

ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS AND MOTIVATIONAL FUNCTIONS IN DR. JILL BOLTE TAYLOR'S TED TALK *MY STROKE OF INSIGHT*

Muna Inarul Hida, Ruminda, Hasbi Assiddiqi

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati (UIN SGD), Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: munainarul@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates how illocutionary acts function as motivational strategies in Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk *My Stroke of Insight*. While previous studies have primarily focused on classifying speech acts, limited attention has been given to how illocutionary force contributes to the construction of motivational discourse in public speeches. Addressing this gap, the present research analyzes the intersection between linguistic action and motivational intent. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, 139 purposively selected utterances were examined based on their identifiable illocutionary force and motivational meaning. The analysis integrates Searle's speech act framework with concepts of motivational communication, including emotional engagement, cognitive reframing, inspirational direction, supportive encouragement, and the strengthening of self-efficacy. The findings reveal that representative acts are the most dominant type, indicating the speaker's emphasis on conveying information and personal insight. Emotional appeal appears as the most frequent motivational function, reflecting the talk's strong affective orientation. Common combinations such as Representative + Emotional Appeal and Directive + Encouragement demonstrate how linguistic forms work synergistically with motivational strategies to enhance the persuasive and inspirational power of the message. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how illocutionary acts shape motivational discourse in spoken communication.

Keywords: *illocutionary acts; motivational function; TED Talk; Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor*

1. Introduction

Understanding how language generates motivational impact requires more than identifying the actions performed through speech. Speech Acts Theory, first introduced by Austin and later refined by Searle, provides an important foundation for explaining the illocutionary force embedded within utterances. However, despite its usefulness in describing language as action, the relationship between illocutionary force and the emergence of motivational effect in public discourse remains insufficiently explored. This gap becomes especially significant in motivational effects, where speakers intentionally craft their linguistic choices to shape emotions, shift perspectives, and stimulate action. Such

dynamics are strongly visible in widely circulated public talks, including Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's influential TED presentation.

TED Talks are known as a global digital discourse genre that combines the dissemination of knowledge with persuasive rhetoric. For example, discourse analysis of TED Talks demonstrates how speakers use narrative techniques and communication strategies to convey complex ideas ways that are accessible to broad audiences (Altamimi, 2021). In addition, rhetorical analyses of TED Talks also highlight speakers' use of persuasive strategies such as ethos, pathos, and logos to influence audiences both emotionally and cognitively (Mohammed & Mayuuf, 2025).

Given that the motivational power of the talk arises not only from its thematic content but also from the manner in which Taylor articulates her ideas, examining her linguistic strategies becomes crucial. The speech presents patterns that build speaker credibility, invite emotional connection, and encourage listeners toward personal transformation. Such features indicate that a surface-level analysis of structure or themes would be insufficient. A framework capable of interpreting language as purposeful action is therefore necessary. Thus, Speech Act Theory, proposed by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1979), provides an appropriate lens for uncovering how Taylor employs illocutionary acts to construct her motivational message.

Even so, categorizing illocutionary acts alone does not fully explain how the speech generates motivation. It is equally important to examine the persuasive functions embedded within Taylor's utterances. Elements such as emotional appeal, cognitive reframing, encouragement, messages fostering self-efficacy, and inspirational motivation allow for a deeper understanding of the persuasive and affective power of her language. By integrating both illocutionary analysis and motivational functions, this study seeks to demonstrate how Taylor's linguistic choices stimulate motivation, strengthen emotional engagement, and create persuasive influence throughout her talk.

Several previous studies have explored speech acts in different contexts, though each adopted distinct focuses and theoretical perspectives. The first study by Hussein & Mubarak (2025) examined the multimodal and linguistic strategies used by TED speakers to engage audiences, showing that narrative framing and emotional resonance shape message impact. However the study did not analyze individual utterances through the perspective of Speech Act Theory. The second study by Mestre-Mestre and Pérez Cabello de Alba (2022) focused on discourse strategies that trigger audience applause, revealing that humor, personal storytelling, and emphatic statements are key persuasive cues; however, the analysis emphasized audience reactions rather than motivational force within the speaker's utterances. The third study by Jovic et al., (2023) investigated the use of hedging in TED Talks and demonstrated how hedges contribute to persuasive appeals such as ethos, pathos, and logos. Nevertheless, the study did not explore their relationship with illocutionary acts or motivational functions. Although these studies provide valuable insights into persuasion in TED discourse, none specifically examines how illocutionary force interacts with motivational strategies. Therefore, this gap becomes the primary focus addressed in the present study.

2. Literature Review

This study uses Speech Act Theory as the primary analytical framework to examine how Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk *My Stroke of Insight* conveys motivational meaning through language. The theoretical basis refers to Austin (1962), who introduced the idea that

language performs actions, and Searle (1979), who later refined the classification of illocutionary acts into five categories: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. According to Speech Act Theory, every utterance contains not only literal meaning but also communicative intention that reflects the speaker's purpose in interaction. In public discourse, especially motivational speech, language functions not merely as a medium for transferring information but also as a strategic tool for influencing emotions, shaping perspectives, and encouraging audience engagement.

Motivational speech is considered a form of persuasive discourse designed not only to create emotional arousal such as fear, sadness, joy, or excitement, but also to motivate audiences to respond through reflection or action (Wrench et al., 2016). Therefore, speech acts in motivational discourse often function simultaneously as communicative actions and persuasive strategies. In addition to illocutionary acts, this study also examines motivational functions, which refer to the ways language influences audience emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and actions through discourse. In motivational communication, language does not merely convey information but also serves as a psychological instrument that encourages, inspires, and reshapes audience perspectives toward personal experiences and social reality.

This study adopts five motivational functions: emotional appeal, cognitive reframing, encouragement, self-efficacy, and inspirational motivation. Emotional appeal is derived from Aristotle's concept of pathos, which emphasizes the role of emotions in persuasion (Aristotle, 2007). Cognitive reframing is based on cognitive restructuring theory proposed by Beck (1976) and Ellis (1994), which explains how individuals reinterpret situations in order to change emotional responses and perspectives. Encouragement is associated with positive reinforcement and supportive communication that promotes confidence, persistence, hope, and motivation (Wong, 2015). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to perform actions, as proposed by Bandura (1997). Meanwhile, inspirational motivation is drawn from transformational leadership theory by Bass and Riggio (2006), highlighting how language can inspire individuals toward higher motivation, confidence, and purpose.

2.1 Emotional Appeal

Emotional appeal is grounded in Aristotle's concept of pathos, which positions emotion as a central component of persuasion (Aristotle, 1991). In persuasive and motivational discourse, emotional appeal functions as a strategy to establish emotional connection between the speaker and the audience. Through emotional engagement, speakers can strengthen audience attention, create empathy, and increase the persuasive impact of their message. Emotional appeal is often realized through expressive language, evaluative adjectives, emotionally loaded expressions, and personal narratives that evoke sympathy and emotional identification (Frijda, 1986; Bruner, 1991). In motivational speech, emotional appeal also helps speakers construct authenticity and sincerity, which strengthen persuasive influence in public discourse.

2.2 Cognitive Reframing

Cognitive reframing draws from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, especially the theories proposed by Beck (1976) and Ellis (1994). This concept refers to the process of changing how individuals interpret situations, experiences, or problems in order to produce different emotional and psychological responses. In motivational communication, cognitive reframing functions as a persuasive strategy because it encourages audiences to reinterpret negative experiences as opportunities for growth, learning, or transformation. Linguistically, cognitive

reframing is often marked by contrastive expressions such as *but*, *however*, *actually*, and phrases such as *the truth is* or *in another way*, which indicate shifts in perspective and interpretation.

2.3 Encouragement

Encouragement refers to language that provides direct motivational support and positive reinforcement to the audience. Research by Wong (2015) and Kellermann and Shea (1996) highlights encouragement as a form of supportive communication that aims to strengthen confidence, persistence, courage, and optimism. In motivational discourse, encouragement functions to reduce doubt and stimulate audiences to continue pursuing positive action despite difficulties or uncertainty. Encouragement is commonly expressed through positive affirmations and directive expressions such as *you can*, *keep going*, and *do not give up*.

2.4 Self-Efficacy Messages

Self-efficacy messages are derived from Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which emphasizes that individuals' beliefs in their own abilities significantly influence their motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1997). People who believe in their capability to perform actions are more likely to persist in facing challenges and achieve desired goals. In discourse, self-efficacy messages function to strengthen audience confidence and foster a sense of personal capability. Linguistically, these messages are commonly expressed through assertive statements and modality indicating capability, such as *can*, *able to*, *capable of*, and *will succeed*.

2.5 Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is derived from transformational leadership theory proposed by Bass and Riggio (2006). This motivational function refers to the use of language that inspires audiences by presenting hope, vision, meaning, and collective purpose. Inspirational motivation encourages individuals to move beyond personal limitations and pursue broader goals or higher ideals. It is commonly realized through visionary language, metaphorical expressions, symbolic narratives, and collective pronouns such as *we* and *our*. Speakers also frequently employ visionary prompts such as *imagine* and *think about* to encourage audiences to visualize possibilities and positive transformation.

By combining Speech Act Theory with these motivational dimensions, the present study provides an integrated framework for examining how linguistic action and motivational intent work together in motivational discourse. This approach allows a deeper understanding of how Taylor's TED Talk generates emotional engagement, shifts perspectives, and encourages positive reflection through strategic language use.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method because the purpose of the research is to describe and interpret the illocutionary acts and motivational functions found in Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk *My Stroke of Insight*. A qualitative descriptive design is suitable for examining meaning, intention, and language use in natural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis relies on Speech Act Theory proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1979), combined with motivational communication frameworks.

3.1 Data Source and Unit of Analysis

The data consist of utterances taken from the official transcript of Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk *My Stroke of Insight* (Taylor, 2008). The transcript represents the complete spoken text of the presentation and serves as the primary data source. The unit of analysis is an utterance, defined as a meaningful segment of speech that conveys a communicative intention.

A total of 139 utterances were selected from the full transcript using the following inclusion criteria:

1. The utterance contains an illocutionary act based on Searle's taxonomy.
2. The utterance reflects at least one motivational function adopted in this study.
3. The utterance forms a complete and interpretable unit of meaning.

Utterances that were incomplete, unclear, or did not meet these criteria were excluded.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through several steps:

1. Watching the TED Talk repeatedly to understand the tone, emotional delivery, and context.
2. Reading the transcript carefully and identifying utterances containing illocutionary force.
3. Coding the selected utterances based on:
 - a. the type of illocutionary act (representative, directive, commissive, expressive, or declarative), and
 - b. the motivational function (emotional appeal, cognitive reframing, encouragement, self-efficacy, or inspirational motivation).

Each utterance was then recorded in a coding sheet for further analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of:

1. data reduction: selecting utterances relevant to the research focus.
2. data display: organizing utterances into analytical tables.
3. conclusion drawing: interpreting how speech acts and motivational strategies work together to construct motivational meaning.

Speech Act Theory was used to identify the illocutionary force of each utterance, while motivational analysis was used to explain how the utterances influence emotion, cognition, and audience empowerment. By integrating these two frameworks, the study explains how linguistic actions generate motivational impact in motivational discourse.

3.4 Reliability Strategies

To strengthen reliability and minimize subjectivity, this study employed a peer-checking procedure. A portion of the coded data was reviewed by a second coder to compare category assignments and ensure consistency in interpretation. The results of the review showed that the classifications remained stable and aligned with the theoretical

criteria. The reliability process was further supported by theoretical triangulation, in which each coding decision was cross-checked against the theoretical frameworks proposed by Austin (1962), Searle (1979), Aristotle (1991), Beck (1976), Ellis (1994), Wong (2015), Bandura (1997), and Bass and Riggio (2006). In cases where an utterance contained multiple motivational elements, the dominant communicative intention was used as the primary classification.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method because the purpose of the research is to describe and interpret the illocutionary acts and motivational functions found in Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk *My Stroke of Insight*. A qualitative descriptive design is suitable for examining meaning, intention, and language use in natural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis relies on Speech Act Theory proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1979), combined with motivational communication frameworks.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that in Jill Bolte Taylor's "*My Stroke of Insight*," illocutionary acts and motivational functions strongly interact. The majority of the 139 utterances that were analyzed were classified as representative acts (121 data), indicating the speaker's tendency to use assertive expressions to convey perceptions, narrate experiences, and construct reality (Searle, 1979). This dominance aligns with the nature of autobiographical TED Talks, which typically emphasize factual recounting and meaning-making. Unlike previous TED-related studies, such as Hussein & Mubarak (2025), who focused on multimodal strategies, or Mestre-Mestre and Pérez Cabello de Alba (2022), who examined applause triggers, the present findings demonstrate that the persuasive power in Taylor's talk does not stem primarily from delivery techniques or audience reactions, but from the consistent use of representative acts to construct emotional resonance. Emotional Appeal also emerged as the most frequent motivational function (84 data), further reflecting that autobiographical narratives rely heavily on emotional engagement to influence the audience (Nabi, 2021). Within this interaction, Representative + Emotional Appeal appeared as the most dominant pattern (78 data), showing that descriptive narration is strategically used to evoke empathy and guide the audience's emotional response.

The study demonstrates that distinct illocutionary acts consistently co-occur with particular motivational functions. From a total of 139 data, the most dominant illocutionary act was Representative (121 data), followed by Expressive (8 data) and Directive (10 data). In terms of motivational functions, Emotional Appeal emerged as the strongest category (84 data), followed by Inspirational Motivation (29 data), Cognitive Reframing (12 data), Self-Efficacy (8 data), and Encouragement (6 data). When the two categories were combined, Representative + Emotional Appeal appeared as the most prevalent pattern (78 data), demonstrating how descriptive narration is deliberately used to evoke emotional resonance. Other notable pairings include Representative + Inspirational Motivation (24 data), Representative + Cognitive Reframing (12 data), Representative + Self-Efficacy (6 data), and Representative + Encouragement (1 data). Less frequent but meaningful combinations also appeared, such as Directive + Encouragement (5 data), Directive + Inspirational Motivation (4 data), Directive + Self-Efficacy (1 data), Expressive + Emotional Appeal (6 data), Expressive + Self-Efficacy (1 data), and Expressive + Inspirational Motivation (1 data). These distribution patterns indicate that motivational strategies and illocutionary force interact systematically to shape the speaker's persuasive intention and influence the audience's emotional and cognitive responses.

4.1 Representative + Emotional Appeal

06:15

"On the morning of the stroke, I woke up to a pounding pain behind my left eye."

This utterance is categorized as a representative illocutionary act because it reports a direct physical experience of the speaker. The vivid phrase "pounding pain" heightens the emotional weight of the narration by making the discomfort feel immediate and tangible for the audience. This description does not merely relay medical symptoms but intentionally draws listeners into the urgency and intensity of the moment. The emotional appeal emerges through sensory detail that allows the audience to mentally simulate the experience and feel an empathetic response. According to Nabi (2002), affective responses play a central role in persuasion, as emotional cues influence how messages are interpreted and internalized. In this case, the detailed description of pain allows the audience to mentally simulate the speaker's experience, thereby increasing emotional involvement and empathetic response.

4.2 Representative + Inspirational Motivation

10:38

"How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?"

This utterance is representative in that it reflects the speaker's genuine recognition of the rare situation she found herself in during the stroke. At the same time, it carries inspirational motivation by reframing a traumatic and life-threatening incident as a moment of unique opportunity. The rhetorical question encourages listeners to pause and see the situation through a more hopeful perspective, shifting from fear to curiosity. This linguistic strategy helps redefine adversity as something potentially meaningful, which strengthens motivational impact. Recent studies highlight that rhetorical questions increase cognitive engagement and encourage audiences to reconsider negative events through a more empowering lens (Sawin & Brewer, 2023). Through this utterance, the speaker motivates listeners to adopt a perspective that values growth even in extreme hardship.

4.3 Representative + Cognitive Reframing

04:59

"Our left hemisphere is all about the past, and it's all about the future."

This statement functions as a representative act because it provides an informational explanation of brain functions based on the speaker's professional background. However, it simultaneously serves as cognitive reframing by guiding the audience to reinterpret how the brain shapes perception of time. By contrasting the left hemisphere's temporal focus with the right hemisphere's present-moment awareness, the speaker helps listeners reconsider how conscious experience is structured. This reinterpretation invites the audience to see the brain not only as an organ but as a system influencing emotional and cognitive orientation. Gross (2013) explains that reframing involves shifting one's understanding to produce a different emotional outcome. Here, the speaker uses scientific explanation to build an

accessible mental shift that helps listeners rethink their own patterns of attention, thought, and self-awareness.

4.4 Representative + Self-Efficacy

12:28

"So that as I would come back to normal reality, I'd be able to tell, 'Yes, I've already dialed that number.'"

The speaker's real-time experience throughout her neurological disability is described in this utterance, making it a representative act. Additionally, it demonstrates self-efficacy, as evidenced by her assurance in monitoring her behaviour despite cognitive difficulties. The statement "I'd be able to tell" demonstrates an internal belief in her own operational capability, which is a crucial component of self-efficacy, which is defined as people's judgments of their capacity to plan and carry out the actions necessary to manage circumstances (Schunk & Dibenedetto, 2019). The statement conveys psychological resilience and a sense of personal agency even in times of crisis by highlighting her capacity to keep an eye on and validate her activities.

4.5 Representative + Encouragement

16:08

"And it motivated me to recover."

This utterance is representative because it directly expresses the speaker's emotional and motivational state during recovery. It fits the Encouragement category because the speaker frames her own experience as an example of determination that the audience can learn from. By stating that she was motivated to recover, she presents personal progress not merely as an outcome, but as an active, hopeful process. Such statements create a narrative of possibility for listeners who may be facing challenges of their own. Research on motivational communication shows that messages emphasizing personal drive and emotional momentum increase listener engagement and perceived hopefulness (Nabi, 2021). The utterance acts as a simple yet powerful reminder that recovery begins with internal motivation, encouraging the audience to trust in the value of their own emotional strength.

4.6 Directive + Encouragement

16:44

"And we have the power to choose, moment by moment, who and how we want to be in the world."

This utterance falls under the Directive category because the speaker implicitly instructs and guides the audience toward adopting a particular mindset by recognizing their agency in shaping their identity and behaviour. The directive force appears through the suggestion that individuals should acknowledge their capacity for intentional choice. At the same time, the statement conveys Encouragement, as it reassures the audience that personal transformation is possible and within their control. Encouragement in motivational communication often highlights autonomy and self-direction, which helps strengthen listeners' confidence. Recent studies on motivational language demonstrate that messages

emphasizing choice and autonomy enhance psychological empowerment and perceived control (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Similarly, self-determination research shows that affirming agency can elevate motivation and foster positive behavioral change (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Therefore, this utterance exemplifies directive encouragement by guiding the audience while simultaneously supporting their sense of personal capability.

4.7 Directive + Inspirational Motivation

09:24

"Imagine what it would be like to be totally disconnected from your brain chatter that connects you to the external world."

Beginning with the verb "Imagine", this utterance is clearly Directive, inviting the audience to mentally simulate an alternative reality. It also provides Inspirational Motivation, encouraging listeners to broaden their perspective and consider an extraordinary cognitive state. Inspirational motivation works by invoking vivid imagery and emotional elevation, elements that help audiences explore new meanings and aspirational ideas (Nabi & Myrick, 2019). Here, the speaker guides the audience into an imaginative space where they can reflect on consciousness, silence, and inner peace, inspiring a deeper appreciation of mental awareness.

4.8 Directive + Self-Efficacy

11:01

"So I've got to call help. I've got to call work."

The statement reflects an urgent need for immediate action, which aligns with the characteristics of a Directive act, as it directs behavior even though it is addressed to the self. The repetition of the phrase *"I've got to"* emphasizes a strong sense of obligation and urgency, reinforcing the directive force within the utterance. At the same time, the statement demonstrates Self-Efficacy, as it reflects the speaker's belief in her ability to perform necessary actions despite severe cognitive disruption from the stroke. Within Social Cognitive Theory, articulating intended actions is considered a form of self-regulation that supports goal-directed behavior and enhances perceived control in difficult situations. Schunk & Dibenedetto (2019) argue that individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to organize their actions more effectively and persist even under pressure, as reflected in the speaker's effort to seek help and maintain responsibility.

4.9 Expressive + Emotional Appeal

10:54

"I don't have time for a stroke!"

The expression conveys a spontaneous emotional reaction, which places it within the category of expressive acts, as it reflects the speaker's immediate feelings of shock, frustration, and disbelief about the situation. The exclamatory form and informal tone intensify the emotional force of the statement, making the experience feel more vivid and relatable to the audience. At the same time, the utterance functions as an Emotional Appeal, as it invites listeners to empathize with the speaker's crisis. By framing the situation in a

slightly ironic and urgent way, the speaker creates a moment that is both emotionally engaging and memorable. Emotional expressions like this are known to enhance audience involvement because they trigger affective responses that shape how messages are processed and understood (Nabi & Myrick, 2019). Therefore, the statement not only reflects personal emotion but also strategically draws the audience into the speaker's experience.

4.10 Expressive + Self-Efficacy

16:58

"I am the life-force power of the universe."

The statement reflects an expressive act because it conveys the speaker's deep emotional realization and sense of spiritual connection following the stroke experience. At the same time, the utterance strengthens Self-Efficacy by expressing inner strength, confidence, and personal empowerment. The phrase "I am the life-force power of the universe" symbolizes the speaker's belief in her own existence and capability to continue living despite the traumatic experience. According to Bandura (1997), verbal expressions affirming personal agency can reinforce perceptions of capability and resilience. Therefore, the statement functions both as emotional expression and as reinforcement of the speaker's psychological strength.

4.11 Expressive + Inspirational Motivation

10:38

"This is so cool!"

The utterance is expressive, conveying excitement and delight during an otherwise frightening neurological episode. The playful tone adds a layer of humor, making the moment feel more human and accessible. Humor supports inspirational motivation by allowing the audience to engage positively with complex and abstract experiences. Meyer (2015) notes that humor increases message receptivity and reduces psychological resistance. The speaker's enthusiastic response reframes the situation as one filled with awe rather than fear, inspiring the audience to adopt a more open and curious attitude toward unexpected experiences.

5. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of 139 utterances drawn from Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's TED Talk, this study concludes that a strategic interplay between illocutionary acts and motivational functions constitutes the core of the speech's persuasive power. Representative acts dominate the discourse because the speaker foregrounds detailed narration to construct an experiential reality and guide the audience's understanding. Emotional Appeal emerges as the strongest motivational function, indicating that the persuasive force of the narrative relies not only on factual description but also on emotional engagement that evokes empathy, attention, and identification. These patterns show that linguistic choices in motivational speeches operate simultaneously as communicative actions and motivational strategies. Theoretically, this study contributes to pragmatic scholarship by demonstrating that illocutionary acts function beyond their traditional action-performing role, they also serve as structured motivational mechanisms capable of shaping audience cognition and

emotional involvement. The findings also enrich motivational discourse studies by showing that Emotional Appeal is not merely an aesthetic element but also a functional device that reinforces narrative persuasion in autobiographical storytelling. In the context of public speaking research, the study highlights how TED Talk speakers integrate descriptive narration with motivational framing to construct impactful and relatable messages. Practically, the findings offer insights for public speakers, educators, and communicators regarding the importance of aligning speech acts with motivational intent to enhance clarity, engagement, and persuasive impact. Finally, future research may explore how these linguistic–motivational patterns differ across genres, such as classroom discourse, political speeches, or religious sermons, across TED speakers with different backgrounds, or through multimodal analysis that incorporates gestures, voice, and visuals to provide a more comprehensive understanding of motivational communication.

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