

# Strategies of Opening A Speech: An Analysis of 20 TED Speeches

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**Abstract**—As giving English speeches becomes an indispensable part of many people’s lives, it is essential to seek for approaches to avoid the “nice-to-be-here” platitude in the prologue. Although many researches have been done in this field, few of them have connected quantitative data with the specific strategies. How to summarize the most influential strategies of making a prologue in English speeches was regarded as the problem to be solved in this paper. Taking 20 TED speeches as data, this paper would analyze the most useful and important strategies of opening a speech with the help of American psychologist Lochin’s Primacy Effect theory. After the investigation, four kinds of strategies of making a prologue were listed out together with their use frequency and times of receiving positive reactions. In conclusion, “Humor and wit” prologue turned out to be the most popular strategy while the story-telling one being the most-used strategy, and asking questions may fail to bring positive effect sometimes.

**Index Terms**—TED speeches, primacy effect theory, strategies of making prologues.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As making public speeches becomes an indispensable part of most people’s lives, speakers are trying every possible method to make their speeches impressive. However, most people always unconsciously make the “nice-to-be-here” platitudes in the opening of a speech, which would definitely bore the audience. Therefore, the opening of a public speech is crucial for the speaker to attract attention and avoid platitude.

Previous researchers have demonstrated a series of strategies of opening a speech and summarized their effects, but most of them failed to connect the theoretical knowledge with practical cases. Taking 20 TED speeches as examples, this paper aims to analyze the most useful and important strategies of opening a speech with the help of American psychologist Lochin’s Primacy Effect theory (1957).

In the first part, this paper presents the general information of TED speeches, including the 20 speeches in concern and the selection criteria. The second part gives a clear illustration of Lochin’s theory of Primacy Effect and its application in prologue analysis. The third part makes

an analysis of the 20 TED speeches and interprets in details the most significant strategies of opening a speech with the help of the Primacy Effect theory, so as to show their importance and influences with a combination of theoretical and practical analysis.

### A. General Information of TED Speeches

TED talks include speeches from expert speakers of various fields, such as education, business, art and science, etc. Under the slogan “ideas worth spreading”, TED has presented hundreds of successful speeches with different styles [1]. Thus, it is a reservoir of good speeches in English and has the value to be studied in terms of how to make an attractive prologue.

#### 1) Origin and development

TED (Technology, entertainment, design) was founded in February 1984 as a conference, which has been held annually since 1990. At the very beginning, its emphasis was solely in technology and design, corresponding to its Silicon Valley origins. With time passing by, TED has broadened its focus to include talks on various topics like scientific, culture, academic fields and etc. How to express a highly concentrated idea in a precise and concise language within a limited time is the first problem that the speaker must face [2].

Since June 2006, TED talks have been offered for free viewing online. As each speaker is given only the maximum of 18 minutes to present their ideas in the most innovative and engaging ways, those speech videos have attracted an amazing number of online audience. Only by 2012, over one billion times had TED Talks been watched worldwide [3].

#### 2) The 20 speeches in concern and the selection criteria

Since there are over 2500+ speeches on the TED official website while the research objects in this paper consist of only 20 of them, how do we choose the most representative and successful 20 speeches? In this paper, the selection criteria will be the popularity of those videos. By ranking the speech videos on the TED official website, the 20 most viewed ones are selected as the study objects of this thesis.

Since these 20 TED speeches have been already selected as the practical cases, it is not hard to analyze the strategies of making a speech prologue with the assistance of Lochin’s theory of Primacy Effect. In what follows, the theory and its connection with the analysis of speech prologue will be explained in detail.

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*B. Lochin’s Theory of Primacy Effect*

*1) Basic introduction of the theory*

Primacy Effect, also called Superiority Effect, was first presented by American Psychologist Lochin(1957). It is, in psychology and sociology, a cognitive bias that results in a subject recalling primary information presented better than information presented later on. Shi Ronghua has found that with Primacy Effect, if a person leaves a great impression upon others when they first meet, people are willing to stay close to him or her and show their friendliness [4]. One explanation for this phenomenon is that preconceived ideas always keep a strong hold, and they make up the core memory schemas in the brains of the information-receivers. The subsequent information is just combined and assimilated into this formed memory schema, hardly able to bring new impression. Another explanation is that the first-received information gets more attention under the circumstance of not being disturbed. Therefore, people’s brains tend to analyze it more carefully. However, the subsequent information is more likely to be ignored and roughly thought about [5].

As a result, just the same as the daily interpersonal meetings, in a speech, even if the subsequent information does not correspond with the previous ones, people tend to submit to the first-received information. They even might think that the subsequent information is non-essential and incidental.

*2) The application of the theory in prologue analysis.*

In psychology, Primacy Effect is in its nature a superiority effect. When different kinds of information are delivered to the audience, they always tend to attach importance to the leading one. Thus, whether the English speaker could express the prologue of a speech well to a large extent determines whether the speech is successful or not. As Liu Jing and her fellow researchers pointed out , “the application of the theory in prologue is in fact based on the first impression of the speech in the audience’s hearts, the speaker is supposed to stand firm in his or her position and make the beginning clear and easy to understand” [6]. Only in this case could the audience identify with what the speaker says, and therefore build up the best first impression.

Making a speech actually has a interpersonal meaning. Interpersonal meaning refers to the use of language to establish and maintain contact with society and to reveal the role of participants in language communication [7].

In the speech, the maintaining and reproducing of the impression largely rely on the strength of interest and attention when concerned psychological activity first appears [8]. As a result, the audience is deeply impressed by the speech prologue. The use of various kinds of little stories, humorous diction, and sentence structures could draw the audience’s attention and interest. With the positive influence of the Primacy Effect, the image of the speaker in the audience’s eyes is tall and convincing, which makes a firm foundation for the following speech.

**II. AN INVESTIGATION OF 20 TED SPEECHES AND THE MOST SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES OF OPENING A SPEECH**

*A. Data*

Topics	Views	Topics	Views
Do schools kill creativity?	47M	The puzzle of motivation.	19M
Your body language may shape who you are.	43M	The power of introverts.	17M
How great leaders inspire action.	35M	What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness.	17M
The power of vulnerability.	31M	How to spot a liar.	17M
This is what happens when you reply to spam email.	22M	The happy secret to better work.	16M
How to speak so that people want to listen.	22M	The thrilling potential of SixthSense technology.	16M
10 things you didn’t know about orgasm.	22M	How I held my breath for 17 minutes.	15M
My stroke of insight.	21M	Inside the mind of a master procrastinator.	15M
Why we do what we do.	20M	The art of misdirection.	15M
Looks aren’t everything. Believe me, I’m a model.	20M	How to make stress your friend.	14 M

The 20 selected TED speeches are listed in the following chart together with their number of views.

*B. Method*

After the leading 20 most viewed TED speeches were selected, it is time to find out what strategies of opening a speech in them lead to their popularity and success. As the theory of Primacy Effect is concerned in this study, the reaction of the audience to the prologue that the speaker made is of crucial importance. Fortunately, this paper is able to examine the audience’s reaction by their laughter and applause which are recorded in both the speech videos and transcripts, and also by the fact that whether they are following the speaker’s instruction or not in the prologue part.

First of all, all the significant strategies of making a prologue in the 20 selected speeches would be listed out after a minute investigation. And then their use frequency and

times of receiving a positive reaction (laughter, applause, or other audience's reactions like following what the speaker asked them to do, etc) will be recorded in order to analyze what strategy used caused the best primacy effect in the beginning of a speech and its reason.

C. Results and Findings

1) The most used 4 strategies of opening a speech among the 20 speeches

a. "Humor and wit" prologue

Apparently, corresponding with its name, this strategy refers to starting a speech with being humorous in an intellectual way. It is easy to find that the speaker has different psychological variables, and the effect of the prologue is different. The most common thing is self mockery and telling jokes [9]. For example, making an appropriate joke or teasing the audience, just like what Ken Robinson did in the opening of his speech "Do schools kill creativity?".

"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 [10]."

Making the audience laugh from the second the speaker open his or her mouth is always a good way of start. This strategy opens their eyes to something different and even entertaining. It piques their interest and immerses them into the action from the opening second with a verbal splash of cold water.

b. Story-telling prologue

Everybody loves stories, no matter they belong to the speaker or other celebrities that they know. Telling a story which is directly connected with the coming topic would definitely do the speaker a favor of grabbing attentions of the audience. But one thing need to be noted here, that is to tell the story in a casual way. Like most successful speakers in these 20 TED speeches do, never tell a story as if it is being read. There are many examples in the selected speeches.

"It went like this: it said, "Hello James Veitch, I have an interesting business proposal I want to share with you, Solomon." Now, my hand was kind of hovering on the delete button, right? I was looking at my phone. I thought, I could just delete this. Or I could do what I think we've all always wanted to do [11]."  
(This is what happens when you reply to spam email)

c. Prologue of asking questions

After the investigation of the 20 speeches, asking questions in the beginning of a speech is frequently used by the speakers. It indeed is an effective way of leading the audience into the topic and attract their interests, and also bridge the speech with the audience more closely. However, it is found that although the 20 speakers do like asking questions, none of them actually leave a period of time for the answers of the audience. Why? Because leaving time for the audience to actually answer these questions may cause an awkward silence, since many of them are too shy to speak it out. Just as Simon Sinek did in "How great

leaders inspire action",

"How do you explain when things don't go as we assume? Or better, how do you explain when others are able to achieve things that seem to defy all of the assumptions? For example: Why is Apple so innovative [12]?"

The duty of the speaker is only to throw out the questions and make the audience think about them, not to truly wait for them to answer as if it is a kind of lecture people have in high school.

D. Suspenseful prologue

"So I want to start by offering you a free no-tech life hack, and all it requires of you is this: that you change your posture for two minutes. But before I give it away, I want to ask you to right now do a little audit of your body and what you're doing with your body. So how many of you are sort of making yourselves smaller [13]?" ("Your body. language may shape who you are", Amy Cuddy)

Curiosity is in the nature of every human being, so there is no doubt that creating suspense in the prologue of a speech could effectively draw the audience's eyes and ears into the stage. As shown in the 20 speeches videos, when people are confronted with a suspenseful opening and do not know what will happen next, their faces are radiant and full of expressions of expectation. According to the Primacy Effect theory, creating a suspense leaves a nice impression in the audience's minds, which makes them super concentrated and have a lasting interest in the speaker's topic [14].

2) The use frequency of these 4 strategies and their times of receiving a positive reaction

Strategies	Use frequency	Times of receiving positive reactions
"Humor and wit" prologue	4	4
Story-telling prologue	8	7
Prologue of asking questions	4	2
Suspenseful prologue	3	3

III. DISCUSSION

As we can see from the chart above, the most used strategies of opening a speech is the story-telling prologue, while the suspenseful prologue is the least used. Both "Humor and wit" prologue and prologue of asking questions are used for 4 times among the total 20 speeches, but only half of the speech starting with questions arouse the audience's interests. If the effect of these prologue is regard as the criteria of ranking, "Humor and wit" and suspenseful prologue rank the first as the audience reacts posi-

tively as long as they are applied in the speech opening. Story-telling prologue comes next, and prologue of asking questions, the last.

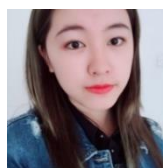
In other words, most speakers prefer to apply the story-telling prologue which brings a considerable effect of grabbing the attention of the audience, with the other three strategies following behind. However, the most welcomed strategies of opening a speech is "Humor and wit" prologue and suspenseful prologue. Obviously these two prologues are most absorbing and appealing according to the audience's reaction like laughing out loud and entirely following the speaker's words with an expression of expectation.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, as the proper strategies of opening a speech to a large extent help to make a successful speech, it is of vital importance for the speech givers to be aware of the most significant strategies of making a prologue. Relying on the theory of Primacy Effect and investigation of the 20 most popular TED speeches, this paper eventually fulfills the purpose of quantifying popularity extent of some important strategies of opening a speech, and also demonstrating these four strategies from the perspectives from the speaker and the audience. However, no matter which strategy of making a prologue in a speech is used, the solid mastery of English knowledge is the must for the speech-delivers. This research paper only looks into the field of prologues in English speeches, while a large deal of speeches in other languages are waiting to be analyzed based on the Primacy Effect theory. With more speeches in all kinds of languages as the research subjects, not only the most useful strategies of making a prologue will be analyzed, but also the different influence caused by a certain strategy in different languages will be discovered.

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