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A Life in Style
In Honour of Donna R. Miller

edited by **ANTONELLA LUPORINI, MARINA MANFREDI, MONICA TURCI, JANE HELEN JOHNSON, SABRINA FUSARI, CINZIA BEVITORI**

UNIVERSITÀ

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Table of contents

Ways of meaning, ways of acting
Exploring identity and intersubjective positioning in TED Talks on climate change[1]

Cinzia Bevitori

> In itself the power of language is simply a potential; its semiotic energy requires the ideological spur of the speaker to be activated; the active principle is always the socially positioned speaker.
>
> (Hasan 2003, p. 447)

> Any step towards the truth (as linguists strive to define it) is a step away from anything that is computationally straightforward.
>
> (Kilgarriff 1977, p. 144)

1. Introduction

This chapter examines some linguistic and discursive resources of inter-subjective positioning and identity in a specialised corpus of TED Talks on climate change. It combines corpus methods and techniques with the theoretical and analytical tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and the appraisal system, concerned with how evaluative language is employed by speakers/writers to align readers along shared values and attitudes (Martin, White 2005). This represents one of Miller's well-established research areas, strategically and synergically bringing together different, apparently incompatible, theoretical and methodological strands, which has been largely inspirational for a younger generation of scholars striving to cross boundaries in their work. However, as Miller has brilliantly shown in her many valuable contributions to the field, crossing methodological, as well as theoretical, boundaries means constantly facing inevitable "hurdles" (Miller 2016a). These have been reflexively addressed by Miller throughout her scholarly career; indeed, our shared task in assessing the strengths and

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 29th ESFL Conference, University of Leira (Portugal), 3-5 July 2019.

shortcomings of corpus-assisted meaning analysis to a variety of registers (Miller *et al*. 2014, Bayley, Bevitori 2016, Bartlett 2021b) has long served as a challenging and vital guiding principle to advance our research goals.

In this exceptionally small-scale investigation, I build on my longstanding interest in media representation(s) of climate change and evaluative stance to look into language resources acting to construe affiliation and attitudinal alignment with the "putative" addressee (White 2021). The article provides an exploratory case study that examines a purpose-built, specialised corpus of TED Talks on the issue of climate change. While previous work on this area of inquiry has mostly focused on some rhetorical and linguistic features concerning science popularisation (e.g., Caliendo 2012, Sugimoto *et al*. 2013, Scotto Di Carlo 2014), I argue that the dissemination of scientific knowledge by experts to the lay public in this specific context not only depends on registerial features of the genre but is also shaped by the intersubjective/dialogistic role played by the speaker in aligning and affiliating with communities (Drasoevan, Tagg 2015, Don 2019).

The aim of the paper is thus to investigate how TED speakers negotiate meaning with their audience as regards the topic at issue, how language resources contribute to that negotiation, what kind of identity is enacted, and for what purpose(s).

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 will briefly introduce TED talks in terms of register. Section 3 describes the corpus, as well as the methodological and theoretical framework. Section 4 reports some selected findings and Section 5 briefly concludes.

2. TED Talks as a "displaced" register and "affinity" space

TED (an acronym standing for *Technology, Entertainment, Design*) talks are socially-contextualised discourses aimed at "spread[ing] ideas"[2] and knowledge by inspiring, or better "enlightening", a wide audience in a supportive environment. While the talks are first delivered as live events, they are also recorded and disseminated to online audiences through the TED website, and eventually through other social platforms. Although not explicitly intended to create "echo chambers", the recontextualisation and remedia-

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2. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the notion of register (i.e., recurrent configurations of linguistic choices across the three metafunctions) – a key concept within SFL theory (e.g., Halliday 1978); for a discussion of hybridity in a variety of registers from an SFL perspective, cf. Miller, Bayley (eds.) (2016).

tion of knowledge in this digital environment (Bevitori, Russo 2023) contribute to aligning and affiliating with online communities and their existing preferences and beliefs. Similarly to academic lectures (cf. Johnson, this volume), TED speakers convey judgement, express attitudes, and guide the audience towards preferred interpretations and world views.

Yet, despite some similarities, their purpose is different. While lectures aim to educate, the talks aim to share ideas and engage the audience, thus "breach[ing] typical 'scientist-mediator-audience' triangularization" (Scotto di Carlo 2014, p. 6). Although speakers establish themselves and the audience as members of a particular community, this is not a disciplinary one, but one of "affinity" – shared interests, values, and common goals. Indeed, the talks may be regarded as a multimodal and multiliteracy affinity space (Gee 2004), triggering active participation and engagement on the ted-com platform through "community-building functionalities" (Drasoevan, Tagg 2015, p. 1).

While their educational and "infotainment" communicative purpose is seemingly one of the main goals as defined by rules and regulations published on the TED platform[3], the talks may be more aptly defined as a "performance" that "'participates' in several genres and continuously 'reconstitutes' them" (Threadgold 1989, quoted in Isaac 2016, p. 133). Hence, as a "hybrid" and "permeable" (Hasan 2016, Matthiessen, Teruya 2016) register at the crossroads between professional and educational discourses, with an "entertaining" slant, they can be regarded as an instance of "displaced" registers (Hasan 2015, in Lukin 2018, p. 113), i.e., registers in which the addressee is unknown, mass and virtual. Moreover, they show features of registerial "indeterminacy" (Matthiessen, Teruya 2016); i.e., a mixture of registers, blending and blurring ways to engage the audience by recreating a personal, and I would claim, political narrative, which is not dissimilar from that of political advertising (Duranti 2006, Silverstein 2011).

3. Corpus, methods and theoretical framework

For the purpose of this study, the analysis will focus on a small, yet highly specialised corpus (CC-TED corpus) containing 14 transcribed talks on the topic of climate change, amounting to approximately 35,000 running words. Most of the speeches included in the corpus are among those delivered at TED events in the period 2008-2018, and purposefully selected

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3. Cf. https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/tedx-rules.

by TED Educators to "illuminate the nature and scale of current-day climate science, policy and ethics"[4]. Methodologically and theoretically, this paper combines quantitative and qualitative dimensions of investigation in a "symbiotic and synergistic relationship" (Halliday 2006, p. 293, Miller 2016a, p. 211). On the quantitative/qualitative paradigm, as Halliday (2005, p. 76, cf. also Bevitori 2014, p. 607) crucially posits:

> Qualitatively, there will be certain key discourses which carry special value, either intrinsically, because they somehow distil the semiotic essence of their moment in space-time, or extrinsically because they played a critical part in the ongoing material events [...]. Quantitatively, on the other hand, dominant semiotic motifs emerge more or less gradually over time; to access and evaluate these one needs a corpus of contextualized discourses that can be examined and interpreted as a whole.

As in much corpus-assisted research, the specialised corpus is used as an "echo-chamber" (Thompson, Hunston 2006, p. 13, Miller *et al.* 2014, Miller 2016a) to focus on "circumscribed, apparently preferred, and so, perhaps, 'probabilistic' patterns of actualized meaning potential" (Miller, Johnson 2009a, pp. 39-40, cf. also Halliday 1990, 1993), bearing in mind benefits and constraints (Miller *et al.* 2014), and with the proviso that although some "manifestations of meaning are measurable, measurability is not an essential property of meaning" (Halliday 2013 [2005], p. 197).

4. Findings and discussion

Due to space constraints, the analysis will focus on some select lexical choices and pronominal choices to shed some light on the speakers' identity in the construction of their intersubjective positioning.

4.1. *Sensing: "knowing" and "seeing"*

Let me begin with a passage from the incipit of a TED talk by the very influential climate scientist, James Hansen, given at one main TED event a few years ago[5]:

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4. https://www.ted.com/read/ted-studies/environmental-studies.
5. Throughout this chapter, italics were added by the author to emphasise key elements in the examples and related discussion.

1. What do *I know that would cause me, a reticent, Midwestern scientist, to get myself* arrested in front of the White House protesting? And what would you do if *you knew* what *I know*? Let's start with how I got to this point. (J. Hansen, *Why I must speak about the climate*, 2012)

To begin with, the why-question in the title, followed by the use of first person and modal expressing meanings of obligation/necessity ("Why I must"), acts to position the addressee to accept an explanation/ justification of the urgency to deal with the topic at issue. Similarly, the "entertaining" function of the expository question – "What" – acting as a key strategy of dialogic involvement, functions to achieve solidarity by bringing the audience closer to the speaker's concerns. More interestingly, through strategies of repetition and parallelism of the senser+process of cognition ("I know"), the speaker construes himself as involved in this conscious processing. At the same time, though, the verbal phrase realises meanings of epistemic modality, through which the speaker construes a credible and reliable authorial stance. This is also reinforced by the adjective "reticent" ("*reticent*, Midwestern scientist"), as a token value of inscribed judgement: social esteem.

Though not the focus of this study, the multimodal ensemble of the event showing the scientist being arrested by the police on the wide screen behind him acts to reinforce the credibility and reliability of the speaker[6]. Visual and linguistic modes jointly perform a main referential strategy providing evidence and acting as a testimonial in distinct ways. By sharing his personal and political story, the climate scientist not only rhetorically enacts the double social role of the expert and storyteller but he also manages to establish trustworthiness at different levels.

The passage provides many insights for detecting stance and intersubjectivity for paths worth exploring further. In light of this, and very succinctly, in the spirit of corpus-assisted meaning analysis, a cursory look at occurrences of the mental Process of cognition *know* reveals that mental processes are the most frequent type in the corpus (Figure 1).

The item "know" appears among the top 20 words in the wordlist and is the second-ranked most frequent mental process with a relative frequency of 0.17 per thousand tokens, only preceded by "think" (r.f. 0.18). Moreover, a cursory look at the top ten collocates (Table 1) shows that "know" tends

6. At the time the head of NASA Institute, Hansen was one of the over 500 people peacefully protesting against the harvesting of fossil fuels at the White House in August 2011.
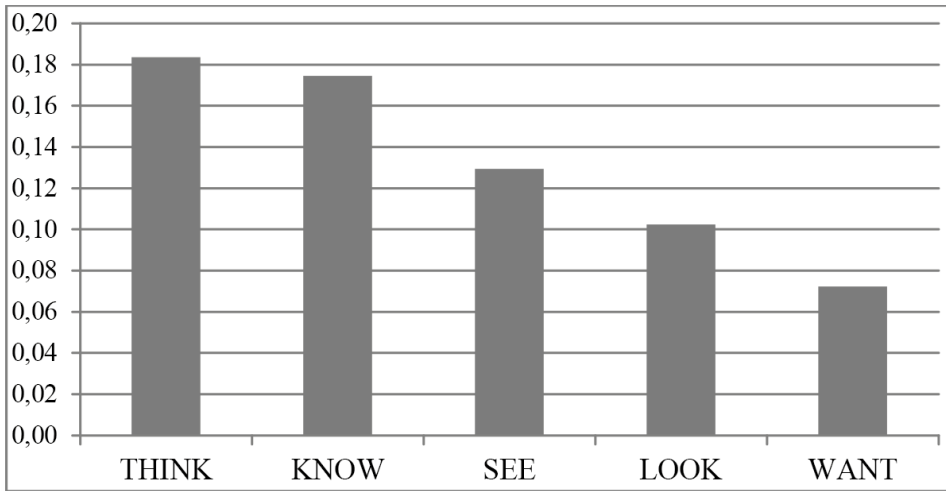
Figure 1. *Top 30 mental processes in the corpus (relative frequency per thousand of words).*

to be co-selected in patterns of negative polarity, personal pronouns "you", "we" and "I", and the auxiliary "Do"[7].

As Table 1 shows, the item "n't" as a marker of engagement (contracting: denial) emerges as a strong collocate of the word "know", functioning as a key rhetorical device. Alongside other resources, this is typically found in the interrogative mood, negative polarity, which coupled with the first person pronoun plural, "we", construe the audience as axiologically aligned to accept that knowledge.

Extract 2 illustrates this:

2. But *don't we already know* what we need to know about greenhouse gases? Why do we need to study this anymore? *Don't we already know* how they affect temperatures? *Don't we already know* the consequences of a changing climate on our settled civilization? (L. Hotz, *Inside an Antarctic time machine*, 2010)

Patterns of co-selection are indicative of typical strategies exploited by TED speakers in aligning the audience by raising awareness of the climate crisis and fostering communal ways of acting (Table 2).

7. The capitalised word indicates the first word in the sentence; in the case of "Do", this is suggestive of the interrogative mood.

Table 1. *Top 10 word collocates of "know" in TED-CC corpus.*

	Freq	T-score	MI
n't	15	3.815	6.084
You	9	2.972	6.762
do	13	3.516	5.342
you	14	3.633	5.117
Do	3	1.718	6.969
already	3	1.702	5.862
We	6	2.353	4.669
I	11	3.129	4.147
as	6	2.325	4.303
we	17	3.852	3.928
if	3	1.635	4.161

Table 2. *Sample of concordances of "know".*

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science. The fact is that we simply don't   know   when the warming that we create will be ut
  hey affect temperatures? Don't we already   know   the consequences of a changing climate on
 d to study this anymore? Don't we already   know   how they affect temperatures? Don't we alr
 But don't we already know what we need to   know   about greenhouse gases? Why do we need to
 he eyes turned to me. (Laughter) I didn't   know   what to say. Kleiner's second law is, "The
 consumer behavior because consumers don't   know   how much this stuff costs. Do you know? Do
 nerated to drive here or fly here? I don't  know,   and I should. Those of us who care about
 out cutting emissions. But we don't really  know   how quickly we have to cut them. There's a
 e moral hazard problem, and I don't really  know   how we can best avoid the moral hazard. I
 e enough, what are we going to do? I don't  know.   Everyone here cares about changing the wo
 t of their scrutiny. But don't we already   know   what we need to know about greenhouse gase
 house gases are rising too. What we don't   know   is the exact, precise, immediate impact of
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It should be noted that the interpersonal conditional clause [*irrealis*] of the "if" + "knew" in both the incipit and extract 3 is another recurrent structural pattern:

3.   *Do you know? Do you know* how much CO_2 you generated to drive here or fly here?
     I don't know, and I should. Those of us who care about all this would act better *if we knew* what the real costs were. But as long as we pretend

that CO2 is free, as long as these uses are nearly invisible, how can we expect change? (J. Doerr, *Salvation (and profit) in Greentech*, 2007)

If mental processes of cognition are a very frequent resource through which the speaker negotiates his/her expert identity, the mental process of perception, "see" is the third most frequently occurring mental process in our material with a relative frequency of 0.13 per thousand tokens. Extract 4, for example, shows that through processes of perceptive sensing ("see" but also "touch", "hear", "feel"), the speaker positions the audience to sense the reality of climate change here and now:

4.   Ice has another meaning. Ice is the canary in the global coal mine. It's the place where *we can see* and touch and hear and feel climate change in action. (J. Balog, *Time-lapse proof of extreme ice loss,* 2009)

While the scientific evidence of the climate crisis is frequently perceived as abstract, and somehow distant, which is why it is often posited as one of the difficulties in raising interest and concern (Gustafson *et al.* 2020), by making changes visible to the audience through his personal story, the speaker acts to make the phenomenon more concrete. By so doing, he acts to recreate a context in which the spatial environment becomes an active element that shapes the narrative and remoulds the nature of social interactions between speaker and addressees and their affective bonds.

In the following section, the construal of speaker and addressee identity will be examined though a brief investigation of pronouns.

4.2. *Tracking identity through keywords: pronominal choices*

As a heuristic tool measuring the statistical salience of words in comparison to larger, multigeneric or domain-specific corpora, the analysis of keywords may be relevant for this study as it can provide a different way into the data. Technically, keywords are words occurring more frequently than in a general reference corpus. Here I make use of three different reference corpora available in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff 2014): the multigeneric British National Corpus (BNC), the register-specific British Academic Spoken English (BASE), and a larger reference corpus of TED transcripts (Table 3). The use of different reference corpora provides different angles, orienting the analysis in empirical terms and facilitating the interpretation of data across different contexts.

Table 3. *Top 15 keywords across corpora.*

	TED-CC vs. BNC			TED-CC vs. BASE			TED-CC vs. TED		
	Term	Score	Freq	Term	Score	Freq	Term	Score	Freq
1	climate	4.89	155	I	5.1	337	climate	4.51	155
2	we	4.86	734	climate	4.85	155	ice	2.81	81
3	our	3.12	181	ice	3.05	81	emission	2.67	68
4	change	3.11	152	our	2.9	181	change	2.59	152
5	ice	3	81	emission	2.7	68	energy	2.29	77
6	world	2.87	116	energy	2.67	77	CO_2	2.09	42
7	energy	2.72	77	change	2.62	152	planet	2.03	62
8	emission	2.71	68	us	2.56	60	earth	1.84	40
9	planet	2.56	62	year	2.54	161	global	1.75	43
10	percent	2.37	55	planet	2.52	62	atmosphere	1.71	31
11	this	2.18	384	me	2.48	57	warming	1.69	29
12	about	2.16	187	percent	2.42	55	year	1.69	161
13	year	2.13	161	world	2.33	116	temperature	1.66	30
14	CO_2	2.09	42	CO_2	2.09	42	greenhouse	1.64	26
15	global	2.06	43	earth	2.04	40	gas	1.63	30

A cursory analysis shows that terms related to climate change, or its "aboutness", are consistent across the three corpora (e.g., "emissions", "energy", "CO2", "planet", "Earth", "temperatures"). Yet, pronominal choice and self-positioning strategies are revealing in terms of interpersonal functionalities, or intersubjective stance, within this domain of analysis.

While the first person plural "we" emerges as a top keyword in our corpus as compared to the BNC, the first person pronoun singular "I" is ranked first when compared to BASE. This finding was somehow unexpected as some previous research has highlighted the use of first person pronouns as a powerful device to establish identity and authority in academic/educational settings (e.g., Hyland, Jiang 2017). Hence, what it suggests is a more personalised intersubjective, authorial voice in TED talks compared to academic lectures.

However, on close inspections, our data reveal that the first person pronoun tends to co-occur with expanding/contracting resources through patterns of denial/counter-expectancy ("I am not"/"but") in over 30% of all instances:

5.   Now *I'm not* a scientist, *but* I was accompanying a remarkable scientific team from the University of South Florida who have been tracking the travels of BP's oil in the Gulf of Mexico. (N. Klein, *Addicted to Risk*, 2010)

6.   Now, *I am not* an explorer. *I'm not* an environmentalist. *I'm actually* just a survivor, and these photographs that I'm showing you here are dangerous. They are the ice melt of the South and North Poles. And ladies and gentlemen, we need to listen to what these places are telling us. (R. Swan, *Let's save the last pristine continent*, 2014)

As discussed in previous work (cf. Bayley, Bevitori 2016, p. 241), this is a powerful feature of persuasive discourse, typically occurring in institutional and political settings. In the extracts above, by disclaiming his/her expert, authoritative voice/identity, the speaker acts to build empathy and engage with the audience, inviting them to an emotional response. It is more than simple facts and data. It is more about aligning and affiliating the audience in communal distinct ways.

5. Conclusion

The study has highlighted preferred ways through which TED speakers construct their intersubjective stance within this specialised domain of analysis. Unlike academic lectures, where the focus is on rhetorical strategies typically used to help students acquire and practice discipline-specific literacy, and unlike infotainment, where the entertaining live performance incorporates (political) information, their inherent registerial hybridity, alongside mechanisms of dialogistic engagement, point to a multifarious, complex dynamics through which meanings are negotiated. By enacting a multiplicity of roles and addressing a multiplicity of audiences, the talks provide an exceptionally persuasive platform to engage people in social and political change processes.

Appendix: CC-TED corpus

Speaker	Title
Lee Hotz	Inside an Antarctic time machine
James Balog	Time-lapse proof of extreme ice loss
James Hansen	Why I must speak out about climate change
Alan Gore	New thinking on the climate crisis
Vicki Arroyo	Let's prepare for our new climate
Naomi Klein	Addicted to Risk
Johan Rockstrom	Let the environment guide our development
Mary Robinson	Why Climate Change is a threat to human rights
David Keith	A critical look at geoengineering against climate change
Alice Bow-Larkin	Climate change is happening. Here's how we adapt
Nicolas Stern	The state of the climate – and what we might do about it
Rachel Pike	The science behind a climate headline
John Doerr	Salvation (and profit) in Greentech
Robert Swan	Let's save the last pristine continent

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Acknowledgements

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