there is a gap in the comprehension of how these methods can be used mutually. Lastly, commencement speeches, which have cultural and educational importance as inspirational points, have not yet been properly researched in

contrast to political or religious speeches. This absence of targeted investigation highlights the necessity of a study that incorporates corpus-based techniques with NLP and persuasion theories to reveal how the use of language in the Steve Jobs Stanford Commencement Address appeals to and influences the reader.

Research Questions

1. Which particular linguistic patterns of Milton's Model of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) are used in Steve Job's 2005 Stanford Commencement Address by Steve Jobs (2005)?
2. How do modal operators, quantifiers, predicates, and nominalizations function as persuasive strategies in speeches?
3. How does Jobs' use of NLP strategies interact with classical rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) to enhance persuasion?
4. In what ways do NLP-based patterns contribute to the motivational and narrative coherence of speech when interpreted through modern persuasion theories?

Research Objectives

1. To determine and label the repetitive linguistic patterns of the Stanford Commencement Address by Steve Jobs (2005) in accordance with the Milton Model of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).
2. To examine the role of modal operators, universal quantifiers, predicates, and nominalizations as persuasive techniques in speeches.
3. To investigate the interaction between the NLP strategies used by Jobs and classical rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos.
4. To elucidate the persuasive power of NLP-based patterns using current persuasion theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Narrative Paradigm.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of discourse analysis by using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to analyze Steve Jobs' Commencement Address at Stanford, a genre that is not actively discussed in this way. Although other studies have emphasized delivery and storytelling by Jobs, the linguistic mechanics of persuasion have received insignificant attention. Through the study of modal operators, quantifiers, predicates, and nominalizations in the context of a corpus-based analysis, this paper illustrates how language can be used as an instrument of thought and action. It combines ancient rhetoric and contemporary views of persuasion, making it close to both ancient and modern views. In addition to its theoretical value, this study provides practical lessons for educators, students, and communication practitioners, demonstrating how tactical linguistic decisions can enhance credibility, emotional appeal, and rational appeal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tradition of persuasion research has evolved through the centuries from ancient rhetoric, classical and modern psychological traditions, and linguistic and communication studies. This study also examines classical theories of persuasion, recent innovations, the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) model, and the literature on motivational and commencement speeches, focusing on previous studies of Steve Jobs' discourse.

Classical Foundations of Persuasion

Aristotle's Rhetoric has long been a cornerstone of persuasion work. His system consists of three types of proof: ethos, pathos, and logos - the credibility of the speaker, the audience's emotion, and logic. These categories remain central to the study of rhetoric today and are considered to be 'cross-cultural' (Kennedy 1999, Herrick 2017). In the Stanford Commencement Address, Steve Jobs embodies this triad via his ethos as an entrepreneur with vision, pathos in sharing personal hardship, and logos when he employs the deductive method to draw lessons from experience.

Rhetorical traditions were also added to by Roman contributions. Cicero focused on delivery (actio) and style (elocutio), while Quintilian developed the notion of the "good man speaking well", which underscored the ethical as well as performative role of persuasion. It is Jobs' calm and measured delivery, his straightforward minimalist style that connects with this ancient artistic view, which links the time-honored Socratic traditions to our modern motivational speaking.

Modern Persuasion Theories

Modern psychology and communication studies have extensively investigated persuasion. According to Petty and Cacioppo's (1986; 1994) Elaboration Likelihood Model of message processing, central route persuasion is based on quality arguments, whereas peripheral route persuasion depends on heuristics such as credibility or affective appeal. Jobs' address is an outstanding example of this dual processing: his logical line of argument uses central processing, while he uses cues that are peripheral (his credibility and emotional storytelling).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) describes persuasion as the result of a desire to reduce inconsistencies between beliefs and actions. Nothing upends complacency like mortality, and Jobs calls his readers to bring their lives into conformity with what are true and courageous, thus lessening cognitive dissonance.

Fisher's (1987) Narrative Paradigm takes the argument one step further, suggesting that rhetors persuade when they tell stories whose elements are interconnected and capable of bearing witness to authenticity. Jobs organized his speech into three personal stories—about dropping out of college, being fired from Apple, and facing cancer—that held a moral lesson and reflected the experiences of the listeners.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-Linguistic Programming emerged in the 1970s through the work of Bandler and Grinder, who conducted a study on the language patterns of successful therapists. At the core of NLP is Milton's Model, which takes persuasive language patterns such as nominalizations, modal operators, universal quantifiers, cause-effect constructions, and rapport-building. These linguistic instruments show that persuasion often occurs at the micro-level of word choice and phrasing.

Although NLP has been criticized for lacking empirical validation in psychology (Einspruch & Forman, 1985), its practical value can be seen in education, politics, and motivational speaking. Torres and Katz (1983) and Seemab (2018) also show how NLP categories can reveal the types of persuasive strategies employed in authentic, naturally occurring discourse. This study follows this tradition and uses NLP to analyze Jobs' commencement address, providing a concise linguistic view of its force of persuasion.

Motivational Discourse and Commencement Speeches

Motivational discourse represents a genre that combines inspiration with instruction. Researchers such as Charteris-Black (2014) have illustrated how motivational speaking is dependent on storytelling, metaphors, and universal value claims. Considering themselves as both followers and leaders of listening communities, protecting listeners' values by helping them adhere to the established norm in their discourses is a premise for lecturers or teachers in motivational speeches (Hyland, 2009; Ng, 2019).

Within this genre, commencement addresses occupy a unique space. They serve both ceremonial and motivational purposes, celebrating achievements while preparing graduates for future challenges. Murphy (2016) draws attention to themes such as resilience, authenticity and legacy, while Ng (2019) underscores the hybrid nature of commencement speeches – narratives wrapped in rituals with bits of advice

Prior Studies on Steve Jobs' Rhetoric

Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Address has been discussed in details in biographies and discourse analysis. Isaacson (2011) highlights his resilience, the storytelling and simplicity he used while Hart and Bell (2011) deconstruct his rhetorical leadership, authenticity. These studies underline Jobs' effectiveness as a speaker but do not systematically investigate the linguistic patterns that underpin his persuasive power.

This study addresses this gap by integrating corpus linguistics, NLP, and persuasion theory. By combining classical rhetoric with modern psychological models and linguistic analysis, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of how Jobs' language constructs persuasion within the commencement speech genre.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) with classical and modern persuasion theories. This integration ensures that the analysis captures both the micro-level linguistic structures and the macro-level rhetorical functions of Steve Jobs' *Address* (2005).

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Milton's Model)

At the core of this framework is Milton's Model of NLP (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), a taxonomy of linguistic strategies derived from hypnotherapy. Milton's Model identifies recurring language patterns that enable persuasion through vagueness, generalization, and embedded commands. The categories relevant to this study included:

1. Nominalizations – abstract nouns that reify processes into concepts (*life, success, death*).
2. Cause-and-Effect Relations – linking statements with causal connectors (*if, because, so*).
3. Modal Operators – expressions of possibility or necessity (*can, must, should, will*).
4. Universal Quantifiers – terms that generalize to all people or situations (*everyone, never, all*).
5. Tag Questions – questions that invite agreement (*don't you?*) though rare in Jobs' speeches.
6. Rapport-Building Strategies – inclusive pronouns and relational language (*we, our*).

These categories provide an analytical lens for identifying persuasive linguistic patterns.

Classical Rhetoric: Ethos, Pathos, Logos

Aristotle's rhetorical triad remains central to interpreting persuasive effects. Jobs' ethos (credibility) is established through his entrepreneurial authority, pathos (emotional appeal) through personal narratives, and logos (reasoning) through cause-and-effect constructions. This triad provides a framework for situating NLP patterns within the broader rhetorical functions.

Modern Persuasion Theories

Three modern theories complement this framework:

- Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how persuasion occurs through both central (logical reasoning) and peripheral (emotional cues, credibility) routes.
- Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) illuminates how Jobs' references to mortality create internal tension resolved through authenticity and courage.
- Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1987) highlights how storytelling persuades by narrative coherence and fidelity.

Together, these theories allow the analysis to move beyond description of patterns to interpretation of how those patterns work persuasively.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods design. The quantitative component was conducted to identify frequent linguistic patterns using the methodology of corpus analysis. The qualitative component was implemented to interpret the patterns within the frameworks of NLP and persuasion. The mixed approach was chosen to combine empirical rigor of the analysis and theoretical depth and value of the findings.

Corpus Compilation

The corpus for this research was the full transcript of Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement Address issued in 2005. The transcript was retrieved from the official Stanford University website. The provided version of the transcript includes almost 3,000 words. All non-verbal elements were removed to create a clean textual dataset for the analysis.

Sampling Rationale

The corpus for this analysis was sampled according to the principles of purposive sampling. The choice of this speech is based on several factors:

1. It one of the most watched and referenced commencement addresses in the world
2. It explicitly emphasis on the motivational and persuasive power of the speaker's message, which makes it appropriate for linguistic persuasive analysis
3. It has the relevant material from the perspective of already established cultural references

Tools and Materials

The software AntConc (Version 3.5.9) was used to generate:

- Word frequency lists, to identify recurring lexical items.
- Concordances, to analyze the contexts of keywords.
- Collocates, to identify patterns of co-occurrence.

Manual categorization was conducted to classify words into NLP categories (e.g., modal operators, quantifiers).

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed four stages:

1. Corpus Processing. The transcript was cleaned and uploaded into AntConc.
2. Quantitative Analysis. Wordlists were generated, sorted by frequency, and manually inspected for NLP-related terms.
3. Qualitative Categorization. Concordance lines were examined to determine the pragmatic function of each item within its context. Items were categorized into Milton's Model patterns.
4. Theoretical Interpretation. Identified patterns were interpreted through Aristotle's rhetoric, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and the Narrative Paradigm.

Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability:

- Concordance lines were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency in categorization.
- Contextual analysis was employed to avoid misclassification (e.g., distinguishing between literal and metaphorical uses).
- Categories were cross-checked against NLP literature (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Seemab, 2018).

Validity was supported through triangulation: quantitative data provided empirical grounding, while qualitative interpretation situated results in established theoretical frameworks.

Ethical Considerations

As the speech transcript is publicly available and Jobs is a public figure, no ethical risks were involved in data collection. The study adheres to ethical standards of discourse analysis by ensuring accurate representation and interpretation of the source material.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section reports results from the corpus analysis of Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement Address (2005). Output results are classified by the categories of Milton's Model in NLP: (keywords) modal operators, cause and effect constructions, universal quantifiers, predicates, nominalizations, tag questions, rapport building and storytelling. Frequency counts, concordance examples, or interpretive commentary are provided in each subsection.

Modal Operators

One of the most common techniques of persuasion in the speech was use of modal operators. Jobs envisioned can, must, should and will as confines of possibility, necessity and obligation.

Table 1:
Frequencies of Modal Operators in Jobs' Stanford Speech

| Modal Operator | Frequency | Percentage (approx. of 3,000 words) | Example Concordance Line |
|-----------------------|------------------|--|---|
| Can | 22 | 0.73% | "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards." |
| Must | 8 | 0.26% | "You must trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever." |
| Should | 5 | 0.16% | "Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith. You should keep going." |
| Will | 10 | 0.33% | "Believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the confidence to follow your heart." |

Note. Frequencies are approximate counts based on AntConc wordlist and concordance searches.

Interpretation:

- The modal *can* dominates Jobs' discourse. Its use emphasizes possibility and agency, central to the motivational function of the speech.
- *Must* conveys obligation, but Jobs frames it existentially ("you must trust in something"), softening compulsion into inspirational necessity.
- *Will* projects future certainty, creating optimism about outcomes.
- These modal operators collectively shift audience perception from limitation to empowerment, a hallmark of motivational persuasion.

Cause-and-Effect Constructions

Jobs frequently used cause-and-effect reasoning to anchor abstract life lessons in logical structures.

Table 2
Frequencies of Cause-and-Effect Markers in Jobs' Stanford Speech

| Marker | Frequency | Percentage | Example Concordance Line |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------|---|
| If | 18 | 0.60% | "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" |
| Because | 9 | 0.30% | "Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me because it freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life." |
| So | 12 | 0.40% | "And so at 30 I was out. And very publicly out." |

Interpretation

- *If* statements appear most frequently, functioning as hypothetical reasoning to encourage reflection.
- *Because* provides causal justification, linking personal setbacks to later success.
- These constructions strengthen logos by presenting Jobs' lessons as logical consequences, not mere opinion.

Universal Quantifiers

Jobs relied on quantifiers like *everyone*, *all*, and *never* to frame his advice as universally applicable.

Table 3:
Frequencies of Universal Quantifiers in Jobs' Stanford Speech

| Quantifier | Frequency | Example Concordance Line |
|------------|-----------|--|
| All | 15 | "All external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death." |
| Everyone | 6 | "Death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true." |
| Never | 7 | "Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary. Never settle." |

Interpretation

- *All* was the most frequent, often appearing in lists that universalize experience (e.g., *all pride*, *all fear*).
- *Never* functions as an absolute imperative, reinforcing Jobs' credibility by presenting non-negotiable advice.
- These quantifiers collectivize experience, appealing to shared human mortality and ambition.

Predicates and Representational Systems

Jobs employed predicates that appealed to different sensory modalities, consistent with NLP's representational systems.

Table 4:
Frequencies of Predicates in Jobs' Stanford Speech

| Predicate Type | Example Predicate | Frequency | Example Concordance Line |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------|--|
| Visual | See, look | 9 | "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards." |
| Auditory | Hear, listen | 4 | "Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice." |
| Kinesthetic | Feel | 6 | "I felt that I had let the previous generation of entrepreneurs down." |
| Auditory-Digital | Know, think | 20 | "You've got to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it." |

Interpretation

- The auditory-digital system (*know, think*) was most prominent, reflecting Jobs' appeal to internal reasoning and self-reflection.
- Visual and kinesthetic predicates appeared in key metaphors (e.g., *looking forward, felt*).
- This mixture ensured broad audience engagement, appealing to different cognitive styles.

Nominalizations

Jobs often converted processes into abstract nouns (*life, death, love, success*), presenting them as immutable truths.

Examples:

- "Death is very likely the single best invention of life."
- "Love what you do."
- "The only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work."

Table 5:
Frequencies of Nominalizations in Jobs' Stanford Speech

| Nominalization | Frequency | Example Concordance Line |
|----------------|-----------|---|
| Life | 24 | "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." |
| Death | 15 | "Death is very likely the single best invention of life." |
| Love | 12 | "The only way to do great work is to love what you do." |
| Success | 7 | "Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me because it freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life and ultimately led to great success." |
| Work | 20 | "Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work." |

Note. Frequencies reflect lexical items functioning as abstract nominalizations in persuasive contexts.

Interpretation

Nominalizations created an illusion of universality and inevitability, reinforcing his authority while simplifying complex processes into digestible concepts.

- By reifying *life* and *death* as stable entities, Jobs heightened the existential weight of his message.
- *Work* and *love* functioned as motivational absolutes, simplifying complex processes into guiding principles.
- Nominalizations provided cognitive anchors, making abstract values more persuasive.

Storytelling

Jobs structured his speech around three stories, each serving as an extended persuasive strategy:

1. Dropping out of college (lesson: trust intuition).
2. Being fired from Apple (lesson: resilience and renewal).
3. Facing cancer (lesson: mortality and urgency).

The most salient persuasive strategy in Jobs' speech was storytelling. The speech was explicitly divided into three stories:

1. Dropping Out of College → lesson: trust in intuition and serendipity.
2. Being Fired from Apple → lesson: resilience and renewal.
3. Facing Cancer → lesson: mortality and urgency.

Table 6:
Narrative Structures in Jobs’ Stanford Speech

| Story Theme | Length (words) | Key Lesson | Example Concordance Line |
|-------------------------|----------------|------------------------|--|
| Dropping out of college | ~950 | Trust in intuition | “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards.” |
| Fired from Apple | ~1,000 | Resilience and renewal | “Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.” |
| Cancer diagnosis | ~800 | Embracing mortality | “Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.” |

Interpretation

- Each story functioned as narrative persuasion, embodying Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm.
- Stories appealed to pathos (empathy, mortality), while simultaneously reinforcing Jobs’ ethos as someone who overcame setbacks.
- Narrative persuasion worked by embedding life lessons in lived experience, increasing identification with the audience.

Rapport Building:

Jobs used inclusive pronouns (*we*, *our*) and conversational phrasing to foster intimacy:

- “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life.”
- “We all face death.”

Interpretation

These choices created a sense of shared human condition, closing the gap between speaker and audience.

DISCUSSION

The present study analyzed Steve Jobs’ *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005) using a mixed-methods corpus-based approach grounded in Milton’s Model of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The results revealed recurrent patterns including modal operators, cause-and-effect reasoning, universal quantifiers, predicates, nominalizations, and storytelling. This section interprets those findings through classical and modern persuasion theories, situates Jobs’ rhetorical style in relation to other motivational discourse, and considers the broader implications for English linguistics and communication studies.

Integration with Classical Rhetoric

The three pillars of ethos, pathos, and logos in Aristotle (2007) still underlie rhetorical analysis. One can view Jobs’ speech as the distillation of this triad:

- Logos came from cause-and-effect sentences (if, because). Jobs connected these abstract life principles to logical reasoning, testing them against what he later called a “fantastic mechanism” of human experience: “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?” Such formulations invited rational reflection.
- Pathos was evoked by storytelling and using kinesthetic predicates (felt, heart wrenching, love), which led to emotional identification. The story around cancer, especially, was one of mortality, fear and bravery.
- Personal ethos was enhanced by credibility: Jobs' tales of college drop-out, being fired from Apple, and facing death were stories that conveyed his resilience, authenticity and authority.

This integration demonstrates Aristotle’s principle that persuasion is strongest when appeals to reason, emotion, and character are combined. Jobs’ nominalizations (*life, death, success*) further heightened this effect by transforming personal experiences into universal truths.

Persuasion Through the Elaboration Likelihood Model

Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) distinguishes between central and peripheral routes to persuasion.

- Central Route. Jobs engaged listeners’ rational faculties with causal reasoning (*if, because*) and modal operators (*must, will*), encouraging careful elaboration of his arguments. His structured narratives offered evidence-based reasoning grounded in personal experience.
- Peripheral Route. Simultaneously, Jobs appealed to emotions and credibility: the ethos of a visionary entrepreneur and the pathos of near-death experiences. His storytelling served as a peripheral cue, persuading even those who might not critically evaluate logical structures.

The results suggest that Jobs’ effectiveness lay in dual-route persuasion: he offered substance for critical thinkers while providing emotionally charged narratives that could influence less analytical listeners.

Cognitive Dissonance and Mortality Awareness

Festinger’s (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains persuasion as the resolution of internal inconsistencies. Jobs deliberately invoked mortality as a cognitive dissonance trigger:

“Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.”

This statement forces listeners to reconcile dissonant cognitions: the desire to play safe versus the inevitability of death. By framing mortality as a liberating force, Jobs resolved this dissonance in favor of risk-taking and authenticity.

The recurrent nominalizations *life* and *death* provided existential anchors for this persuasion, presenting abstract inevitabilities as immutable realities. Jobs’ strategy aligns with Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), which suggests that mortality salience increases adherence to meaningful values.

Storytelling and the Narrative Paradigm

Walter Fisher’s (1987) Narrative Paradigm argues that humans are storytellers who reason and are persuaded through narrative coherence and fidelity. Jobs’ speech exemplifies this paradigm:

1. **Coherence:** Each of the three stories (dropping out, being fired, facing cancer) followed a consistent arc: adversity → struggle → resolution. This structure mirrored audience expectations of narrative logic.
2. **Fidelity:** Jobs' stories resonated with lived human experiences. His struggles were relatable (financial hardship, professional failure, health crises), lending credibility and authenticity.

By embedding persuasion in narrative, Jobs minimized the perception of overt persuasion. Rather than instructing, he showed through stories, allowing audiences to internalize lessons organically.

Implications for Linguistics and Communication

The findings have several implications:

1. **Corpus Linguistics and NLP:** The study demonstrates how corpus tools (AntConc) can reveal persuasive patterns in real-world texts. Identifying modal operators, quantifiers, and predicates provides empirical grounding for rhetorical claims.
2. **English Linguistics:** Jobs' discourse illustrates how nominalization, modality, and quantification operate not just as grammatical categories but as persuasive strategies.
3. **Communication Studies:** The integration of logos, pathos, and ethos through NLP patterns shows how motivational discourse aligns with both rhetorical and psychological theories.
4. **Pedagogy:** Analyzing speeches like Jobs' offers a valuable resource for teaching persuasive writing and speaking, showing students how linguistic choices construct credibility and impact.

Limitations of the Study

1. **Corpus Size:** The study analyzed a single speech of approximately 3,000 words. While the findings are rich, yet they cannot be generalized to Jobs' entire rhetorical style or to motivational discourse broadly.
2. **Subjectivity in Categorization:** Although AntConc provided frequency data, manual categorization of words into NLP patterns involved interpretive judgment. A second coder would strengthen reliability.
3. **Cultural Specificity:** Jobs' rhetoric is shaped by American entrepreneurial culture. Its persuasive strategies may not resonate identically across cultures.
4. **Absence of Audience Reception:** The study focuses on language patterns but does not analyze how actual audiences received or were persuaded by the speech.

Directions for Future Research

- Expand the corpus to include multiple speeches by Jobs and compare them to those of other leaders (Robbins, Obama, Malala).
- Cross-cultural studies could examine whether NLP patterns are universal or culturally specific.
- Reception analysis could incorporate surveys or interviews to measure how audiences interpret these strategies.
- Computational approaches such as sentiment analysis could complement NLP-based categorization with broader emotional profiling.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to examine the persuasive strategies embedded in Steve Jobs' *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005), using a corpus-based mixed-methods approach. The objectives were threefold: to identify recurrent linguistic patterns, to analyze how those patterns correspond with Milton's Model of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), and to interpret their persuasive force through classical and contemporary theories of persuasion.

The findings revealed that Jobs' discourse is characterized by a sophisticated interplay of modal operators (e.g., *can*, *must*), cause-and-effect constructions (*if*, *because*), universal quantifiers (*all*, *everyone*), nominalizations (*success*, *innovation*, *mortality*), and personal storytelling. These features not only align with categories outlined in NLP's Milton Model but also resonate with Aristotle's rhetorical triad of ethos, pathos, and logos. Jobs built ethos by presenting himself as both a successful entrepreneur and an ordinary human who had faced failure and illness. He engaged pathos by sharing emotional stories about dropping out of college, being fired from Apple, and confronting mortality. His appeal to logos was evident in the logical sequencing of his lessons and the cause-and-effect reasoning woven throughout the speech.

When situated within modern persuasion theories, the analysis shows that Jobs employed strategies consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), blending central route arguments (reasoned advice about life choices) with peripheral cues (his credibility and storytelling charisma). His references to death and authenticity also illustrated mechanisms of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957), prompting the audience to reconcile their existing beliefs with the unsettling reality of mortality. Furthermore, through the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1987), Jobs' stories achieved narrative coherence and fidelity, making his life experiences both believable and inspirational.

The present study adds to the understanding of motivational discourse as a type of genre. Although there are much empirical papers examining political speeches, however rather less has been written up motivational speeches at universities/public forums (by entrepreneurs or cultural icons for instance). The close reading of Jobs' speech demonstrates how motivational speakers can produce discourse which eschews personal participation in situational dynamics and offers more general – perhaps even universal - hard life, work and resistance-related lessons to listeners.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the study. The corpus was limited to one speech, and as inspiring as the Stanford address may be, it does not represent Jobs' full range of rhetorical style over time and circumstances. A bigger corpus, even if only of his keynote addresses, interviews and product releases, might have helped paint a more comprehensive picture of how persuasive he could be. Additionally, while NLP provided a useful framework for identifying patterns, its scientific validity has often been debated. The findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive insights into Jobs' discourse, rather than as empirical verification of NLP's theoretical claims.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that Jobs' success as a motivational speaker rests not on any single linguistic strategy but on the integration of multiple persuasive techniques. By combining logical reasoning with emotional resonance and personal credibility, Jobs' speech exemplifies the inclusive nature of persuasion. His ability to transform deeply personal experiences into universal lessons illustrates the enduring power of narrative as a persuasive force.

Future research could extend this study by conducting comparative analyses of motivational speeches across different professions — for instance, examining religious leaders, activists, or contemporary entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk or Oprah Winfrey. Incorporating larger datasets and computational

linguistic methods such as topic modeling or sentiment analysis could yield richer insights into the broader rhetorical patterns that define motivational discourse.

In conclusion, Steve Jobs' *Stanford Commencement Address* continues to resonate because it embodies a synergy of rhetoric, psychology, and narrative. His words invite audiences to confront uncertainty, embrace creativity, and seek authenticity. This study underscores that motivational speeches are not merely ceremonial performances but significant rhetorical events that shape cultural understandings of success, identity, and resilience. By illuminating the linguistic architecture of persuasion in Jobs' address, the study provides a foundation for further exploration into how language can inspire, guide, and transform human thought and action.

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