

Persuasion in the Business Speeches of Chief Executive Officers of Selected International Companies

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the persuasive strategies employed in the business speeches of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of selected international companies. Anchored in Speech Act Theory within the broader aspect of pragmatics, it analyzed 12 speeches, totalling 14,938 words, from a diverse range of international CEOs. These speeches, intended for both employees and shareholders, provided a rich corpus for examining the nuances of persuasion in a business context. The analysis focused on identifying various categories of persuasion, particularly distinguishing between direct and indirect speech acts. Utilizing a qualitative approach, 1,172 clauses were coded to elucidate the persuasive mechanisms at play. Findings revealed a predominant use of indirect persuasion by CEOs. Despite their intention to persuade, these business leaders predominantly opted for subtle, indirect speech acts, making their persuasive intent both non-obvious and inherent. Contrary to expectations, the study found a marked absence of direct rhetorical devices such as rhetorical questions, suppositions, and wonderings. This aligned with the pragmatic realities of business communication, which often eschews overtly unrealistic assertions. The analysis proposed a novel model for understanding the linguistic strategies of persuasive speech in business, highlighting both utilized and potential areas of persuasive speech acts. The implications of these findings extended beyond the specific speeches analyzed, suggesting avenues for further research. Recommendations included exploring persuasion directed at varied audiences, analyzing the perlocutionary effects post-delivery, and integrating paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements with verbal aspects of business speeches. This research not only mapped the current landscape of persuasive strategies in CEO speeches but also opened new possibilities for linguistic exploration in the realm of corporate communication.

Keywords: Business Speeches; Company CEOs; Persuasion; Pragmatics; Speech Acts

Introduction

The art of persuasion in business communications, especially within the speeches delivered by Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of international companies, represents a pivotal area of study in understanding how strategic communication influences corporate and public spheres. Persuasion, intricately defined as the act of influencing others' beliefs or actions (Lucas, 2015), is not merely a linguistic feat but a strategic endeavor that encompasses the dual engagement of speaker and listener (Sheidel, 1967; Lee, 2019). This study embarks on an exploration of the mechanisms and intentionalities of persuasion as utilized by CEOs in their speeches, aiming to unravel the complexities of corporate communication within a global context.

Persuasiveness in business is not merely about verbal prowess but serves as a strategic tool for CEOs to direct audience behavior and bolster belief in the company's vision (Keraf, 2007 as cited in Kurniawan et al., 2020; Halmari & Virtanen, 2005). Business speeches, encompassing reports, proposals, training, and sales presentations, emerge as vital platforms for this endeavor (Hess & Pearson, 1992; Zimmerman & Owen, 1986; Thro, 2009). These speeches, ranging from financial disclosures to policy advocacies, underscore the multifaceted role of CEO communications in shaping corporate and public discourse (Dhgoe, 2014). The credibility of the CEO as a speaker plays a crucial role in this context, where effective speech preparation and delivery can enhance a company reputation and influence public opinion (Conger, 1998; Lucas, 2009; Lee, 2019; Cyphert, 2010).

Research underscores the importance of persuasion as a quintessential entrepreneurial skill, highlighting the impact of effective public speaking on business success (Baron & Markman, 2000, 2003; Brush, 2008). This skill is pivotal in business communication, where the linguistic characteristics of a speech significantly determine the achievement of the speaker's objectives, including eliciting emotional responses, maintaining relationships, and persuading audiences toward new perspectives (Wang & Liu, 2021).

In addition, Chan (2020) highlights that persuasion permeates various forms of business communication, including reports, proposals, sales correspondence, and presentations. Even informative speeches, aimed at educating audiences such as employees or trainees, often carry an underlying persuasive intent. Persuasive speeches in business often serve to align listeners with the speaker's viewpoint, inspire action, or advocate for ideas or programs (Lucas, 2009).

A study by Burikova et al. (2020) on the lexical and contextual aspects of business speeches revealed the strategic use of language, including positive and negative adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs, and pronouns. These elements, along with syntactical features like repetition and emphatic structures, contribute to the overall communicative effectiveness of the speeches.

Furthermore, Chan (2020) suggests several key strategies for effective persuasive speaking, including maintaining a "you" attitude, establishing speaker credibility, balancing emotional appeal, avoiding faulty logic, and reinforcing the speaker's position. The use of rhetorical devices such as alliteration, anaphora, hyperbole, irony, and puns enhances the impact of speeches.

Genre analysis, as explored by Kopus and Klimova (2020), provides additional insights into the characteristics of persuasive business speeches. Their study of entrepreneurs' pitches on reality TV shows identified specific lexical features and semantic patterns that are characteristic of persuasive business communication.

Additionally, Ardriyati (2012) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic features in speeches delivered by the Indonesian president, encompassing lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical elements. This analysis underscores the importance of language choices in enhancing the coherence and persuasive power of business speeches.

Jibreen et al. (2018) categorized persuasion as both a macro- and micro-speech act, where at the micro level, it functions as a directive act aiming to prompt specific actions from the audience (Searle, 1969). Pragmatics, which explores the relationship between linguistic forms and their users, often sees persuasive utterances as directive in nature.

Austin (1962) and Searle et al. (1980) differentiated between illocutionary acts, which help in understanding the meaning and force of utterances, and perlocutionary acts, which have effects on the audience that go beyond mere understanding. Persuasion, in this framework, can be categorized as a perlocutionary act. These insights are crucial in understanding the implicit intentions behind a speaker's words in a business context.

Osman (1987) argued that effective persuasion is often implicit rather than explicit. The subtlety of persuasion lies in its indirectness, making it a nuanced tool in business communication. This indirect approach is tailored according to the predefined audience, and the effectiveness of a business speech is contingent upon a targeted assessment of purpose, audience, and message (Chan, 2020).

The study also looks at practical applications of speech acts in persuasion. Nasser (2022) analyzed online hotel reviews to understand how various speech act functions influence the persuasiveness of the content. Kadri (2022) examined how different speech acts in advertisements aim to persuade customers, noting a prevalence of directive acts that encourage customers to make purchases.

Additionally, AlAfnan and Oshchepkova (2022) explored the use of directive and assertive speech acts in public opening remarks at an Emergency Special Session in Ukraine, demonstrating how these acts assert, claim, and request in a formal setting.

Persuasion, as defined by Perloff (2003), is a form of social interaction aimed at influencing and changing attitudes within a framework of free choice. Rahardi (2005 as cited in Kurniawan et al., 2020) views persuasive speech as encompassing a broad scope of meaning tied to the function and complexity of speech. Larson (2013) and Lakoff (as cited by Hardin, 2010) further elaborate on this, characterizing persuasive discourse as an attempt by one party to alter the behavior, feelings, intentions, or viewpoints of another through communicative means.

While persuasion is generally viewed positively, manipulation is often perceived negatively. Goodin (1980) describes manipulation as a deceptive influence exerted by a speaker to affect someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions, typically in a manner not aligned with the individual's self-interest. This act of manipulation is not just a linguistic expression but is deeply rooted in the pragmatics of language use (Danler, 2005; Tarasov, 1990).

Al-Hindawi and Kamil (2017) argue that manipulation breaches Grice's (1975, 1989) quality maxim, often manifesting as insincerity to covertly influence others. Jacobs (1994) and Blass (2006) assert that manipulation involves breaking conversational maxims to achieve the manipulator's objectives. Ware (1981) defines manipulation as a covert influence where the manipulated person lacks awareness or understanding of how they are being influenced.

Seda and Rafayel (2021) note that manipulation is particularly prevalent in propaganda and media, closely associated with political discourse. It is used strategically to influence decisions beneficial to the manipulator, especially in political contexts (Polyakova et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding persuasion in business speeches inherently involves acknowledging the potential for manipulation.

The Speech Act Theory, a cornerstone of pragmatics, provides a vital framework for understanding persuasion in the business speeches of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of international companies. Introduced by Searle (1960) and Austin (1962), and further developed by scholars such as Levinson (1983), this theory examines how language is used to perform actions, particularly in the realm of persuasion.

Pragmatics, focusing on the context-dependent aspects of language use (Levinson, 1983), is especially relevant for analyzing business speeches. According to Yule (1996), a speech act is an action performed through utterance, encompassing various purposes, both explicit and implicit (Archer et al., 2012). Austin (1962) categorized speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, each representing different facets of meaning and intention in communication.

For this study, the emphasis is on illocutionary acts, where the speaker's intention is central. These acts include making statements, requests, promises, apologies, and more, aiming to produce a specific effect on the listener (Searle, 1997). Austin (1962) and Searle et al. (1980) distinguished between direct and indirect speech acts, crucial for understanding the nuanced ways CEOs communicate persuasive messages.

Research in various fields has employed Speech Act Theory to analyze communication. Ansari and Gupta (2021) investigated the perceived deceptiveness in online product reviews. Oparinde et al. (2021) analyzed Nigerian political speeches, highlighting the use of rhetorical and linguistic strategies. Similarly, studies on political figures like Donald Trump and Barham Salih by Jasim and Mustafa (2020), and Ivo Sanader by Hakimova (2021), showcased how speech acts are used to influence public opinion.

In corporate, studies have examined persuasive strategies in business contexts. Dhooge (2004) analyzed Dr. Mahathir's business speeches, focusing on the use of linguistic features for persuasion. Intharaphromrat et al. (2020) explored entrepreneurs' pitches on TV shows, identifying assertive, commissive, and expressive speech acts as key persuasive tools. Said (2018) noted the prevalence of assertive speech acts in Business English, aligning with ethos, logos, and pathos constructs.

Moreover, speech act theory has been applied beyond traditional business settings. Fadhilla and Basari (2022) analyzed directive speech acts in movies, while Rahmawati (2022) and Novitasari and Dewi (2023) investigated speech acts in educational settings, illustrating their wide-ranging applicability. In e-commerce, Fiqih and Sudana (2022) examined speech acts in customer complaints, demonstrating the practical implications of speech acts in modern business practices.

The review of existing literature reveals a significant concentration of research on persuasion and speech acts primarily within political discourses, public health announcements, media manipulation, and marketing strategies. Studies have extensively examined the use of assertion speech acts in political speeches (Rashid, 2022; Thanh, 2022), the communicative strategies in COVID-19 announcements (Krishnan et al., 2021), manipulation techniques in prominent newspapers like the New York Times (Lihua, 2022), and persuasive approaches in marketing (Kupor & Tormala, 2018). Additionally, Wang and Liu (2021) have explored language characteristics across various types of business speeches, including promotion, skills training, sales, decision-making, and problem-solving speeches. Beyond these applications, the field has also ventured into analyzing the psychological and emotional aspects of communication, as noted in studies like those by Manca et al. (2020). The application of speech act theory has been diverse, extending from literature (Porter, 2022) to online communication (Diegoli, 2022).

Despite the extensive exploration of persuasive strategies across various disciplines, there is a notable absence of studies that deeply understand the persuasive mechanisms and intentionality employed in the speeches of company spokespersons, keynote speakers, and executives like CEOs. This gap is evident in the lack of exploration into the specific persuasive strategies and linguistic nuances employed by CEOs when addressing their predefined audience.

In light of the identified research gap, this study aims to elucidate the persuasion mechanisms and their intentionality as employed by CEOs of selected international companies in their business speeches. Specifically, the research seeks to answer two key questions: (1) What persuasion mechanisms do company CEOs employ in their business speeches? and (2) How can these types of persuasion be described in terms of intentionality? By focusing on these aspects, the study endeavors to enrich the corpus of knowledge on corporate communication, highlighting the strategic use of language and speech acts by business leaders to persuade and influence their global stakeholders. This investigation is poised to offer significant contributions to the understanding of corporate persuasive communication, providing insights that could inform both academic scholarship and practical applications in business leadership and communication strategy.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the persuasive mechanisms in the business speeches of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of selected international companies, particularly focusing on how these speeches influence predefined audiences such as employees and shareholders. Following the framework of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), the study considers discourse in all its forms, encompassing both spoken and written interactions, formal and informal. The business speeches analyzed in this study are thus viewed as expressions of human behavior within a social environment, warranting a qualitative descriptive approach.

Corpus of the Study

A total of 12 speeches from 12 different CEOs, addressing employees and shareholders, were selected for analysis. These speeches represent a variety of industries, including retail, technology, food, and manufacturing. Companies like Nestle and Coca-Cola, featured in the study, are recognized as leaders in their respective fields and are listed among the Top 500 global companies, indicating their significant influence and competitive edge (Statista, 2023). The total number of clauses parsed and analyzed in these speeches amounted to 1,172, a number deemed sufficient to identify patterns of persuasion used by the CEOs.

Data-Gathering Procedure

The speeches were sourced in two primary ways: directly downloaded from the respective companies' official websites and transcribed from videos available on YouTube. Given the public nature of these speeches, either on corporate websites or publicly accessible platforms like YouTube, no special permissions were required for their use in this study. For the speeches obtained from company websites, they were used in their original form without any editing to preserve the speaker's intent. Speeches from YouTube were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist, including discourse fillers like "uhm" to capture the complete speech.

The transcription process was straightforward, focusing solely on the verbal elements of the speeches. Paralinguistic features, such as tone or body language, were not considered in this study. The accuracy of the transcriptions was a priority, with an independent reviewer cross-checking the speeches against the transcriptions to ensure completeness and accuracy, a crucial step given the linguistic nuances of persuasion. A total of 1,172 clauses from these speeches were parsed and analyzed. The division of clauses for further analysis was based on sentence types – compound, complex, or compound-complex – including the use of conjunctions (Okore, 2022; Wood, 2023).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The study's data analysis was primarily guided by the taxonomies of two types of manipulative speech acts: Manipulative Direct Speech Acts (MDSAs) as defined by Ivanova (1981), and Manipulative Indirect Speech Acts (MIDSAs) as delineated by Akimova (1992) and Brusenskaya et al. (2005). The study classified the coded clauses from the speeches into MDSAs and MIDSAs. MDSAs included direct, imperative utterances, and MIDSAs encompassed actions like declaring, promising, advising, and various moods and forms of interrogation as detailed by Akimova (1992) and Brusenskaya et al. (2005).

The analysis presented these speech acts about the audience types – employees and shareholders – to discern specific patterns of persuasion employed by the CEOs. Additionally, a consolidated view of persuasive mechanisms across audience types was provided to offer a comprehensive understanding. The study employed simple statistical methods, such as frequency and percentage, to rank and interpret the persuasive speech act patterns. These patterns were qualitatively interpreted using the theoretical framework and relevant literature.

Results and Discussion

Persuasion Mechanisms that the Company CEOs Employ in Their Business Speeches

This section presents the different persuasion mechanisms that the company CEOs employed in their business speeches based on the identified audiences. In the context of analyzing the persuasive strategies employed by CEOs in their business speeches, Table 1 offers a comprehensive summary, delineating the frequency and percentage of various persuasive strategies used towards different intended audiences - employees and shareholders.

Declarations were predominantly used in speeches aimed at shareholders (80.85%) compared to employees (19.15%), totaling 830 instances. This implies a strategic emphasis on declarative persuasion in shareholder communication. Indications were also a significant persuasive strategy, with 73.22% aimed at shareholders and 26.78% at employees, totaling 168 occurrences. This reflects a nuanced approach to engaging with these distinct audience groups. The strategy of expressing desires or wishes was more frequently employed towards employees (53.85%) than shareholders (46.15%). The imperative form was more commonly used for employees (69.23%) than for shareholders (30.77%), indicating a more directive approach to employee communication. Subjunctive forms of persuasion skewed slightly more towards shareholders (56.00%) than employees (44.00%). Conditional forms were used more with shareholders (62.50%) compared to employees (37.50%). Notably, the study found no instances of the use of wondering, rhetorical questions, or suppositions as persuasive strategies in the speeches. 'Lack of Necessity' forms were exclusively used for shareholders (100.00%), and 'Verb to Be' was only employed for employees (100.00%). The 'Verb Get' and 'Interrogative' forms were scarcely used, with only one instance each, directed towards employees.

These findings align with Larson Ugande's (2001, as cited in Asemah, 2012) perspective on persuasion as a skillful presentation of ideas intended to produce desired outcomes. The varied use of persuasive strategies reflects a conscious

effort by CEOs to align their communication tactics with the specific needs and dynamics of their audiences, whether aiming to inform, motivate, or direct. This approach is indicative of a strategic understanding of the different roles and expectations of employees and shareholders in the corporate environment.

Additionally, the findings from the analysis resonate with the research of Liu et al. (2019), who examined the effect of CEO rhetorical strategies on corporate social performance in China, suggesting that the strategic deployment of rhetoric can significantly influence corporate outcomes. Similarly, Alkaraan et al.'s (2023) investigation into the strategic choices and persuasive appeals in the context of Carillion's boardroom strategies illuminates the intricate role of ethos, logos, and pathos in shaping corporate narratives and stakeholder perceptions.

Table 1: Summary of occurrences of the different persuasion types per intended audience

Persuasive Strategies	Intended Audience	Frequency	Percentage
Declaration	Employees	159	19.15%
	Shareholders	671	80.85%
	Total	830	100.00%
Indications	Employees	45	26.78%
	Shareholders	123	73.22%
	Total	168	100.00%
Desire, Wish	Employees	28	53.85%
	Shareholders	24	46.15%
	Total	52	100.00%
Imperative Form	Employees	18	69.23%
	Shareholders	8	30.77%
	Total	26	100.00%
Subjunctive	Employees	11	44.00%
	Shareholders	14	56.00%
	Total	25	100.00%
Verb Let	Employees	5	35.71%
	Shareholders	9	64.29%
	Total	14	100.00%
Conditionals	Employees	3	37.50%
	Shareholders	5	62.50%
	Total	8	100.00%
Lack of Necessity	Employees	0	0.00%
	Shareholders	4	100.00%
	Total	4	100.00%
Verb To Be	Employees	2	100.00%
	Shareholders	0	0.00%
	Total	2	100.00%
Verb Get	Employees	1	100.00%
	Shareholders	0	0.00%
	Total	1	100.00%
Interrogative	Employees	0	0.00%
	Shareholders	1	100.00%
	Total	1	100.00%
Wondering	Employees	0	0.00%
	Shareholders	0	0.00%
	Total	0	0.00%
Rhetorical	Employees	0	0.00%
	Shareholders	0	0.00%
	Total	0	0.00%
Supposition	Employees	0	0.00%
	Shareholders	0	0.00%
	Total	0	0.00%

Functionality of Persuasion Mechanisms in Terms of Intentionality

This section presents the intentionality of the different types of persuasions. To describe this intentionally, these different types of persuasions were subsumed into directness and indirectness. By doing so, one can understand how the deployment of the persuasions was made explicit, straightforward, covert, overt, or otherwise.

Table 2: Summary of persuasive mechanisms per intended audience

Intentionality	Intended Audience	Frequency	Percentage	Grand Percentage
Direct	Employees	26	60.46%	-
	Shareholders	17	39.54%	-
	Total	43	100.00%	3.80%
Indirect	Employees	246	22.62%	-
	Shareholders	842	77.38%	-
	Total	1,088	100.00%	96.19%

In the investigation of the persuasive strategies employed by CEOs in their business speeches, Table 2 provides a critical analysis focusing on the intentionality of these strategies, either as direct or indirect, towards their intended audiences, employees, and shareholders. The analysis reveals a significant leaning towards indirect persuasion, encompassing 96.19% of all instances. This suggests a subtler approach by CEOs in communicating with both employees and shareholders. Among these indirect strategies, a notable 77.38% were directed toward shareholders. This could reflect a nuanced communication approach, considering shareholders' familiarity with business rhetoric and their role in the financial aspects of the company.

Direct persuasive mechanisms were less prevalent, constituting only 3.80% of the total strategies used. However, when employed, 60.46% of these direct approaches were aimed at employees. This pattern indicates a more transparent and straightforward method of influencing employees, suggesting a hierarchical dynamic where direct instructions or guidance might be more expected and effective. The CEOs' preference for indirect persuasion with shareholders suggests an understanding of the shareholders' role and expectations. Shareholders, being typically more attuned to the nuances of business communication, might require less direct forms of persuasion.

Direct strategies such as the imperative form, 'verb get', and 'verb to be' were primarily used for employees, aligning with their role as implementers within the company. In contrast, indirect strategies like declarations and indications were predominantly used for shareholders, possibly to align with their decision-making role in the company. The intentional use of direct and indirect persuasion aligns with the distinct roles and expectations of employees and shareholders. It suggests a tailored approach by CEOs to match the communication style with the audience's position within the corporate structure. The overwhelming preference for indirect methods could be indicative of a strategic choice to maintain a non-imposing persona, allowing audiences to process and interpret the intended persuasive messages independently.

The findings from this analysis align with broader research on corporate communication strategies. For instance, the work of Yue et al. (2019) on CEO communications on Twitter reveals a similar strategic selection of communication styles, adapted to the platform and its audience's expectations. Similarly, Craig and Amernic's (2018) examination of language markers in CEO letters to shareholders provides insights into the nuanced language choices that may signal underlying intentions or corporate ethos, further emphasizing the complexity of CEO communication strategies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the persuasion tactics employed in the business speeches of CEOs from various international companies, targeting employees and shareholders. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study dissected 1,172 clauses from 12 speeches, amounting to 14,938 words. The analysis, grounded in Speech Act Theory, revealed a predominant use of indirect persuasion strategies, signifying a subtle approach by CEOs to influence their audiences. This trend was consistent across different audiences, with a notable avoidance of rhetorical questions, suppositions, and wondering, aligning with the pragmatic nature of business communication.

Future research should explore persuasion strategies in speeches targeting different audiences like investors and customers. Understanding how CEOs tailor their persuasive approaches to various groups can provide deeper insights into corporate communication dynamics. Investigating how audiences perceive and interpret the intentions behind business speeches can shed light on the effectiveness of different persuasive techniques. Analyzing audience reactions can also inform the development of more impactful communication strategies.

In addition, future studies could benefit from applying the Yale Attitude Change Model to understand the dynamics of persuasion in business speeches. This model's focus on source credibility, message characteristics, and audience attributes can offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing persuasive communication. Exploring business speeches

through the lens of Relevance Theory can provide insights into how audiences infer speakers' intentions. This approach can also help in detecting subtle manipulative tactics in corporate communication.

Moreover, investigating the boundary between persuasion and manipulation in business speeches is crucial. Future research should scrutinize the linguistic features that differentiate persuasive communication from manipulative tactics, focusing on verbal manipulation and syntactic and lexico-semantic aspects. Analyzing the actual impact of business speeches on audience behavior, opinions, and attitudes can offer valuable perspectives on the real-world effectiveness of different persuasive strategies.

Lastly, employing discourse analysis to study persuasive effects can deepen understanding of the social actions associated with language in business contexts. This includes exploring non-verbal cues and their role in enhancing persuasive impact. Future research should consider the multimodal aspects of persuasion, examining how various verbal and non-verbal cues work together to influence audiences. This includes studying the role of animation quality, speech quality, rendering style, and other factors in persuasive communication.

Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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