

วาทกรรมสร้างแรงบันดาลใจในสุนทรพจน์พิธีสำเร็จการศึกษาของสตีฟ จ๊อบส์: การวิเคราะห์เชิงพหุสื่อและสทวาทกรรมของภาษาสร้างแรงบันดาลใจ

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ใช้แนวทางเชิงคุณภาพในการศึกษาวาทกรรมสร้างแรงบันดาลใจในสุนทรพจน์รับปริญญาของสตีฟ จ๊อบส์ ที่มหาวิทยาลัยสแตนฟอร์ด ปี พ.ศ. 2548 (ค.ศ. 2005) โดยวิเคราะห์เฉพาะส่วนแรกของสุนทรพจน์ ข้อมูลจากวิดีโอและบทถอดความได้รับการตรวจสอบความถูกต้องและตรวจสอบด้วยมือ พร้อมจัดแบ่งตามประเภทภาษาที่ใช้สร้างแรงบันดาลใจ (ภาษาเชิงเห็นอกเห็นใจและภาษาเชิงสร้างความหมาย) คุณลักษณะพหุสื่อ (จังหวะและทำนองเสียงในการพูด การใช้สายตา ท่าทาง และการหยุดเว้นจังหวะ) และสทวาทกรรม ผลการศึกษาพบว่า สตีฟ จ๊อบส์ ใช้ภาษาเชิงเห็นอกเห็นใจและภาษาเชิงสร้างความหมายเป็นหลัก ด้วยการแทรกเล่าเรื่องส่วนตัวที่ก่อความไม่แน่นอนให้มีความหมายเชิงจุดมุ่งหมาย หรือ การเชื่อมโยงจุด ความหนาแน่นเชิงพหุสื่อ เช่น น้ำเสียงที่มีพลัง การใช้สายตาอย่างเจาะจง ท่าทางที่ละเอียดอ่อน และการหยุดเว้นจังหวะที่เหมาะสม ช่วยเน้นการเล่าเรื่องเชิงสะท้อน ขณะที่ปฏิกริยาของผู้ฟัง (เสียงหัวเราะ การปรบมือ การตั้งใจฟัง) มีส่วนร่วมในการสร้างผลกระทบเชิงแรงบันดาลใจ งานวิจัยนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าความหมายเชิงแรงบันดาลใจในสุนทรพจน์รับปริญญาเกิดขึ้นจากการประสานกันระหว่างเนื้อหาภาษา การแสดงออกทางกาย และการผสมผสานวาทกรรม แม้จะมีขอบเขตจำกัด แต่การวิเคราะห์นี้ให้ข้อค้นพบเกี่ยวกับกลยุทธ์ทางวาทศิลป์ในสุนทรพจน์รับปริญญา และวางรากฐานสำหรับการวิจัยเปรียบเทียบในอนาคตทั้งในด้านผู้พูด สถาบัน และบริบททางวัฒนธรรมที่หลากหลาย

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Inspirational Discourse in Steve Jobs' Commencement Speech: A Multimodal and Interdiscursive Analysis of Motivational Language

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Abstract

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how inspirational discourse is constructed in Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement speech. Focusing exclusively on the first section of the address, video and transcript data were manually transcribed and coded for motivational language types (empathetic, meaning-making), multimodal features (prosody, gaze, gesture, pauses), and interdiscursive resources. Findings show Jobs predominantly employs empathetic and meaning-making language, embedding personal narratives that reinterpret uncertainty as purposeful or "connecting the dots." High modal density, energetic prosody, targeted gaze, subtle gestures, and timed pauses, foregrounds reflective storytelling, while audience responses (laughter, applause, attentive gaze) co-construct the speech's inspirational effect. The study demonstrates that inspirational meaning in commencement addresses emerges from the interplay of verbal content, embodied performance, and discursive layering. Although limited in scope, the analysis provides rhetorical strategies in commencement speeches and lays the groundwork for future comparative research across speakers, institutions, and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Inspirational Discourse, Motivational Language, Multimodality, Interdiscursivity, Commencement Speech

Introduction

Commencement speeches are formal ceremonial, institutional events to honor and celebrate the graduates' accomplishments. They are often carefully polished and inoffensive (Peterson, 2024). Their primary purpose is to inspire new graduates, marking a transition – from academic life to professional life. Nowadays, notable public figures such as entrepreneurs, politicians, writers, singers, and activists are often invited to deliver commencement speeches at well-known universities. These speeches attract scholarly attention due to their multivocal nature, combining personal stories, motivational language, humor, institutional messages, and political ideas. While most studies have focused on linguistic features through qualitative analysis, research on multimodality remains limited. Exploring multimodal elements can provide deeper insights into how different semiotic resources enhance audience engagement, persuasion, and the overall inspirational impact of commencement speeches.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how inspirational discourse is constructed in a commencement speech through the incorporation of motivational language, multimodal communication, and interdiscursive resources. Drawing on Motivating Language Theory (MLT) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the study investigates how commencement speeches employ language, gesture, tone, and audience engagement to inspire listeners. It examines how commencement speeches draw upon while rearticulating wider social and educational discourses to convey meaning and reinforce shared values. The analysis of both verbal and nonverbal resources in terms of audience reaction seeks to enhance our understanding of the construction of inspirational public discourse across multimodal and socio-cultural contexts.

Research Questions

1. How is inspirational multimodal discourse constructed in commencement speeches?
2. What interdiscursive resources do speakers draw upon to inspire their audiences?

Literature Review

Commencement speeches play a vital role in public discourse. They are a combination of ceremonial tradition, motivational storytelling, and rhetorical engagement. Presented by distinguished national or global figures, these speeches inspire graduates, offer reflections on life and success, and reinforce cultural and academic values. Scholars have classified commencement speeches as belonging to the entertaining-commemorating discourse type, which emphasize their dual role in celebration and guidance (Shabelnyk and Torhovets, 2021). While the inspirational quality of these speeches has widely attracted scholar attention, the structural and discourse-level strategies that underlie their impact remain an area for further exploration.

Related Studies

Jaroenkitvorn (2021) analyzed Mark Zuckerberg's commencement speech at Harvard University in 2017, using a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (MDA), and the concepts of interdiscursivity. The study aimed to explore how Zuckerberg made his speech engaging. Based on Norris' (2004) two levels of actions, high and low, the study revealed that five major higher-level actions were performed: joking, exchanging similar experiences, inspiring and encouraging the audience, building audience involvement, and blessing the audience. In terms of intertextuality, Zuckerberg was found to incorporate narrative experiences and stories, while quoting famous sayings, and inserting religious text. Additionally, the study revealed three major different discourse topics as part of inspiring and encouraging messages, including entrepreneurship, racism, and globalization.

The study uses Multimodal Discourse Analysis, moving beyond traditional textual analysis to include gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and vocal variations. By analyzing Norris' (2004) higher-level actions (e.g. joking, inspiring, audience involvement) and lower-level actions (e.g. utterances, gestures, vocal variations and eye contact), the study provides a comprehensive understanding of Zuckerberg's speech strategies. Moreover, the integration of interdiscursivity lends strength to the study. The use of Fairclough's (1992) concept of interdiscursivity allowed the researcher to identify various discourse types utilized by Zuckerberg to emotionally connect with diverse audiences. Incorporation of all of these strategies (MDA, interdiscursivity) contributes to findings which may have applicability to communication studies and language learners.

Another study, "A pragmatlinguistic study of the strategies in motivational discourse (Based on Mark Zuckerberg's Harvard commencement speech)," by Yerznkian and Harutyunyan (2004) applied discourse analysis to examine the linguistic and pragmatic methods along with classification of speech acts in motivational discourse. The study found that Zuckerberg employed main pragmatlinguistic tools, including praising, gratitude, humor, inclusion strategy, direct or indirect instruction, storytelling, recognition and acknowledgment of others' success in his motivational discourse. Additionally, expressive, assertive, and directive speech acts were identified as predominant.

The study systematically and effectively identified key pragmatlinguistic strategies as mentioned earlier. With this clear defining of these strategies, the researcher enhances the understanding of motivational discourse and its applicability to linguistics, communication, and education. Another strength is its application of speech act theory, which provides a structured linguistic approach to explore Zuckerberg's commencement speech. The identification of expressive, assertive, and directive speech acts shows how motivational speakers use performative language to inspire their audience. This strengthens the study's connection to pragmatics, rhetoric, and discourse analysis. Additionally, the study successfully contextualized persuasive communication within an interdisciplinary framework. It linked Zuckerberg's speech strategies to broader psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions of motivational discourse.

Both studies focused on motivational discourse, specifically Mark Zuckerberg's 2017 Harvard commencement speech, but they adopted different methodological approaches to analyzing its rhetorical and linguistic strategies. In terms of scope and analytical depth, Yerznkian & Harutyunyan's pragmatolinguistic approach categorized linguistic devices such as praising, gratitude, humor, storytelling, directives, and expressive speech acts using Searle's (1979) classification. While this offers a systematic linguistic framework, it is limited in capturing multimodal elements—such as tone, gestures, pauses, and audience reactions—which significantly shape speech effectiveness. This limitation emphasizes the need for a framework that integrates multimodal features—an area where Jaroenkitboworn's MDA approach provides valuable insight.

Jaroenkitboworn's study acknowledged the interplay between linguistic and non-linguistic elements. This offers a more holistic view of how Zuckerberg constructs meaning through verbal emphasis and physical cues. This approach reflects Norris's (2004) argument that communication is multimodal, emphasizing that rhetorical impact emerges through interaction between modes rather than isolated linguistic choices.

Furthermore, in warranting their knowledge claims, both studies justified their analytical frameworks by drawing from established linguistic and rhetorical theories. However, Yerznkian & Harutyunyan's reliance on speech act theory assumed that motivational effectiveness can be inferred purely from linguistic structure, which may oversimplify the complex interactions between speaker intent and audience perception. Without examining audience responses, the study's claims about persuasive impact remain theoretical rather than empirically validated.

Conversely, Jaroenkitboworn's multimodal approach provides greater empirical grounding, as it allows for observations of audience reactions (e.g., laughter, applause, engagement cues). This makes claims about effectiveness more measurable, at how these features and interdiscursivity contribute to constructing motivational meaning and influencing audiences are still open to further exploration.

While previous studies have examined motivational discourse and multimodal features separately, little research has integrated motivational discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and interdiscursivity to investigate how inspirational meaning is jointly constructed. This study addresses that gap by combining these perspectives to provide a more comprehensive account of how motivational speakers create impact.

Theoretical Frameworks

1. Motivation Language Theory

Motivational language theory describes how the strategic use of language can strongly influence individuals' motivation and behavior (Sullivan, 1988, as cited in Seol, 2023). It categorizes motivational language into three types: direction-giving language, empathetic language, and meaning-making language (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2018, as cited in Seol, 2023).

Direction-giving language, according to Mayfield and Mayfield (2018, as cited in Seol, 2023), reduces confusions by providing clear instructions and guidelines related to job tasks, acting as a compass, which helps organizational members understand their roles and navigate their responsibilities effectively.

Empathic language enhances morale by demonstrating interest, encouragement, and praise (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2018, as cited in Seol, 2023). It reflects a leader's humanity, fostering deeper connections beyond routine interactions (Mayfield et al., 2015, as cited in Seol, 2023). Emotional language can be used to strengthen engagement but should be carefully managed to avoid causing distress.

Meaning-making language reflects an organization's culture, values, and expectations (Sullivan, 1988, as cited in Seol, 2023) while reinforcing one's sense of self-worth and commitment to organizational goals (Seol, 2023). It can be informal, incorporating personal experiences, values, and wisdom (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2018, as cited in Seol, 2023). While direction-giving language focuses on "what" by providing guidance, meaning-making language corresponds to "why" by conveying deeper purpose and significance (Seol, 2023).

This theory is widely applied in leadership communication, particularly in workplaces, where effective language can enhance job satisfaction and engagement. The study by Seol (2023) explored its application in Harvard University commencement speeches, which emphasized how speakers used personal anecdotes, metaphors, and suggestions to inspire audiences. It also examined differences in motivational language based on gender and shifts over time.

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Norris (2004, as cited in Jaroenkitboworn, 2021) identified actions into two types: higher- and lower-level actions. A higher-level action can be examined by analyzing the sequences of smaller actions (such as gestures, speech, or written texts) that make it up and how these actions relate to one another. According to Norris (2024, as cited in Wigham and Satar, 2021), a construction of a higher-level action involves measuring how intense and complex the use of communicative modes is, which is referred to as modal density. Modal intensity refers to how essential a mode is to completing the higher-level action. A mode has high intensity if its absence changes or stops the higher-level action. Medium intensity if its absence slightly alters the action. Low intensity if its absence does not affect the action.

Additionally, foregrounding and backgrounding are also part of examining multimodality. Foreground and background refer to different levels of a social actor's attention to simultaneous actions. Actions with high modal density, particularly high modal intensity, are more likely to be foregrounded, meaning they occupy the focus of the actor's attention (Norris & Pirini, 2016, as cited in Wigham and Satar, 2021). In contrast, actions with lower modal density are placed in the background or mid-ground, reflecting reduced levels of awareness or attention (Norris, 2019, as cited in Wigham and Satar, 2021).

3. Interdiscursivity

As explained by Bhatia (2010), interdiscursivity refers to the appropriation of generic resources across different professional genres, practices, and cultures. It concerns text-external influences and the

mixing or blending of discourses, particularly when genres borrow elements from other genres, professional practices, or cultural conventions to achieve new communicative purposes. Texts of this kind are frequently produced in overlapping communicative contexts or settings. For instance, a corporate annual report may integrate accounting language, economic analysis, public relations discourse, and legal disclaimers in order to meet both regulative requirements and promotional demands. Similarly, commencement speeches demonstrate interdiscursivity, where personal narrative combines with motivational discourse, academic formality and political commentary, and sometimes also with what we might consider as spiritual or philosophical reflection. Such texts are shaped not just by linguistic strategies, but by the professional and cultural contexts in which they are produced and interpreted. With the strategic use of genre conventions, interdiscursivity allows speakers and writers to persuade, inspire, inform, and shape audience expectations when they move through complex interplay of social, institutional, and personal identities.

Methods

1. Sample

A commencement speech which was delivered by Steve Jobs in 2005 Stanford is used as a sample. The sample speech has a complete video recording and subtitles or transcripts. The data is drawn from one section. Although the speech can be divided into three sections, this study focused exclusively on the introductory section. This choice is deliberate since introductions conventionally function to establish context, engage the audience, and provide a coherent transition to subsequent parts (Swales, 1990). Analyzing this section alone is sufficient to reveal the rhetorical strategies Jobs employs to frame his message, making it a representative and methodologically sound sample without requiring the entire speech.

In discourse analysis, it is common practice to select only the portion of a text that fulfills a specific rhetorical function. This approach allows researchers to focus on the most relevant rhetorical moves, ensuring depth of analysis without unnecessary expansion. Introductions, in particular, are often isolated because they summarize how speakers establish context, engage the audience, and frame the themes that follow, making them representative of the text's overall communicative purpose.

2. Data Collection and Reliability

Steve Jobs' 2005 commencement speech transcript was collected from <https://tea4avcastro.tea.state.tx.us/thl/G7ELAR.W3.L1.steve-jobs-stanford-university-commencement-speech.pdf>, posted by Othello School District, and the video clip of his commencement speech was available on the channel "Stanford" on YouTube. The transcript of Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement speech was cross-checked against the official video recording on Stanford's YouTube channel to ensure accuracy of wording and sequencing. To strengthen reliability, the transcript was verified twice, with corrections made where discrepancies were found. In addition, selected excerpts were independently reviewed by another researcher to confirm consistency in identifying multimodal features such as pauses, tone shifts, and audience reactions. Peer debriefing was also conducted with colleagues experienced in discourse analysis, who provided feedback on the coding framework and interpretation of

data. These procedures enhanced the credibility of the transcription and analysis, reducing the risk of bias and ensuring methodological rigor.

3. Data Analysis

Transcription symbols were adapted from Jaroenkitboworn's (2021) study. Coding guide was adapted from Conversation Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis for manual annotation of verbal, gestural, motivational language types, and interdiscursive features.

Transcription symbols and coding conventions:

(1) Numbers in parentheses on the left identify the line of transcription.

... A short pause made while the speech was delivered

bold Bold typeface marks emphasis or stress in the speech.

[text] Description of any actions or non-verbal elements are put in square brackets with asterisks.

[***[italic]*** A large square bracket connecting square brackets with *italic code* mark overlaps between actions, or when an action and a piece of utterance occur simultaneously.

"..." Quotation is used when the speaker explicitly refers to someone else's expressions.

SJ The abbreviation of Steve Jobs

AD The abbreviation of audience

↑ / ↓ An arrow is used to direct readers' attention to a particular line where an interesting expression is located.

[MLT-DG] Motivation language discourse - direction-giving type

[MLT-EMPATHETIC] Motivation language discourse - empathetic type

[MLT-MM] Motivation language discourse - meaning-making type

Steve Jobs outlined his speech as consisting of three stories. The transcription covered from the beginning of his speech until the end of his first story. The script was manually coded manually using the symbol and coding guide.

Results

1. Motivational Language Theory

Two types of Motivational Language were identified.

1.1 Empathetic Language

Excerpt 1:

(1) AD **[applauded]**

(2) SJ Thank you.

(3) **[smiled and gaze: sweeping; smiled briefly]**

(4) SJ I'm...

(5) **[touch above his upper lip]**

- (6) SJ honored to be with you today at your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world.
- (7) ****[gaze: audience (general)]****
- (8) AD ****[screamed and applauded]****
- (9) SJ ****[sighed lightly; gaze: audience (general)]****
- (10) SJ Truth be told, ..ah...I never graduated from college. [PROSODY-SOFT] [MLT-EMPATHETIC]
- (11) AD ****[screamed]****

Jobs made a humble opening and revealed a personal inadequacy (*"I never graduated from college"*) by saying it with a soft, slightly self-effacing tone. This builds emotional connection and humility.

1.2 Meaning-Making Language

Excerpt 2

- (10) SJ And... this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. [MLT-MM]
- (11) ****[gaze: audience (general); laughed slightly]****

He continued by emphasizing that this is the closest he has gotten to a college graduation. He reframed his deviated path from norms as a valid life path. In other words, being invited to give a speech to graduates even though he did not graduate.

Excerpt 3

Throughout Jobs' speech, he told three stories from his life. The first story reflects the aspect of meaning-making language. The following specific excerpt illustrates this type of language.

- (86) SJ So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.
[prosody-energetic] [MLT-MM]
- (87) SJ You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.
[prosody-energetic]
- (88) ****[gaze: audience (general)]****

Jobs shared a deeply personal, uncertain period of his life, which was when he dropped out of college and took calligraphy, but instead of just narrating it, he saw it as a valuable, purposeful experience (*"You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever."*). This encouraged listeners to view uncertainty as meaningful and purposeful in hindsight.

Excerpt 4

Another example of the meaning-making language is:

- (89) SJ Because believing in that the dots will connect down the road,
- (90) SJ will give the confidence to follow your heart
- (91) ****[gaze: audience (general)]****
- (92) SJ even when it leads you off the well-worn path,
- (93) SJ and that will make all the difference. [MLT-MM]
- (94) AD ****[gaze: speaker (attentive), smiled]****

The story is about his own life, but the lesson was presented in second person perspective ("you") and generalized his insight by saying, *"Believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the*

confidence to follow your heart...". This helps the audience see their own difficulties and risks as part of a meaningful path.

2. Multimodality

2.1 Modal density, Modal Intensity, Foregrounding vs. Backgrounding

Jobs employed various communication modes.

Excerpt 5

- (74) SJ But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer,
 (75) [it all came back to me.
 (75) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (76) SJ And we designed it **all** into the Mac.
 (77) SJ It was the first computer with [beautiful typography.
 (77) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (78) SJ If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts.
 (79) SJ And since Windows just copied the Mac, [it's likely that no personal computer would have them.
 (79) [prosody-energetic]
 (80) AD ****[laughed, applauded, whistled]****
 (81) SJ If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do. [prosody-energetic]
 (82) SJ Of course it was **impossible** to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very [clear looking backwards ten years later. [prosody-energetic]
 (83) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (84) SJ Again, you **can't** connect the dots looking forward; [you can only connect them looking backwards. ****[prosody-energetic]****
 (85) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (86) SJ So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. [prosody-energetic]
 (87) SJ You have to trust in something —your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. [prosody-energetic]
 (87) [MLT-MM]
 (88) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (89) SJ Because believing in that the dots will connect down the road,
 (90) SJ will give the confidence to [follow your heart
 (91) [****[gaze: audience (general)]****
 (92) SJ even when it leads you off the well-worn path,
 (93) SJ and that will make all the difference.
 (94) AD ****[gaze: speaker (attentive), smiled]****

Jobs recalled dropping in on a calligraphy class. While speaking, he often gazed towards the audience in general (*[gaze: audience (general)]*), especially towards the end of each line, and when he

wanted to emphasize or draw attention to what he was mentioning. The modal density is high since Jobs used various modes, including verbal, tonal (*[prosody-energetic]*), gestures (*[sighed lightly]*, *[smiled]*, *[laughed slightly]*) and gaze (*[gaze: sweeping]*, *[gaze: audience (general)]*), modes simultaneously. These lower-level actions combined to form a higher-level action of reflective storytelling. Jobs' meaning making is foregrounded through tone and message, while bodily modes support subtly.

2.2 High-level action: creating motivational narratives by reflecting on past experiences

According to Excerpt 5, Jobs told a story of dropping out and taking a calligraphy class which years later helped him design font types when creating the first Macintosh computer and ended this first story with a philosophical insight through a metaphor of connecting dots. His storytelling was performed to inspire a belief in trust, risk-taking, and intuition.

2.3 Low-level actions

While delivering the narrative, Jobs performed various low-level actions, including gazing towards the audience, speaking in a more energetic tone (than when talking about his birth and adoption) to show excitement in learning the calligraphy and successfully creating a typeface, stressing some words to emphasize them, speaking with a consistent tempo, and briefly pausing from time to time. These lower-level actions worked together to emphasize the verbal message. Their effectiveness could be seen through the audience's reactions of listening to his speech attentively, laughing, and cheering.

3. Interdiscursivity

Different discourse types were merged within Jobs' single speech to create an engaging and inspirational message for the audience.

3.1 Personal narrative discourse

Jobs began with the story of his background shortly after the introduction and before he told the story about dropping out of college.

Excerpt 9

(23) SJ It started before I was born.

(24) SJ My biological mother... *[prosody-slow (onwards)]*

(25) ***[stroke his bearded chin gently]***

(26) SJ *[was a young, unwed graduate student, and she decided to put me up for adoption.*

(27) ***[stroke his bearded chin gently]*** ***[gaze: audience (general)]***

(28) SJ She felt very strongly that I should be adopted by college graduates, so everything was all set for me to be adopted at birth *[by a lawyer and his wife.*

(29) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***

(30) SJ Except that when I popped out, they decided at the last minute

[that they really wanted a girl.

(32) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***

(33) SJ So my parents, who were on a waiting list, got a call in the middle of the night asking,

(34) SJ "We have an unexpected baby *[boy; do you want him?]*"

- (35) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***
- (36) SJ They said, "Of course."
- (37) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***
- (38) SJ My biological mother later found out that my mother had never graduated from college and that my father had never graduated from high school.
- (39) SJ She refused to sign the final adoption papers.
- (40) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***
- (41) SJ She only relented a few months later when my parents promised that
- I would go to college.
- **[gaze: audience (general)]***

This is the storytelling of his family background, adoption, and socioeconomic circumstances. It emphasizes origin, identity, and early challenges in life.

3.2 Educational discourse

Jobs referenced his circumstances at Reed College, dropping out, and sitting in on classes.

Excerpt 10

- (49) SJ After six months, I couldn't see the value in it.
- (50) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***
- (48) SJ I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out.
- (49) SJ And here I was... spending all of the money my parents had saved their
- entire life.
- (50) ***[gaze: audience (general)]***
- (51) SJ So I decided to drop out and trust that it would **all** work out OK.
- (52) SJ It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back...it was one of the best decisions I ever made.
- (53) AD ***[laughed]***
- (54) SJ The minute I dropped out I could **stop** taking the required classes that **didn't** interest me and begin **dropping in** on the ones that looked far more interesting.

This references the norms of academic success but challenges their conventions.

3.3 Entrepreneurial discourse

Jobs employed entrepreneurial discourse, which linked his non-practical interest in calligraphy to a signature feature of the Macintosh. This shows how personal experience can drive innovation.

Excerpt 11

- (78) SJ If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts.
- (79) SJ And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them.
- [prosody-energetic]
- (80) AD ***[laughed, applauded, whistled]***
- (81) SJ If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal

computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do. [prosody-energetic]

This moment showcases high audience engagement through humor and decisive tone, which was reinforced by energetic delivery.”

In sum, two types of Motivational Language were identified: empathetic language and meaning-making language. Interestingly, no clear instances of direction-giving language were found in the selected section of Jobs’ speech. This absence is itself significant: commencement speeches often aim to inspire rather than prescribe specific actions, and Jobs’ rhetorical strategy relied more on personal narrative and philosophical reflection than on explicit instructions. His emphasis on “connecting the dots” and trusting intuition illustrates meaning-making rather than directive guidance. Thus, the lack of direction-giving language highlights the distinctive motivational style of Jobs’ address, which privileges inspiration and reflection over prescriptive advice.

Discussion

The analysis of Steve Jobs’ Stanford commencement speech reveals three major dimensions, motivational language, multimodality, and interdiscursivity, that together construct a powerful rhetorical performance. The identification of empathetic and meaning-making language aligns with Motivational Language Theory, showing how Jobs not only acknowledges the audience’s emotions but also provides a sense of purpose and direction. This echoes findings from Zuckerberg’s commencement speeches (Jaroenkitvorn, 2001; Yerznkyan & Harutyunyan, 2004), where motivational strategies were likewise central, though Jobs’ emphasis on personal vulnerability and intuition distinguishes his approach.

Multimodality further enhances the speech’s impact. Jobs’ use of modal density and intensity, combined with foregrounding and backgrounding, demonstrates how verbal and non-verbal modes interact to create motivational narratives. His story of dropping out and discovering calligraphy exemplifies high-level action, weaving past experiences into a narrative of innovation and resilience. At the same time, low-level actions, such as gaze, tone variation, and strategic pauses, reinforce the verbal message and elicit audience engagement. Compared to Zuckerberg’s speeches, which relied more heavily on technological vision and collective action, Jobs’ multimodal strategies foreground personal experience as a source of inspiration, highlighting a distinctive rhetorical style.

Finally, the interdiscursive nature of Jobs’ speech - merging personal narrative, educational discourse, and entrepreneurial discourse - illustrates how commencement addresses can function as hybrid genres. This blending of discourses not only sustains audience interest but also legitimizes the speaker’s authority by linking personal struggles to broader social and professional values. While Zuckerberg’s speeches similarly integrated entrepreneurial discourse, Jobs’ narrative depth and philosophical framing through metaphors such as “connecting the dots” underscore a more individualized and reflective mode of persuasion.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Jobs’ rhetorical effectiveness lies in the interplay of motivational language, multimodal delivery, and interdiscursive blending. By situating the results alongside previous studies of Zuckerberg’s speeches, it becomes clear that while both speakers employ

motivational strategies, Jobs' distinctive reliance on personal narrative and multimodal richness sets his speech apart, offering valuable insights into the rhetorical construction of inspirational discourse in commencement addresses.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the beginning of Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement speech through the end of his first story, focusing on motivational language, multimodality, and interdiscursivity. Jobs used empathetic and meaning-making language to share personal experiences and encourage trust in uncertainty.

His tone, gaze, gestures, and pacing worked alongside his words to create a reflective and sincere delivery. Audience reactions, such as applause, cheering and laughter, were essential in shaping the meaning of key moments, highlighting how inspiration was co-constructed through interaction.

Jobs' message drew on educational, entrepreneurial, and personal narrative discourses, and echoed familiar cultural beliefs about success and self-trust. Overall, the speech demonstrates how inspirational meaning is built not only through content, but through multimodal performance and layered discourse.

These findings show how commencement speeches are not simply ceremonial events, but rich multimodal performances that blend personal narrative with cultural discourse to inspire public audiences. Jobs' use of gestural modes and audience engagement further suggests that inspirational discourse is co-produced in real time, shaped by both speaker and listener.

Theoretical Implications

This study demonstrates the value of combining Motivating Language Theory with multimodal and discourse-based analysis to better understand how inspirational meaning is constructed in commencement speeches. The findings highlight that motivational strategies are not only verbal but are reinforced through embodied actions and interdiscursive layering. This integrative framework contributes to rhetorical and discourse studies by showing how personal narrative, multimodal delivery, and motivational language interact to produce persuasive effects. Although limited to a single case, the analysis lays the groundwork for comparative research across different speakers, offering a pathway to trace evolving rhetorical trends in public addresses.

Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests that educators, lecturers, and teachers can benefit from adopting an integrative perspective when teaching or crafting public messages. By recognizing how motivational language is amplified through multimodal strategies, such as tone, gaze, and gesture, teachers of communication can help students develop speeches that show both verbally and visually. Moreover, the blending of personal, educational, and entrepreneurial discourses illustrates how speakers can connect individual experiences to broader social values, a technique that can be taught in courses on rhetoric, leadership communication, or

professional speaking. These insights may inform curriculum design and training practices, equipping learners to deliver messages that inspire trust, risk-taking, and intuition in diverse audiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers insight into Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement speech, future research could broaden the scope by comparing commencement addresses across different cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts. Such comparative studies would reveal how motivational language, multimodal strategies, and interdiscursive blending vary depending on cultural traditions, audience expectations, and rhetorical norms. For example, examining speeches from Asian, European, and American universities could highlight contrasts in the use of personal narrative, direction-giving language, or collective appeals.

Additionally, future work could integrate computational or AI-assisted methods, such as automated discourse analysis, multimodal annotation tools, or sentiment analysis, to examine larger corpora of commencement speeches. These approaches would allow researchers to identify recurring rhetorical patterns, track changes over time, and compare speakers across diverse contexts with greater efficiency and reliability. Combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative or AI-driven techniques could therefore enrich our understanding of how inspirational meaning is constructed in public addresses and how rhetorical strategies evolve across cultures and generations.

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