

## TED TALKS: THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN DISCOURSES

*This paper studies interdiscursivity in TED talks. Interdiscursivity is considered here as implicit or explicit relations that a discourse has to other discourses, as well as interaction between and convergence of discourses. We show that interdiscursive elements as socially, culturally and pragmatically bound language units form an integral part of public speaking discourse.*

**Key words:** TED talks, interdiscursivity, interdiscourse, public speaking discourse, convergence of discourses, hybridization of discourses

*У цій статті ми розглядаємо інтердискурсивність у доповідях конференції TED. Під інтердискурсивністю ми розуміємо імпліцитні та експліцитні взаємозв'язки між дискурсами, а також взаємодію та конвергенцію дискурсів. Показано, що інтердискурсивні елементи як соціо-, культурно- та прагматично зумовлені мовні одиниці є невід'ємною частиною дискурсу публічних доповідей.*

**Ключові слова:** доповіді на конференції TED, інтердискурсивність, інтердискурс, дискурс публічних доповідей, конвергенція дискурсу, гібридизація дискурсу

*В данной статье мы рассматриваем интердискурсивность в докладах конференции TED. Под интердискурсивностью мы понимаем имплицитные и эксплицитные взаимосвязи между дискурсами, а также взаимодействие и конвергенцию дискурсов. Показано, что интердискурсивные элементы как социо-, культурно- та прагматически обусловленные языковые единицы являются неотъемлемой частью дискурса публичных выступлений.*

**Ключевые слова:** доклады на конференции TED, интердискурсивность, интердискурс, дискурс публичных выступлений, конвергенция дискурса, гибридизация дискурса

TED is a one-off conference about technology, entertainment and design. Its videos became viral and created the so called TED-style talk. TED is a forum wherein specialists from different fields can meet and share ideas which are literally tagged as "ideas worth spreading". Richard Saul Wurman observed a powerful convergence among three fields: technology, entertainment and design and came up with the idea of TED conference. Since then, TED-talk style has become pervasive in public speaking [12]. In this paper, we'll try to figure out what TED talks have in common with interdiscursivity. But firstly, we'll bring some light into what three disciplinarity: interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are all about which will help us understand the correlation between TED talks and interdiscursivity.

When it comes to modern sciences, they are no longer pure "distilled" in the contemporary highly integrated world. The modern scientific world favors cross-pollination and cross-fertilization of ideas. Discourses evidently follow the suit. Some may say it is a bold statement, but facts show it really holds true. Many scientific fields traditionally use a common set of categories and research methods. Also, sciences share common scientific terminology. It demonstrates that sciences are deeply interwoven.

Let's just consider a number of interdisciplinary studies that actually exist and appear every now and then. Technological advances, that is where technology comes

into play, in various sciences have led to a burgeoning of specializations and often new, interdisciplinary, fields. As Dawn Youngblood has put it, "no discipline is an island entire in itself. That is to say, disciplines are by no means discrete entities – they necessarily overlap, borrow, and encroach upon one another. Within each discipline are sub-disciplines that may behave with as great a sense of separation as exists between separately defined disciplines. Further, as each discipline evolves, the very definition of it may change." [14]. Interdisciplinarity has become the driving force, a fresh stream for the science advancement which analyzes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coherent and coordinated whole [7].

Multidisciplinarity is what happens when members of two or more disciplines cooperate, using the tools and knowledge of their disciplines in new ways to consider multifaceted problems that have at least one tentacle in another area of study [6]. In academia, multidisciplinary studies are gaining more and more popularity among students. Now many colleges and universities offer multidisciplinary studies programs for students who are free to build their own course of study. These programs do not involve a set of pre-determined courses, though there are required classes common among most multidisciplinary studies programs.

Transdisciplinarity is a complex and abstract synthesis of disciplines. Back in 1970, Jean Piaget, who actually coined this term, viewed it as "higher stage succeeding interdisciplinary studies ... which would not only cover interactions and reciprocities between specialised research projects, but would place these relationships within a total system without any firm boundaries between disciplines" [14]. Basarab Nicolescu defines transdisciplinarity as a unity of knowledge beyond disciplines [10].

This research strategy crosses many disciplinary boundaries to create a holistic approach. Its goal is the understanding of the present world. For example, the Planetary Collegium and the Plasticities Sciences Art research group study transdisciplinary discourse in convergence of art, science, technology. Hence interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary always remain within the disciplinary boundaries, while transdisciplinarity seeks to go beyond the disciplinary boundaries [6, 10, 14].

Curious as it may sound, but the idea of TED also emerged back in 1984 around the time when the concept of transdisciplinarity was pioneered in 1970. Obviously it is not a mere coincidence, but shows that intellectuals worldwide have sought to draw on knowledge from various disciplines to deeper understand the world going beyond the disciplinary perspectives by coming up with ideas of new terms and converting them into reality.

Originally, Richard Saul Wurman, a creator of TED conference, was toying with the idea of subtraction – he was keen on making speeches shorter by introducing an 18-minute short talk format and encouraged speakers to go into "intellectual jazz", improvised conversation with the audience [5]. Hence TED talks are all about simplified and authentic storytelling. Their mission is to inspire, challenge and be thought provoking [1].

TED talk focuses on a great and well-formed idea which takes certain evidence or observations and draws a large audience. Now TED covers all topics from science to

business to global issues. The roster of its presenters includes scientists, philosophers, musicians, business and religious leaders, philanthropists and many others [12].

In this paper, we decided to focus on 10 most popular TED talks and demonstrate how interdiscursivity has crystallized in them. Mikhail Bakhtin famously noted that various semiotic systems interact which is reflected in text [2]. Interdiscursivity is inherent to TED talks not only because various discourses interact in texts of speeches delivered, but also because the interdiscursive space/domain is created between the speaker and the audience in the mental process of information sharing, as well as interaction of their cognitive systems and cultural codes [9; 11; 15].

In fact, interdiscourse and interdiscursivity have originated in Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism meaning that all texts are dialogic in nature and must be understood against the background of other texts. Interdiscursivity also stems from Bakhtin's heteroglossia which viewed any text as combination of one's own voice and the voices of others [2; 9]. In addition, the very term can be traced back to Norman Fairclough's "orders of discourse" who actually coined the term "interdiscursivity" [8]. Michael Foucault denotes interdiscourse as differences and equalities across discursive formations and interdiscursivity as relations between types of discourse [17].

Interdiscursivity refers to implicit or explicit relations that a discourse has to other discourses; interdiscourse implies that elements are imported from one discourse into another [9, 11, 13, 15]. Interdiscursivity is also defined as the mixing of various discourses, genres or styles associated with institutional and social meanings in a text [11; 13]. It is closely related to cognitive, social, and cultural factors of language use. Interdiscursive texts are aspects of culture, interconnected elements located in the social world [7; 13]. Such "intense interdiscursivity" reflects the "dynamic complexity of professional communication is the result of several factors, including the ever-increasing use of multi-media, explosion of information technology, multi-disciplinary contexts of the world of work, increasingly competitive professional (academic as well as business) environment, and the overwhelmingly compulsive nature of promotional and advertising activities." [3; 4].

The crucial role in most TED talks analyzed plays humor which is the speaker's communicative strategy aimed at establishing rapport with the audience. At the same time it serves as the interdiscursive element embedded in the discourse texture imported from other discourses. For instance, Ken Robinson in his speech "Do schools kill creativity?" rated as inspiring and funny not to sound too scholarly as a university professor quite naturally...

- resorts to humor from various spheres of his personal and professional life:
  - *I have an interest in education. Actually, what I find is everybody has an interest in education. Don't you? I find this very interesting. If you're at a dinner party, and you say you work in education -- Actually, you're not often at dinner parties, frankly.*
  - *And I like university professors, but you know, we shouldn't hold them up as the high-water mark of all human achievement. They're just a form of life, another*

*form of life. But they're rather curious, and I say this out of affection for them. There's something curious about professors in my experience -- not all of them, but typically, they live in their heads. They live up there, and slightly to one side. They're disembodied, you know, in a kind of literal way. They look upon their body as a form of transport for their heads.*

10:21

*(Laughter)*

10:27

*Don't they? It's a way of getting their head to meetings.*

- *By the way, there's a shaft of nerves that joins the two halves of the brain called the corpus callosum. It's thicker in women. Following off from Helen yesterday, this is probably why women are better at multi-tasking. Because you are, aren't you? There's a raft of research, but I know it from my personal life. If my wife is cooking a meal at home -- which is not often, thankfully.*

13:56

*(Laughter)*

13:58

*No, she's good at some things, but if she's cooking, she's dealing with people on the phone, she's talking to the kids, she's painting the ceiling, she's doing open-heart surgery over here. If I'm cooking, the door is shut, the kids are out, the phone's on the hook, if she comes in I get annoyed. I say, "Terry, please, I'm trying to fry an egg in here."*

The latter example shows how scientific facts go along with life stories. This is where scientific discourse interacts with colloquial speech/everyday language.

- cracks old well-known jokes which helps find a common ground with the audience:

- *Actually, do you know that old philosophical thing, if a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it, did it happen? Remember that old chestnut? I saw a great t-shirt recently, which said, "If a man speaks his mind in a forest, and no woman hears him, is he still wrong?"*

- skillfully uses precedent units such as names of famous artists and scientists:

- *Picasso once said this, he said that all children are born artists.*
- *There was a wonderful quote by Jonas Salk, who said, "If all the insects were to disappear from the Earth, within 50 years all life on Earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the Earth, within 50 years all forms of life would flourish." And he's right.*

- makes use of culture bound elements. As an Englishman, he mentions his native country obviously being proud of his background. It seems that as an Englishman he has a great sense of humor:

- *When my son was four in England -- Actually, he was four everywhere, to be honest.*

- *I lived in Stratford-on-Avon until about five years ago. Actually, we lived in a place called Snitterfield, just outside Stratford, which is where Shakespeare's father was born.*

- retrospectively refers to his experience so that his speech bristles with narratives:

- *I heard a great story recently -- I love telling it -- of a little girl who was in a drawing lesson. She was six, and she was at the back, drawing, and the teacher said this girl hardly ever paid attention, and in this drawing lesson, she did. The teacher was fascinated. She went over to her, and she said, "What are you drawing?" And the girl said, "I'm drawing a picture of God. " And the teacher said, "But nobody knows what God looks like. " And the girl said, "They will, in a minute. "*

- refers to other semiotic systems such as cinema:

- *No, it was big, it was a big story. Mel Gibson did the sequel, you may have seen it.*

But at the time he touches upon some fundamental and burning social issues like the future of education and underlying reforms public education worldwide requires not to kill the students' creativity. To this end, he employs scientific facts and statistics:

- *In the next 30 years, according to UNESCO, more people worldwide will be graduating through education than since the beginning of history. More people, and it's the combination of all the things we've talked about -- technology and its transformation effect on work, and demography and the huge explosion in population.*

The interdiscursivity is also produced here through the blending of information and persuasion [13]. It clearly shows that to deliver a successful speech the speaker mixes various discursive elements creating the interdiscursive space/domain.

Some speeches are overly scientific, the author tries to establish his/her authority, e. g. as a scientist/scholar by using professional jargon just like Amy Cuddy employing lots of sociological and psychological terms. Only at the end of her speech she unravels the personality by telling her life story introducing the personal narrative as an inspiring success story which serves as an interdiscursive element:

- *So when I tell people about this, that our bodies change our minds and our minds can change our behavior, and our behavior can change our outcomes, they say to me, "It feels fake. " Right? So I said, fake it till you make it. It's not me. I don't want to get there and then still feel like a fraud. I don't want to feel like an impostor. I don't want to get there only to feel like I'm not supposed to be here. And that really resonated with me, because I want to tell you a little story about being an impostor and feeling like I'm not supposed to be here.*

16:06

*When I was 19, I was in a really bad car accident. I was thrown out of a car, rolled several times. I was thrown from the car. And I woke up in a head injury rehab ward, and I had been withdrawn from college, and I learned that my IQ had dropped by two standard deviations, which was very traumatic. I knew my IQ because I had identified with being smart, and I had been called gifted as a child. So*

*I'm taken out of college, I keep trying to go back. They say, "You're not going to finish college. Just, you know, there are other things for you to do, but that's not going to work out for you."*

16:43

*So I really struggled with this, and I have to say, having your identity taken from you, your core identity, and for me it was being smart, having that taken from you, there's nothing that leaves you feeling more powerless than that. So I felt entirely powerless. I worked and worked, and I got lucky, and worked, and got lucky, and worked.*

17:02

*Eventually I graduated from college.*

Some speakers feeling not very confident, more exactly – quite uncomfortable in public speaking endeavor to hide their fear and lack of confidence in humour like model Cameron Russell trying to make the point and persuade the audience that looks are not everything:

- *Hi. My name is Cameron Russell, and for the last little while, I've been a model. Actually, for 10 years. And I feel like there's an uncomfortable tension in the room right now because I should not have worn this dress.*

0:31

*(Laughter)*

0:32

*So luckily, I brought an outfit change. This is the first outfit change on the TED stage, so you guys are pretty lucky to witness it, I think. If some of the women were really horrified when I came out, you don't have to tell me now, but I'll find out later on Twitter.*

Most speeches rely heavily on visual representations, namely slides, videos, pictures, photos, along with verbal messages, thus some interdiscursive space/domain is created by hybridization of visual art and verbal message [9].

In his "positively amazing" speech rated as fascinating and jaw-dropping David Gallo shows astonishing images of deepwater ocean creatures "positively amazing from an artistic point view" because of their extraordinary bioluminescence and compares one creature to "a flying turkey under a tree" noting that all of them resemble "fireflies". This comparison obviously has a great interdiscursive potential by exporting and importing elements from one discourse into another – drawing parallels between artistic objects and ocean creatures.

Harvard university professor Dan Gilbert starts his speech revealing the secret of happiness with the ironic remark:

- *When you have 21 minutes to speak, two million years seems like a really long time. But evolutionarily, two million years is nothing.*

To prove that happiness can be synthesized rather than found out, the speaker uses a powerful quote of a famous polymath Sir Thomas Browne to illustrate this idea which is an imported interdiscursive element into the psychological discourse:

- *Sir Thomas Browne wrote in 1642, "I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty to riches, adversity to prosperity. I am more invulnerable than Achilles; fortune hath not one place to hit me." What kind of remarkable machinery does this guy have in his head?*

Dan Gilbert also gives an apt example using a powerful and well-known image from religious practices Zen where we can see interaction of psychological and religious discourses:

- *Why do we have that belief? Well, it's very simple. What kind of economic engine would keep churning if we believed that not getting what we want could make us just as happy as getting it? With all apologies to my friend Matthieu Ricard, a shopping mall full of Zen monks is not going to be particularly profitable, because they don't want stuff enough.*

He acknowledges the power of words, but being a scientist he respects facts and figures. Also, he employs an interesting food metaphor *to marinate* preparing the audience for long and rather boring part of his speech.

- *I'm a scientist, so I'm going to do this not with rhetoric, but by marinating you in a little bit of data.*

Moreover, hybridization of literary and non-literary genres, interaction of psychological and economic discourses can be observed in this speech:

- *The Bard said everything best, of course, and he's making my point here but he's making it hyperbolically: "'Tis nothing good or bad / But thinking makes it so." It's nice poetry, but that can't exactly be right. Is there really nothing good or bad? Is it really the case that gall bladder surgery and a trip to Paris are just the same thing?*

- *In more turgid prose, but closer to the truth, was the father of modern capitalism, Adam Smith, and he said this. This is worth contemplating: "The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life seems to arise from overrating the difference between one permanent situation and another -- Some of these situations may, no doubt, deserve to be preferred to others, but none of them can deserve to be pursued with that passionate ardor which drives us to violate the rules either of prudence or of justice, or to corrupt the future tranquility of our minds, either by shame from the remembrance of our own folly, or by remorse for the horror of our own injustice." In other words: yes, some things are better than others.*

It seems almost every speech under study contains some interdiscursive elements which demonstrates that interdiscursivity as a linguistic phenomenon is intrinsic to public speaking discourse. However, to substantiate this premise more evidence should be collected which will be further pursued. Furthermore, limitation of interdiscursive elements in public speaking discourse would make speeches simply boring, but not only... Interdiscursive elements serve many functions: they are used to persuade the audience, to grab the attention, to make the emotional

appeal, to give examples, to provide evidence, in general, to make speeches stand out, notably bringing some unique flavor to a speech.

Therefore, TED talks brought together talented and extraordinary people who made it all happened. It is a platform where intellectuals interact which helped establish an important correlation between three fields: technology, entertainment and design implying their versatile relations and convergence of various discourses.

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