The TED Factor

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Abstract

In this chapter, we will discuss the technology, entertainment, design (TED) phenomenon and consider which aspects of TED presentations are most applicable to academic conference CPs and why. We will also introduce the persuasion, information, entertainment (PIE) formula for oral presentations and consider how the balance between each of the three dimensions might change according to the speech genre.

Recently, a number of commercial books have appeared on the market claiming to provide readers with the secrets behind the very successful 'TED Talks' series. TED Curator Chris Anderson's '*TED Talks*' ranked number 2 in sales in Amazon.com category of Business Communication sales in late 2016, as well as third in the category of public speaking, while Carmine Gallo's '*Talk Like Ted,'* although published in 2014, ranked second in sales among public-speaking books at the same time. There is little doubt that the TED series has served as a successful communicative bridge between academics (although many TED speakers are not academics per se), skilled professionals, and the intelligent layman. As a result, novice academic researchers may be inclined to turn to TED as a model for honing their presentation skills.

Very few would argue that an ability to speak publicly at the level of a TED presentation would be a bad thing, but it might not, in many cases, be a realistic or even an appropriate approach. Unrealistic, in that the majority of English speakers in the world are NNESs, and non-native speakers of any language face numerous hurdles when trying to partake in prestigious discourse community events, such as academic and professional conferences. While it is true that many TED speakers are also NNESs, most have already developed an international cachet in their field, ensuring a knowledgeable and generally sympathetic audience; these are also speakers who have spent much of their professional lives working within international environments where English is used as a lingua franca (ELF).

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For the average academic/professional working in a sheltered environment and suddenly being thrust into a prestigious, pressure-filled international conference setting, the task of appealing to an audience often made up of peer specialists is inherently fraught with difficulties. These difficulties are often magnified for NNESs, who may have to deal with the added dimension of a lack of English proficiency.

These hurdles, however, are not limited to NNESs. Novice academics and young researchers from all linguistic backgrounds are often ill-equipped to deal with the linguistic expectations and standards of their particular discourse community when it comes to distinctive genres such as academic international conferences. The standards and norms of interaction at a conference are not the same as those found in the classroom, the laboratory, or the research center. The conference atmosphere can be intimidating, particularly for those who are expected by their superiors and/or advisors to take an active role in the proceedings and partake in a productive manner. All this is quite distinct from the TED approach, in which speakers are selected and coached prior to filming.

Further, adopting the TED approach might be considered inappropriate in that the environment of the standard academic/professional conference speaker giving a short free paper/parallel session presentation is far removed from the often elaborate stage prepared for the celebrated, established TED presenter. While conference plenary and keynote speeches may share both production and discourse similarities to TED presentations, the average free paper session does not. Performing a TED-styled routine at the Korean Annual Congress of Neurosurgeons, for example, would likely be viewed as incongruous as playing a tuba in an African percussion troupe. The norms of spoken interaction utilized in the genre of international academic conferences are, to some extent, codified as a distinct and identifiable genre, including multiple sub-genres, each with their own standards constraining what is said, as well as how and when it can or should be stated. As we shall see, the constraints at international academic conferences, while still allowing for the dynamic and flexible, involve greater formal constrictions. This book will explore some of those norms and constrictions and explain their purpose or role in furthering academic conference discourse in later sections.

TED's invited speakers come from all fields and are given near carte blanche to attract and appeal to their (very wide) audiences. Production values are high because performances are managed by specialists. Even with the recent expansion to more localized TED presentations, the TED presenter is still invariably already an expert in a field and/or has a story deemed significant enough to perform 'naked' (meaning he/she is not placed behind a podium or computer table) in front of an audience. While TED presentations may share with conference FP/PS CPs the quality of being extemporaneous (as opposed to impromptu or fully scripted speech), the surrounding environment and community expectations as to how these events should be managed are quite distinct.

Readers may also have noted that many TED presentations are not as dependent upon accompanying visual displays, whether they are PowerPoint, Prezi, or otherwise typical academic CPs. The TED speaker typically focuses upon the

narrative of his/her speech and utilizes visuals only as a supplementary aid to the spoken mode, most frequently in the form of charts and graphs, as opposed to standard prose text. There is a storytelling mode at the heart of most TED presentations that does not entirely mesh with the research content focus that informs most academic CPs.

Besides TED-related or TED-inspired publications, one can also easily find a large number of commercial books dedicated to improving one's English presentation skills available both online and in bookshops. So then, how are those different from this one? For one thing, our focus is placed squarely upon *academic,* particularly *academic research,* presentations. Therefore, the very lucrative 'Effective Business Presentations' and popular 'Debating Skills' fields are not within the scope of this book.

Why not? Business and commercial presentations serve largely promotional purposes and are thus distinct from academic presentations in terms of the degree to which the quality of persuasiveness is integrated into the text. Now, while it is indubitably true that even the most detached scientific 'research report' will be more effective when some triangulation of a persuasion, information, entertainment (PIE) formula is utilized, the emphasis for academic research presenters will invariably lean toward the informative dimension over the persuasive, particularly given the differing audience expectations and differing communicative goals or purposes.

Debate, or even political, speeches will lean toward the persuasive dimension, with the purpose of the genre being to score points or otherwise defeat an opponent by, presumably, employing better debating tactics. These factors mark a crucial difference from the academic CP. This book aims to be sensitive to those differences and thus addresses the specific needs of the academic, particularly the research-focused, conference attendee.

This focus also distinguishes research/academic presentations and related discourses from *instructional* presentations of the in-house, 'How to Use the University Database' variety, which tend to be overwhelmingly informational (and often accompanied by a printed version of the slides). These are often informative to the point where almost all dialogic or narrative elements are willfully omitted.

3.1 'Public Speaking' Versus Conference Presentations (CPs)

It is important to distinguish between characteristics of academic CPs and the type of public speaking that is often addressed in guidebooks and in English classrooms, the kind in which students are preparing speeches for classroom assessment, debate contests, or even competitive English-speaking contests.

The primary difference is that academic CPs involve the screen and slides as the fundamental object of the audience's attention, reducing the physical performance of the speaker to the periphery. This involves a multimodal triangulation of

interaction between the text or graphics on the slides, the speaker, and the audience, in which the speaker serves as a type of intermediary between the written content of the slides and the interpretation of the text offered to the audience.

In traditional public speaking or in recitations and English-speaking contests, it is the speech alone that is conveyed to the audience, meaning that a number of different semiotic skills will be involved. While CPs are in many ways dialogic, with the presenter attempting to draw the audience into the presentation, speech contests and recitations are more monologic, with the speaker trying to gain the judges' favor for the sake of winning a prize.

The audiences too are of an entirely different constitution. The CP audience is made up of one's academic or professional peers, and the speech contestant's primary audience consists of judges or evaluators. The former serves as a medium for dispensing knowledge or good practices with the discourse community; the latter is a competition with winners and losers. The former therefore seeks how to most effectively convey the research or theory so that it will be understood and valued by peers; the latter is less concerned with conveying content and more concerned with adhering to criteria that the judges are likely to find appealing, regardless of the novelty or gravity of the contents. These will often include evaluative categories such as 'correct diction,' eye contact, or the effective use of reinforcing gestures. While not entirely outside the scope of concern for the academic presenter, these qualities are not as of primary importance in an academic CP.

Ventola (2002) notes that while most public-speaking guides deal with tenor, the notion of suiting one's language to the target audience, such guides spend very little time actually looking at the language itself, beyond, that is, some minimal advice regarding pronunciation. Analyzing the manner in which multimodal forms can be used via linguistic realizations to produce coherent and effective presentations is only a recent, and limited, phenomenon.

Thus, popular public-speaking guides are unlikely to be helpful for most NNES and novice CP speakers, who not only have to deal with the vagaries of speaking in front of an audience of peers, but who also must consider the linguistic coding which underpins their performance. Therefore, more needs to be discussed regarding the linguistic realizations which actually occur in academic conference settings than TED guides and other public-speaking self-help books have typically dealt with.

3.2 TED and Academic Conference Presentations—Convergence and Divergence

Conference presentations have always blurred the boundaries between written and spoken modes. Given the advent of PowerPoint slides as the standard medium of conference presentations, Myers (2000) talks of the 'tyranny of bulletization,' in which the author becomes an animator, and text becomes the star, with the presenter

as a support player. An overdependency on allowing the slides to 'do the work,' particularly in data-heavy research CPs, can actually have a negative impact on performance, particularly if the CP becomes mechanized and dehumanized. To explain how this might occur, let us once again look at where the features of TED presentations converge and diverge with academic research CPs.

As mentioned earlier, TED Talks have become an international phenomenon and, in many ways, have set the modern standard for what we think of as public speaking. Not surprisingly then, many novice conference presenters look to TED as a model of an effective, impactful presentation style. As mentioned earlier, the obvious question for novice NNESs hoping to hone their presentation skills is to what extent does TED serve as a realistic and effective model for academic researchers presenting in FP/PS CPs at international conferences, as opposed to established personalities or celebrities giving a talk within their chosen field?

Wallwork (2016), who compiled a comprehensive instruction guidebook to English academic CPs for NNESs, admits that while there is much to be admired in TED presentations, and adds that several benefits may be gleaned from watching them, argues that, '…the aim of TED presentations is to primarily to convey an interesting message to your audience,' (p. 15) which is distinct from the more informative, data-heavy research presentations that constitute most academic CPs. This often results in more slides being included in the latter (Rowley-Jolivet [1999], noted that academic CPs proceeded at an average of one slide per 50 s), plus a more narrow-ranging, genre-specific focus involving related 'insider' discourse. Furthermore, even those presenting in humanist fields, Wallwork notes, are not as likely to have as 'interesting stories' as TED speakers. Nor are they as likely to have the same multimodal production facilities, overseen by experienced professionals, at hand.

Academic CPs and other academic conference discourse, rather, are, '…semiotically established in academic/scientific discourse community,' (Ventola, 2002, p. 25). This implies that speakers simply do not have the same freedom to choose the organization or structure of their talks that is the hallmark of TED presenters. Genre and register norms limit choices for academic presenters. Musician/street performer Amanda Palmer's distinctive TED Talk delivered atop stacked milk crates would not conform to the expected presentation discourse norms at, say, the Annual Forum on ASEAN Policy Research Society.

Gallo (2014) in 'Talk Like TED' outlines nine principles of public speaking that are common to TED presenters and which are subsequently suggested to the reader in order to invigorate their own presentations (Table 3.1). Although Gallo uses more commercially appealing language for each chapter title (left column), the chapter topics are basically reducible to the gloss/paraphrase in the right column:

Of those 9 items listed above, I would argue that all except nos. 6 and 9 are crucial to *any* successful conference presentation, even if the field involves the densest, most narrowly specialized aspects of academic research. I will discuss many of the other factors listed above later in this book, but for the time being allow me to point out why humor (#6) and intimacy (for lack of a better term) (#9) are not as essential for performing academic CPs.

Table 3.1 Chapter titles from Gallo's 'Talk Like Ted,' Pan Macmillan, 2014, and topical glosses

'Talk Like TED' chapter titles:	Chapter topic focus:
1. Unleash the master within	Having a passion for your topic
2. Master the art of storytelling	Storytelling, or narrative, sense
3. Have a conversation	The presentation as conversation/dialogue
4. Teach me something new	The need for novelty
5. Deliver jaw-dropping moments	Highlighting impact moments
6. Lighten up	Humor and lightheartedness
7. Stick to the 18-minute rule	Keeping within the limited time format
8. Paint a mental picture with multisensory experiences	The balanced use of multimodal forms
9. Stay in your lane	Speaking from the heart

Humor is often listed in general public-speaking guides as a staple of effective presentations, a crucial ingredient in establishing a rapport with an audience. However, the degree of informality required in order to inject humor into a present is not usually consistent with the tenor of content-heavy free paper academic presentations. Webber (2005) notes that greater degrees of humor and other markers of informality are far more common in plenary or other featured presentations, these often performed by established personalities in the field, than within the time restrictions and narrow themes typical of standard FP/PS CPs. Wallwork (2016) suggests that being entertaining need not imply making people laugh and cautions against the use of humorous slides.

This corresponds to my own experiences as a presenter, audience member, and researcher at academic conferences. On several occasions, I observed nervous novice presenters beginning with an amusing anecdote or lighthearted banter, presumably to relax and establish rapport with the audience. Except for the most skillful presenters, this often produced the opposite result—many of the attempts came across as somewhat desperate, forced, or fairly obvious attempts at masking nerves, resulting in discomfort for the audience. Subsequent discussions with audience members indicate that this approach was also viewed as inappropriate by some, as many in attendance at such sessions had attended to gain research data and insight, not to indulge the presenter's witticisms. When humor *was* used successfully in FP/PS CPs, it tended to occur not in the opening section—the result of the speaker attempting to establish rapport—but further into the body of the CP, particularly in humanities CPs. Humor, it might be argued then, is best applied after the veracity of the speaker has been established.

Heart-to-heart appeals often elicited a similar response in the FP/PS sessions. Appeals to action based on an explicit pathos generated by the speaker tend to carry more weight within the humanities, but even there it can run the risk of being viewed by the audience as an advertisement, an exercise in self-indulgence, or as a personal emotional appeal at odds with the expected degree of sobriety and objectivity assumed to underpin academic research.

However, this is not to disparage or disqualify the notion of displaying a personal interest in the uptake of the research data, much less to discourage evidence of passion on behalf of the researcher/presenter. In fact, it is more or less given that any presentation should give consideration to maintaining a balance between the three central CP dimensions of persuasion, information, entertainment (often referred to as 'PIE'; see Fig. 3.1). None of these should be excluded from consideration from an academic presentation. The question is, rather, to what degree can or should they be balanced to maximize the impact of an academic presentation?

To address this question, the field and tenor of the presentation or speech event will be the governing factors. As we noted earlier, field refers to the academic topic area or domain being addressed. Research reports in the hard sciences will almost certainly be expected to lean more heavily toward the informative dimension, whereas CPs in the humanities will tend to necessitate an increase in the persuasive dimension. The type of presentation that might be generic in a more commercial conference, such as an appeal to tourists to visit a specific locale, would tend to include a greater entertainment factor to complement the other two.

The point that needs to be made here is that even the most heavily data-driven, evidence-based academic presentations should not ignore the entertainment dimension. After all, as we shall see, the sense of maintaining a 'research narrative' involving human agents constitutes a large part of what distinguishes CPs and other academic conference speech events from the less immediate, more detached mode of written research.

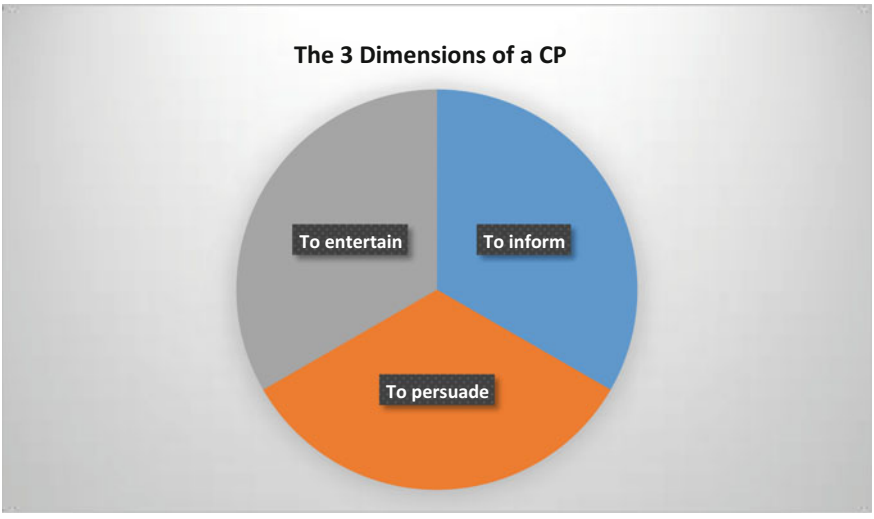

Fig. 3.1 PIE formula

In order to reinforce this point, allow me here to engage in a bit of metadiscourse. Astute readers will note that the 'voices' of this book are attempting to establish the same PIE formula. The triangulation of the three dimensions of tenor is evident even in the current paragraph. For example, opening a section with the directive phrase, 'allow me here to engage in…' as I did above, is probably not the type of discourse one would expect of a thoroughly academic research paper. However, I have used it here to add a persuasive element, further augmented by the direct appeal to the audience by the use of the term 'astute readers.'

The phrase 'the triangulation of the three dimensions of tenor,' on the other hand, is the more detached, objective voice of the academic paper, and thus represents the informative dimension. On top of that, this entire exercise in ironic metadiscourse presents a bit of a novelty item, holding some entertainment value (one would hope!). In short, this book is mirroring the dimensions one would hope for in a presentation.

Let me conclude this section with an anecdote. Recently, after performing an invited presentation about how to perform more effective English CPs to a group of Japanese obstetricians, I was mildly criticized in the follow-up discussion session on the grounds that in my presentation, I had, '*…performed with a lot of personality, mixed with anecdotes and humor, whereas we are required to do research presentations, where this is impossible*.' My response to this very valid point was that while anecdotes and more personalized voice are a part of the 'generic code' of doing a 1-hour specially invited presentation—something that I had pointed out in the presentation itself—but the same rules do not apply to the standard 10-min FP/PS session.

I added, however, that this does *not* mean that there should be *no* element of personal appeal for persuasion or nothing of entertainment value in the short FP/PS CP, leaving only the transfer of raw data. After all, since this research represents the fruits of the researchers' hard work it is presumably of some importance to the speaker, and thus it is imperative to inject some of one's self into the presentation in order to impart that research data or those findings more effectively. Tell your research story, as a narrative, like a novel, I said.

In short, although the proportions of each PIE component will almost certainly differ between my 1-hour special 'lecture' and a 10-min research FP/PS, this should never imply that the latter should be completely devoid of persuasive or entertaining elements. The trick for novice academic conference presenters, as this book will show, is to embed and maximize the impact of all three dimensions without mitigating or reducing the scientific/academic veracity or import of your data.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 3

1. Give two reasons why the TED presentation model might not always be suitable for academic conference presentations.
2. In what ways are business, debate, and instructional presentations distinct from academic conference research presentations?

3. List five ways in which academic CPs tend to differ from standardized debate or public-speaking contests.
4. What are the three essential dimensions of a CP?
5. To what extent do you think the balance between these dimensions should be in a scientific research FP/PS CP?
6. In what types of presentations are the use of humor or personal anecdotes most effective? How do you think they can be best applied to standard FP/PS presentations if at all?

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