

A Spoken Discourse Analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's Educational Speech Through Gee's Theory

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Abstract

This study analyzes Mark Zuckerberg's educational speech through the framework of Gee's Seven Building Tasks of language. The aim of this study is to discuss how language is used to construct meaning, ideas of learning, success, knowledge, and personal development in Zuckerberg's speech. The study uses qualitative approach and applies spoken discourse analysis to the chosen speech. The data of this study are taken from the transcript of Zuckerberg's 2017 Harvard Commencement speech analyzed by using Gee's Seven Building Tasks: Significance, Activities, Identities, Relationship, Politics, Connections, and Sign System Knowledge. The study examines particular words, expressions, and rhetorical strategies that shape audience's understanding of learning and success. Through this framework we can see that language plays an important role in building educational messages and social values in public speeches. This research provides a better understanding of how educational discourse shapes the idea of learning and success. It contributes to discourse analysis by showing that Gee's framework is useful for studying spoken educational texts and uncovering the ideologies and meanings expressed through the language.

Keywords: Spoken discourse analysis, educational discourse, Gee's Seven Building Tasks, Mark Zuckerberg, language and identity, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Language is an important tool of communication that allows people to express their ideas, share knowledge, and build relationships with others. Language is not only a system of words and rules, but also a social practice that helps people create meanings and represent their beliefs and values (Halliday, 1978). Because language plays an important role in society, many researchers study how it is used in different contexts to understand how meanings are constructed and communicated.

Discourse analysis is an important approach of studying language. It studies language beyond and how meaning is created in real social context (Paltridge, 2012). It also focuses on the relationship between language and society and how people use language to achieve different purposes (Johnstone Barbara, 2018)

A major area of discourse analysis is spoken discourse which focuses on language such as conversations, interviews, and speeches (Carter & McCarthy, 1997). In fact, speeches in general are important because they can inform and inspire people, especially educational speeches which often talk about learning, success and personal development. Through

educational speeches, researchers can understand how speakers use language to communicate ideas and values.

One of the well-known speeches is delivered by Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook co-founder and CEO of Meta Platforms, which discusses the importance of learning, achieving goals and innovation through effort and persistence. Because of these ideas, the speech is suitable for discourse analysis.

This study uses James Paul Gee's theory of the Seven Building Tasks of Language. According to Gee (2011), language is not only for communication but also for building significance, activities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge. This theory will help the researchers to understand how to use language, to construct meanings, and represent perspectives in particular to the world.

1.0 Research Objectives

To discuss how language constructs learning and learner's identity, and to analyze Mark Zuckerberg's speech and the linguistics and rhetorical strategies that are used in his speech by applying Gee's Seven Building Tasks.

1.1 Research Questions

- 1- How is the concept of learning constructed in Mark Zuckerberg's speech?
- 2- What are the linguistics and rhetorical strategies that are used?

2. Literature Review

2.0 Gee's Discourse Theory

James Paul Gee's theory is one of the most important theoretical frameworks in discourse analysis because it demonstrates language as a social practice which produces identities and social work. According to Gee, discourse analysis constructs meaning through "Building Tasks" which include identity, activities, relationship, and values. Previous studies refer that Gee's work in discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) discusses how language is building thought and social identities through different contexts.

Within educational context, the speaker communicates ideas, values, and ideologies through discourse, and presents himself as a "speaker" or "guide" and the audience as active learners. Despite the strength of this work in analyzing identity and meaning still some studies refer to the focus of the linguistic side without adequate attention to social structures which are produced by discourse. Ross Collin (2012) argued that Gee's theory is valuable for understanding identity and meaning in discourse. However, he believed that the theory gives less attention to the wider social and institutional conditions that shape discourse practices. Collin (2012) states that Gee's framework should be combined with genre theory and the study of power relations to explain how discourse is used in different contexts.

Despite these criticisms, many previous studies have applied discourse analysis to discuss public speeches from different perspectives. For example, Harutyunyan and Yernknyan (2024) analyzed Zuckerberg's speech, and found that he used different strategies such as storytelling, gratitude, humor, and praising. These strategies helped him to motivate the audience. The study also demonstrated that he used expressive, assertive, and directive speech to effect on the audience positively.

According to Jaroenkitboworn (2021) analyzed the connecting strategies in Mark Zuckerberg's speech using multimodal discourse analysis, and the results showed that Zuckerberg connected with the audience by sharing his personal experiences as an example, using quotations, and talking about his social issues. He also mentioned in his speech the ideas globalization and social responsibility and etc...

Another study by Sihura (2023) he analyzed using deixis in Zuckerberg's speech, and the study found five types of deixis such as: person, place, time, discourse, and social deixis, and the findings showed how these linguistic elements helped create connections between Zuckerberg, the audience, and the context of the speech.

Previous studies mainly focused on pragmatic strategies, multimodal elements, and deixis in Zuckerberg's speech. In contrast with this study that uses James Pual Gee's Seven Building Tasks. The study aims to analyze how the concept of learning is constructed in speech. Also, it examines how language helps create meaning, shape identities and relationships, values, and share knowledge in educational discourse.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on James Pual Gee's theory of Discourse Analysis. According to Gee (2014) language is a social practice and it is not only a means of communication, but it also constructs meaning, identities, relationships, values, and knowledge. Gee argues that speakers use language to perform different social functions and to shape the way people understand themselves and the world around them. The educational speech of Mark Zuckerberg was analyzed by Gee's Seven Building Tasks of language as main functions that language performs in discourse, they defined by Gee (2014) as follows:

- Significance is language used to make certain things important or less important.
- Activities mean that language helps people carry out activities or social practice
- Identities show how language used to create and present identities.
- Relationship is that language builds and maintains relationships between people.
- Politics discuss how language reflects power, status, and access to social goods such as respect, knowledge, or authority.
- Connections means language connects or disconnects ideas, events, and people.
- Sign Systems and Knowledge is that language gives value to certain ways of speaking, thinking, or knowing over things.

These building tasks help identify how Zuckerberg uses language to make certain ideas important, present learning, education, and innovation. Through this framework, the study examines how Zuckerberg constructs the concept of learning in his speech, and how his language contributes to the construction of educational messages and values such as innovation, continuous learning, solving problems, and personal growth. In addition, the framework helps to examine the linguistics and rhetorical strategies that are used in the speech. Linguistics strategies include the use of personal pronouns, repetition, and simple and clear language, to make the message accessible to the audience. While rhetorical strategies include storytelling, personal examples, direct address, motivational appeals and appeals to innovation and education. By applying Gee's theory, the study shows how these strategies work together as one tool to communicate ideas about learning and encouraging lifelong learning.

2.2 Research Gap

Although numerous studies have examined Mark Zuckerberg's speeches from linguistic, rhetorical, motivational, and educational perspectives, limited attention has been given to how the concept of learning is socially and ideologically constructed through discourse. In particular, there is a clear lack of research applying James Pual Gee's Building Tasks framework to investigate how language is used to construct learning, identities, relationships, values, and social meanings in educational speeches delivered by influential figures in the technology sector. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by employing Gee's discourse theory to analyze how learning is constructed and represented in Mark Zuckerberg's educational speech

and how the Building Tasks operate within the discourse to create particular meanings and perspectives about learning.

3. Methodology

In this study a qualitative research design is used, based on spoken discourse analysis to examine how learning is built in Mark Zuckerberg's educational discourse. Qualitative discourse analysis is appropriate because it examines language in its social context to understand how meaning, identities, and relationships are constructed in real-life situations (McLeod, 2024). The research is based on James Paul Gee's idea of the Seven Building Tasks of Language, which offers a systematic framework for analysing how speakers use language to accomplish social actions and construct particular views of the world.

The research is interpretive in nature, aiming to discover linguistics, rhetorical, and ideological meaning in discourse, instead of measuring variables quantitatively. This approach is well suited for exploring how language functions as social practice.

3.0 Research Design

This study follows a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach, with the focus on a single case analysis for publicly available discourse. This approach gives deeply discussion of the discourse features within its natural context. The discourse is treated as a socially context reflecting wider ideological and cultural meanings connected with education and technology in digital age. Linguists increasingly recognize that language research must extend beyond mere sentence and grammar analysis to encompass the structures, strategies, and processes of cognitively and socially contextualized text and speech of actual language users (Van & Teun, 2011).

3.1 Data collection

The data were collected from the video and transcript of Mark Zuckerberg's 2017 Harvard Commencement Speech entitled 'Mark Zuckerberg's commencement address at Harvard' and is taken from the Harvard Gazette (Harvard Gazette, 2017). It is 32.36 minutes long and contains 3566 words. However, the data that was analysed was taken from minute 11:20 to 14:10 which contains 358 words.

The researchers have watched the video and read the script many times to understand the meaning, analyze and identify the sentences and expressions that are related to Gee's seven building tasks theory.

3.2 Data Selection and Sampling

This study uses purposive sampling. The researchers focused on the parts of the speech that are related to the seven building tasks of Gee's theory, which are significance, activities identities, relationships, politics, connection, and sign system and knowledge. There were some sentences and expressions that were not relevant to the main idea of the study which were not included in the analyses.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the ethics of scientific research, and the data were taken from publicly available speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg. Therefore, taking permission from participants was not necessary. The study adopts a case-study approach. The selected speech is particularly suitable because it contains extensive discussion of learning, innovation, education, and social change, which are central themes of the research. The researchers used this data only for academic purposes and they ensured that the main content and meaning were represented accurately, and all the sources in the study were cited properly.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis included an iterative qualitative methodology that included repeated readings, coding, categorization, and interpretation.

The first stage contained familiarization with the transcript through repeated readings and reviewing the original video to understand the broader communicative context.

In the second stage, the transcript was coded. Segments of discourse reflecting educational meanings, persuasive strategies, or social positioning were identified.

The Third stage involved these the organization of these coded segments in accordance with Gee's Seven Building Tasks: Significance, Activities, Identities, Relationships, Politics, Connections, and Sign Systems and Knowledge. Each part was examined to determine how linguistics choices contributed to the construction of educational meanings.

During the fourth stage, interpretive analysis was utilized. Attention was given to lexical selection, pronoun use, modality, rhetorical questions, repetition, metaphor, and other discourse features that supported the construction of educational ideologies and values.

Finally, the findings were synthesized across the seven categories, developing an integrated interpretation of how the speech constructs learning and educational change. Direct quotations from the transcript were used to support the interpretation to ensure analytical transparency

4. Results

4.0 Significance

Gee argues that speakers use language to make some ideas seem more important than others. Here, Zuckerberg emphasizes that starting is the most important step in learning.

Zuckerberg repeats the expression *"have to"* multiple times, for example he said 'You just have to get started' which he frames as the essential requirement for success rather than expertise. He encourages people to act rather than waiting for perfection. Similarly, his statement: *'Ideas don't come out fully formed'* states that learning is a developmental process instead of a moment of perfection.

He argues that the thought of having a significant idea that will change your life come to you suddenly is not a reality, *"the idea of a single eureka moment is a dangerous lie"*

The contrast between the word *"begin"* and *"fully formed"* gives the idea the importance of rejecting the belief that successful innovators have the full knowledge from the outset.

The repetition of *"anyone working..."*, *"anyone taking..."* and *"anyone..."* shows increase of significance as well. Which universalizes the experience of struggle, portraying uncertainty as normal and not exceptional.

We can also see a similarity in the rhetorical questions used, such as: *"so what are we waiting for?"* shifting the audience's attention from reflecting to immediately acting.

Overall, significance is not given to innovation and intelligence but to persistence, experimentation and responsibility.

4.1 Activities

According to Gee, Activities is the language that encourages people to do particular social activities:

Zuckerberg constructs learning as an active process involving: *"beginning"*, *"experimenting"*, *"solving problems"*, *"collaborating"* and *"creating change"*.

The speech has constantly repeated dynamic material processes: *"build"*, *"begin"*, *"work"*, *"started"*, *"fix"*, *"modernizing"*, *"curing"* and *"installing"*.

These verbs portray the process of learning as a continuous participation and not a passive acquisition.

The statement: *"Ideas... become clear as you work on them"* presents knowledge as a construction of emerging actions reflecting experiential and constructivist views of learning. Moreover, Facebook itself functions as an experiential narrative. As Zuckerberg states, *"If I had to understand everything... I never would have started Facebook."*

Experimenting is also presented in *"Manufacturing and installing solar panels"*

The speech shows practical work helps solving environmental problems *"Asking volunteers to track their health data"*

This part encourages active participation and people learn by practicing and getting involved, not only by receiving.

The analysis of the speech shows that learning happens through action and experience rather than waiting for sudden inspiration or for absolute knowledge. Zuckerberg presents learning as an active process and describes activities such as starting projects, making mistakes and improving through experience.

4.2 Identities

Gee shows here how identities are constructed and created by language.

Zuckerberg's identity: *"if I had to know about connecting people before I got started, I never would have built Facebook"*. He shows himself as a learner who does not know anything when he started, and creates the identity of someone who risks and keeps learning.

Audience identity: *"Anyone working on a big vision will get called crazy"* The audience here is presented as future innovators and they can create change and not be afraid of criticism.

We can see that Zuckerberg's speech here creates the identity of confident learners and encourages them to make an effort and take risks for lifelong learning.

Zuckerberg refuses the idea that successful people are born as geniuses, but he creates the identity of learners as someone who improves themselves through hard work and continuous learning.

4.3 Relationships

In this task, Gee examines how speakers build relationships with the audience. We can see that relationships between the speaker and the audience are built through conversational language and inclusive discourse.

The opening address: *"Now it's our turn..."* which creates immediate solidarity.

Zuckerberg creates a sense of connection and close relationship between him and his audience by telling personal experiences and using inclusive language such as "we" and "you".

By using the phrase, *"well, let me tell you a secret"* Zuckerberg creates a friendly and close connection, and sounds like a mentor giving advice which makes the audience feel included.

"What are you waiting for?" help create a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility by using the inclusive pronoun "we" and by speaking as someone sharing his experiences.

We can conclude here that learning is presented as human experience that everyone can share and participate.

4.4 Politics

In Gee's framework, politics refers to the distribution of power, status, and access to social goods such as respect, knowledge, or authority.

In this extract, Zuckerberg reallocates legitimacy away from traditional expertise and toward initiative. *"Everyone taking initiative will always get criticized"*

The statement, *"How about personalizing education?"* presents education as a social goal and social goods that should meet the needs of different students.

Similarly, Zuckerberg shows scientific value by stating, *"How about curing all diseases?"* as a way to improve people's lives.

On the other hand, Fear of failure was presented negatively in, *"We are so afraid of making mistakes"*.

Passivity was also criticized, *"We ignore all the things wrong today if we do nothing"*.

The speech promotes innovation, education, science and active participation while criticizing fear and negativity.

The speech encourages everyone has the chance of learning and success. Also, it values hard work, patience and practical experience. While he rejects the idea that success comes quickly or for only genius people.

4.5 Connection

Gee studies how speakers connect different ideas and concepts together.

Zuckerberg treats education as part of society through linking learning directly with solving global challenges

"How about stopping climate change before we destroy the planet and getting millions of people involved manufacturing and installing solar panels? How about curing all diseases and asking volunteers to track their health data and share their genomes?"

By repeating the rhetorical pattern *"how about..."* he creates a sequence of interconnected possibilities, resenting innovation as transferable across multiple societal domains.

We can also see that he has made logical relationships in his speech with effort, understanding and practice lead to improvement, *"Ideas don't come out fully formed. They only become clear as you work on them"*

Similarly, he emphasized that merely believing in the importance of immediate action without acting would not lead to success, *"The idea of a single eureka moment is a dangerous lie"*

Learning is shown as the basis of success. Thus, Zuckerberg links learning with success, innovation, and personal growth. He also mentioned that his achievements of creating Facebook happened by learning through experience and practicing.

4.6 Sign Systems and Knowledge

Gee claims that the discourse privileges practical knowledge over abstract expertise.

Technical terminologies were limited despite the discussion of global issues. Instead, everyday languages dominated the speech: *"ideas", "work", "start", "learn", and "fix"*. The use of lexically simple words broadens accessibility and suggests that meaningful participation is open for everyone.

He demystifies specialized knowledge, for example *"No one writes math formulas on glass. That's not a thing"* which he rejects stereotypical representation of scientific expertise and replaces them with iterative learning.

Zuckerberg challenges common media that represent innovation which he shows it as different from what movies portray, *"Movies and pop culture just get this all wrong"*. He criticizes movies and pop culture for not giving realistic ideas about success. He argues that Technology and science are presented as important for solving problems, *"Track their health data and share their genomes"*. The speech values practical, scientific knowledge and rejects the idea that success comes from genius or one sudden idea.

Zuckerberg believes that people learn through trying, making mistakes, and continuous improvement. That's why the speech values practical and real-life knowledge more than the idea of natural genius or instant success. Moreover, learning is represented as a lifelong process that needs effort and experience rather than natural talent alone.

The results show that Mark Zuckerberg's educational speech constructs learning as an active and continuous process. Using James Pual Gee's seven building tasks, the speech shows us that learning is important, collaborative and connected to personal growth and success. It also

encourages audience to believe that everyone can learn and grow and achieve their goals through effort and experience.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study show that Mark Zuckerberg uses language effectively to influence and connect with people. Previous studies explained the pragmatic strategies, multimodal features, and deixis to communicate with the audience while this study shows how language creates meaning through Gee's Building Tasks. For example, the results of this study show that Zuckerberg uses language to connect with people and share valuable ideas on learning and success. These findings are similar to Yerznkian (2024) study who found that Zuckerberg speech contained motivational and persuasive language. The finding also align with Jaroenkitboworn (2021), particularly in showing how Zuckerberg connects with the audience by telling his personal experience as a real life example while also connect the speech to global ideas and social responsibility. Zuckerberg, therefore, was able to make a connection and build a relation with the audience. The findings further connect with Sihura (2023) who found that Zuckerberg uses deixis in his speech such as, person, place, time, discourse and social deixis. These elements can be seen clearly in Zuckerberg's speech and his talking about education, personal experience, success and the future. Gee's Seven Building Tasks help explain how Zuckerberg uses spoken discourse to deliver these ideas of learning and how it was constructed through language.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that this study analyzed Mark Zuckerberg's educational speech by using James Paul Gee's Seven Building Tasks. The study summarizes that language is not only means of communication but also to express ideas, values, and beliefs. The speech presents learning as a continuous process that relies on effort, experience and collaboration. The findings also reveal that Zuckerberg promotes people to work hard, to keep learning, and believe that everyone has a chance to succeed. Then, we see how he presents himself as ordinary person who learned from his experiences which helped him to connect with his audience. In conclusion, this study shows that Gee's theory is useful for analyzing spoken educational speeches, because it helps to explain how to use language to create meanings and communicate important educational values.

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