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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Figurative Language in Commencement Speeches: Speakers in the Entertainment and Business Industries

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**Abstract:** Figurative language is a commonly used strategy in interpersonal interaction. Although previous studies have explored the use of figurative language in various materials, its use in commencement speeches based on the speaker's professional background has not been investigated. This study used 20 commencement speeches as material to examine the differences in the use of the figurative language of entertainers and business people invited to speak at commencement ceremonies. The results revealed that figurative language is pervasive in commencement speeches; the more frequently used figure of speech types were metaphor, repetition, personification, and parallelism. Moreover, speakers from the entertainment industry significantly used more rhetorical questions, exclamations, and similes than those from the business industry. Entertainers tended to ask questions to get their audiences involved, express emotions to reveal their inner feelings, and adopt similes to produce vivid narrations. On the other hand, business people employed significantly fewer strategies to emphasize their authority and highlight their objectivity. The findings imply that there exist certain variations in how people from different professional backgrounds use language, and further studies are necessary to reveal more of these differences. In sum, the data show that figurative language may be used to achieve several goals; relevant findings might prove useful to English for Special Purposes practitioners and to language learners as well.

**Keywords:** Commencement Speech, Figurative Language, Public Speaking

Figurative language is pervasive in every aspect of our daily lives. This is aptly illustrated by the following: (a) a well-known line in the movie *Forrest Gump*, "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get"; (b) a catchy phrase from

an internationally popular song, *We are the world*; and (c) a powerful profession in one of the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools." The manner of their utterance allows the expressed ideas to linger

in the minds of the moviegoers, the listeners, and the audience, respectively. People may strategically use figurative expressions to embellish their speech and sound more convincing; figurative language is, in fact, so well-entrenched in our everyday speech that we unconsciously use it with amazing frequency. It is a vital part of our repertoire as language users.

Figurative language can be a significant element that provides speakers with an effective way to express their intentions (Yuan, 2018). Previous studies on figurative language have been conducted in different materials, such as advertisements, computer-mediated communication, and literature. Although previous studies have looked into the use of figurative language in commencement speeches, none of them have attempted to examine the use of it based on the speakers' professional backgrounds (entertainers and business people), which this study tries to accomplish.

Commencement speeches are one noteworthy kind of public speaking. The commencement ceremony is a significant milestone in the life of a student. Most colleges would invite celebrities as commencement speakers. These celebrities are prestigious for their achievements in their own field, and they tend to share their life stories to encourage the graduating students. For example, "Stay hungry; stay foolish" was an encouraging advice given by Steve Jobs at the commencement exercises at Stanford University. "Cleverness is a gift; kindness is a choice" was a famous quotation uttered by Jeff Bezos at the commencement rites at Princeton University. These remarkable commencement speeches have gained popularity, and they may also influence the values and beliefs of the young people listening to them.

It is thus the aim of this study to show how figurative language figures, so to speak, in commencement speeches, and how it is used in similar and different ways by the entertainers and the businesspeople invited to speak at graduation ceremonies to achieve their goals of motivating and encouraging young adults about to venture into the world outside. Three research questions were proposed:

1. How is the overall use of figurative language in commencement speeches delivered by speakers from the entertainment and business industries?
2. What are the more frequently used figurative language types in commencement speeches of

speakers from the entertainment and business industries?

3. What are the differences in the use of individual figurative expression types in commencement speeches of speakers from the entertainment and business industries?

There are five sections in the study. In section one, the background, motivation, purpose, research questions, and the significance of the study are presented. Section two reviews the literature related to this study from figurative language, public speaking, commencement speeches, and professional background and language use. In section three, the methodology will be introduced. Section four discusses the results. In section five, a conclusion is offered.

## Literature Review

### *Figurative Language*

Generally speaking, figurative language may embellish language through modification and decoration to fulfill the aim of aesthetics. Modification means to arrange the order of words, phrases, and sentences. Decoration means to use some particular words to make the language more vivid. With the use of figurative language, speakers' intentions can be expressed more completely (Yen & Chang, 1997a; Zou, 1993). More specifically, using figurative language is arranging certain words and phrases or changing the grammatical structure of sentences to produce implications. Words can derive other lexical meanings through the figurative language of speech. Take *grasp* as an example; the word means to solidly grip something. With the use of metaphORIZATION, the word develops another meaning: to understand something arduous (Kroeger, 2018).

Figurative language may offer opportunities to effectively influence and convince people. It can enhance comprehension and make words more graceful (Alshammari, 2016; Heracleous & Klaering, 2014). This is especially true in the context of political speeches. Many distinguished researchers have studied politicians' public speeches through different aspects, such as emotional expression, gesture, and structure. For example, Gunawan (2017) studied Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential campaign speech texts. Clinton's political ideas were successfully analyzed through

the structure of the text. Tu (2018) used the 2016 U.S. presidential debates as material to find hedging expressions in Donald Trump's discourse. Furthermore, there are some figurative applications of language use in political speeches. For example, Barack Obama is well-known for his eloquent discourse; Li et al. (2016) reported that he tended to use some figurative language, such as metaphor, metonymy, and parallelism. With the use of figurative language, Obama's discourse became more attractive and persuasive. These rhetorical strategies can also help politicians build a congruous relationship with the general public (Sheveleva, 2012). Aside from political speeches, Yuan (2018) stated that Emma Watson, a UN Women's Goodwill ambassador, used parallelism, rhetorical questions, irony, and contrast while speaking for the *HeForShe* campaign at the United Nations headquarters. These figurative expressions turned *HeForShe* into an emphatic speech to fulfill her purpose: to encourage people worldwide to support gender equality.

Apart from public speaking, figurative language is applied in different fields, such as marketing, literary arts, and computer-mediated communication. Advertising has long been used as a way of marketing (Salko, 2017). The main purpose of advertising is to impress customers and motivate them to purchase products (Wu, 2004). In order to fulfill the aim of publicizing, attractive texts are essential, and the first element to catch people's eyes are titles. According to Leigh (1994), more than half of advertisements use figurative language to embellish their titles. For example, using personification in advertisements can bring emotional resonance among the receivers (Delbaere et al., 2011). Impressive slogans are regarded as the punch line of advertisements, which leads to the salience of the brand value, and figurative expressions impact positively on slogans. For consumers, slogans affect their intention to purchase products (Wu, 2004). Figurative language enables slogans in advertisements to achieve persuasive effects (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013).

There are also many applications of figurative language in the literature and the arts. Lyrics are influential for songs; they represent people's emotions, feelings, and stories. Popular songs are especially teeming with figurative languages, such as repetition, anadiplosis, antithesis, parallelism, metaphor, and metonymy (Zhang & Zhao, 2005). Celine Dion's *Fly* and *Falling into You* abound with

metaphor, personification, simile, symbolism, and imagery (Ardhyanti & Supriyatiningih, 2020). Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence* utilized personification and paradox (Areef, 2016).

Due to the abundance of information, clear expression and eloquent words are significant for computer-mediated communication, such as metaphor, euphemism, parody, irony, paradox, and rhetorical questions, to ensure that language use will be attractive and impressive (Li, 2014). Wang (2013), using Chinese blogs as material to analyze gender differences in the use of figurative language, found that both male and female bloggers applied figurative language in their blogs extensively. However, male bloggers tended to use design type of figurative languages, such as repetition, anadiplosis, and parallelism, whereas female bloggers tended to use adjustment type of figurative languages, such as metaphor, hyperbole, and exclamation. Moreover, Abulaish et al. (2020) used texts on Twitter as material to show that some figurative expression types are frequently used in Tweets, such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, humor, irony, sarcasm, and satire.

### **Public Speaking**

Public speaking, an organized and cogitative presentation, is the purposeful expression of certain ideas to a person or a group of people. During the communication, the speaker and the audience face each other (Shyam & Elizabeth Joy, 2016; Yuan, 2018). When the audience is different, the content of the speech changes. Public speaking can be a satisfying way for speakers to convey their thoughts, and it can also be an effective way for an audience to acquire some information. Public speaking functions to share individual stories, amuse an audience, convince people, and disseminate knowledge (Yuan, 2018). Business people use public speaking to allow consumers to gain an understanding of the products they are selling and the services that they are offering. Politicians tend to use public speaking to convey their political views to people; this way, they can persuade their constituents to agree with their political philosophy. Entertainers use public speaking to realize a performance and allow the audience to be influenced by their show.

The commencement speech, a kind of public speaking, is delivered at commencement ceremonies. This ceremony embodies the students' accomplishment of their studies and the terminal phase of academic life.

However, the ceremony also represents a new start. After the ceremony ends with tears and laughter, the students depart from their alma mater and enter the workforce. Commencement infers the progress of the graduate student's life; the process constitutes a great opportunity to make the graduates understand that they are going to become adults in the society, receiving many social expectations, such as being independent and responsible for their own lives. Commencement speeches are thus one of the important events to fulfill this purpose. As Kamenetz (2015) observed, some words are used constantly during commencement speeches, such as *life, people, world, success, and generation*, which reflect what the society expects of them.

As Partch and Kinnier (2011) stated, speakers tend to express some information through their speeches, such as giving assistance to others, behaving correctly, broadening horizons, being one's self, staying persistent, valuing diversity, appreciating others, and finding stable relations. Sigl (2015) used Ellen DeGeneres's commencement speech at Tulane University in 2009 as material and found that genre and humor may be possible factors that lead to an impressive speech, as well as to gain emotional resonance with the graduates. Svetlana (2017) adopted discourse analysis to analyze a hundred American commencement speeches and observed that context and style contribute to a fairly elastic tendency of discourse in the language use of commencement speeches.

Commencement speakers have to prepare their speeches deliberately. Because if the content is tedious, the graduates may be distracted and wander away. As Schmidt (1959) indicated, the aim of delivering a commencement speech is to encourage fresh graduates rather than delight them or tire them. Accordingly, the contents of a commencement speech take an important role: they not only remind the graduating students that the ceremony is a significant time in their life but also inform them how to be nice men and women in the society (Markella, 2004). Joshi (2014) indicated that commencement speeches are considered to inspire graduates, encouraging them and giving them some directions to face difficulties in their future life.

Using figurative language can appropriately provide a better means of expression for public speaking (Yuan, 2018). Besides, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) stated that the ideal function of language is related to the speaker's background and experience. Commencement

speakers work in different industries, so they can be politicians, entertainers, business people, authors, savants, and journalists, and people who come from different backgrounds will exhibit different discourses. This study focused on commencement speakers who work in the entertainment and business sectors. The next section reviews the literature related to the differences between these two groups of speakers.

### ***Professional Background and Language Use***

Studies related to personality traits and professional performance at work have been conducted extensively. Generally speaking, diligence, conscientiousness, emotional intelligence, and perseverance are regarded as the traits of people with remarkable achievements in their respective industries (Barrick et al., 2001). Moreover, people who are invited as commencement speakers hold a remarkable reputation for their professional performances. Even though everyone is unique, people who work in the same industry exude similar traits. As Hirsh and Peterson (2009) observed, there is a significant relationship between personality traits and language style. Language use can disclose personality traits (Pennebaker & King, 1999). People working in the entertainment and business industries possess differing traits. These special traits may affect their language use, the way they conduct themselves in society, and enable them to maintain an excellent reputation.

Entertainers are people of influence to the public (Kogan, 2002). They are open-minded, humorous, and extroverted (Greengross & Miller, 2009; Nettle, 2006). In addition, entertainers' emotional expression is excellent; this ability not only allows them to convey their feelings but also arouses an audience's emotions (Kogan, 2002). Furthermore, with a sense of empathy, they can perceive how the audience feels and adopt suitable ways to interact with their audience (Greengross & Miller, 2009). They are cognizant of their audience's reactions while performing. Moreover, teamwork is also significant for entertainers. As Kogan (2002) indicated, to bring great performance, entertainers rely on their team members. Teamwork can be effective in achieving wonderful effects.

Similar to entertainers, people with significant achievements in the business industry also possess an extroverted personality trait and an openness to face new things. Besides that, they are also tolerant, scrupulous, and creative (Elenurm & Alas, 2009;

López-Núñez et al., 2020; Morallane & Botha, 2019; Obschonka & Fisch, 2018; Obschonka et al., 2017). With the ability to solve problems and grapple with difficulties, they can ensure a smooth operation of their companies (Kaminski et al., 2017; López-Núñez et al., 2020), which is described as entrepreneurship. This group of people are self-disciplined with a clear and positive orientation (Brandstätter, 2011; Obschonka & Fisch, 2018; Obschonka et al., 2017).

Social media is a technological communicative tool for celebrities to share their perspectives and thinking. Celebrities can use social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to build strong connections with their supporters. The interaction between celebrities and their followers can disclose the celebrities' character (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Speakers who are invited to commencement ceremonies are distinguished for their achievements in their own fields, and their language use on social media can disclose their character and personality. Stever and Lawson (2013) stated that entertainers tend to share their work and personal life on Twitter to communicate with followers. This is slightly different from that of business people. People who work in the business industry disclose their work more than their privacy on Twitter (Tata et al., 2017), while on talk shows, entertainers tend to disclose themselves and reveal their character more than politicians (Schütz, 1995, 1997).

## Methodology

The data were collected following certain criteria. The first one was clear information about the commencement speeches, including the speaker's professional background, the time of the commencement speech, and the venue where the commencement speech was to be delivered. The second one was the time limit. In order to systematically analyze the data, the duration of the commencement speeches was limited to between 20 and 30 minutes. According to these criteria, commencement speeches were collected from Opensource Opencourseware Prototype System (OOPS, <http://www.myoops.org/index.php>). OOPS is an online resource where English materials can be collected for learners, such as famous college courses and celebrities' commencement speeches. A total of 20 commencement speeches delivered between 2010 and 2016 were collected from OOPS. Half of them were delivered by entertainers, and the other half were delivered by business people, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

After the figurative language tokens were extracted from the material, they were then classified following Zou (1993), as listed in Table 3.

This study follows Dörnyei's (2007) content analysis framework in analyzing the data. First, the commencement speeches were transcribed into textual

**Table 1**  
*Information on the Collected Commencement Speeches (Entertainers)*

	Speaker	Year	University	Duration
E1	Meryl Streep	2010	Columbia University Barnard College	28'07"
E2	Denzel Washington	2011	University of Pennsylvania	22'43"
E3	Tom Hanks	2011	Yale University	22'11"
E4	Stephen Colbert	2011	Northwestern University	20'25"
E5	Jane Lynch	2012	Smith College	22'35"
E6	Peter Dinklage	2012	Bennington College	28'18"
E7	Ed Helms	2015	University of Virginia	22'06"
E8	Natalie Portman	2015	Harvard University	20'16"
E9	Jim Carrey	2016	Maharishi International University	26'08"
E10	Matt Damon	2016	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	23'45"

**Table 2***Information on the Collected Commencement Speeches (Business People)*

	Speaker	Year	University	Duration
B1	Sheryl Sandberg	2012	Harvard Business School	22'25"
B2	Jimmy Iovine	2013	University of Southern California	21'16"
B3	Steve Case	2013	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	22'32"
B4	Bill Gates Melinda Gates	2014	Stanford University	24'40"
B5	Marc Benioff	2014	University of Southern California	22'11"
B6	Steve Ballmer	2014	University of Southern California Marshall School of Business	22'46"
B7	Susan Wojcicki	2014	Johns Hopkins University	26'38"
B8	Jeffrey Immelt	2015	Siena College	20'17"
B9	Tim Cook	2015	George Washington University	21'21"
B10	Michael Bloomberg	2016	Harvard Business School	24'33"

**Table 3***Zou's (1993) Classification of Figurative Language*

Category	Definition	Example
Simile	use of as, as if, or like to achieve the purpose of analogy	I could be goofy, vehement, aggressive, and slovenly and open and funny and tough and my friends let me. I didn't wash my hair for three weeks once. <u>They accepted me like the Velveteen Rabbit.</u> (E1_Meryl Streep)
Metaphor	implicit use of analogy	We believe that a company that has values and acts on them can really change the world. And an individual can too. That can be you. That must be you. Graduates, your values matter. <u>They are your North Star.</u> (B9_Tim Cook)
Personification	reference to non-living things, animals, or abstract concepts behaving as if they were human	Things are different today. Most of you will not only have multiple jobs- you likely will have multiple careers. So the key is to keep learning. Be curious. Be open. Be flexible. Let your life unfold as a series of chapters. <u>Don't be so fixated on a specific ending that you neglect to open the door when opportunity knocks.</u> (B3_Steve Case)
Metonymy	use of parts to represent the whole	Being asked to give the Commencement speech at Smith College, when my insides screamed "NO!" I somehow got my mouth to say "YES AND." (E5_Jane Lynch)
Euphemism	indirect description of things	That shows a small segment in joy, ease and comfort while an equal portion struggle <u>on with little hope in the fortunes of the remainder,</u> either on the rise or on the wane in this confounding tide of so many damn things that we grow oblivious to the shifts in the quality of our lives. (E3_Tom Hanks)

Table 3 continued...

Category	Definition	Example
Antithesis	use of contrasting expressions	The ease of coming back somehow made it that much harder to explain to friends what was it was like out there— <u>what was <i>lost</i> and what was <i>gained</i></u> on that sublime and terrible trip. (E4_ Stephen Colbert)
Paradox	use of absurd or contradictory statements	<u>I feel <i>lucky</i> that my first experience of releasing a film was initially such a <i>disaster</i> by all standards and measures.</u> I learned early that my meaning had to be from the experience of making a film and the possibility of connecting with individuals rather than the foremost trophies in my industry: financial and critical success. (E8_ Natalie Portman)
Hyperbole	purposeful exaggeration	I made <i>Your Highness</i> , a <u>pothead comedy with Danny McBride and <i>laughed for three months straight</i></u> . I was able to own my meaning and not have it be determined by box office receipts or prestige. (E8_ Natalie Portman)
Exclamation	expression of emotion	Well, thank you, Max, for having me here. It is so great to be with you today. <u>What a gorgeous day this is!</u> (B5_ Marc Benioff)
Parallelism	placing of words together with the same part of speech, or arranging of phrases, clauses, and sentences with the same grammatical structure	I was getting very fidgety. <u>We needed to sell these people something, we needed to tell them why our product is good, we needed to tell them why they're going to make a lot of money selling our product.</u> (B6_ Steve Ballmer)
Rhetorical questions	use of questions without any expectation of an answer	<u>How many times do we label someone with our first impression, only to be proven wrong?</u> The tattooed motorcycle guy who turns out to be a teddy bear. The buttoned up co-worker who actually knows how to party. Or the mousy librarian who takes off her glasses to reveal she's a bloodthirsty alien from a distant galaxy. (E7_ Ed Helms)
Repetition	repetition of words, phrases, or sentences to emphasize certain ideas	I adjusted my natural temperament which tends to be slightly bossy, a little opinionated, loud, a little loud, full of pronouncements and high spirits, and I willfully cultivated softness, agreeableness, a breezy, natural sort of sweetness, even shyness if you will, <u>which was very, very, very effective on the boys.</u> (E1_ Meryl Streep)
Anadiplosis	repetition of the last word or phrase of a sentence to start the next sentence	I mean, you're working on some crazy stuff in these buildings. <u>Stuff</u> that would freak me out if I actually understood it. Theories, models, paradigm shifts. (E10_ Matt Damon)
Quotation	direct or indirect use of proverbs, idioms, or other people's words	<u>There's the old John Lennon quote. <i>Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.</i></u> As you sit there and look around saying you still have a lot to figure out, I don't know exactly where I'm headed, just know that it's ok and your parents should hear that, too. It's ok. (B7_ Susan Wojcicki)



data. Second, the figurative expressions were manually coded and classified into the different categories enumerated in the previous subsection. Moreover, it is possible for a language unit to contain more than two rhetorical devices, such as in example (1).

(1) The world needs you in the arena. There are problems that need to be solved. Injustices that need to be ended. People that are still being persecuted, diseases still in need of cure. No matter what you do next, the world needs your energy, your passion, your impatience with progress. (B9\_Tim Cook)

In (1), there are more than one figurative expression: *No matter what you do next, the world needs your energy, your passion, your impatience with progress.* The first one is parallelism. The phrases with the same grammatical structure *your energy, your passion, and your impatience* were classified as parallelism. The second one is repetition. The commencement speaker repeated the word *your* in the phrases *your energy, your passion, and your impatience*. In this case, the sentence consists of parallelism and repetition.

Table 4 presents the overall results of the collected figurative language, showing that figurative language is pervasive in the collected set of commencement speeches.

**Table 4**

*The Overall Frequency of Figurative Language*

Speakers	Duration	No. of Tokens	Speakers	Duration	No. of Tokens
E1	28'07"	156	B1	22'25"	169
E2	22'43"	171	B2	21'16"	130
E3	22'11"	170	B3	22'32"	157
E4	20'25"	103	B4	24'40"	154
E5	22'35"	161	B5	22'11"	126
E6	28'18"	92	B6	22'46"	121
E7	22'06"	117	B7	26'38"	95
E8	20'16"	157	B8	20'17"	67
E9	26'08"	149	B9	21'21"	137
E10	23'45"	184	B10	24'33"	116
	236'34"	1460		228'39"	1272

Total tokens: 2732;  $p$  value: 0.188

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

It may be observed from Table 4 that the use of figurative language is different from person to person. The finding corroborates the ideas of Palmer and Brooks (2004) and Suleiman and Moore (1995), who stated that even though people's various backgrounds usually affect the usage of figurative language to some extent, the frequently used figurative expressions are still different from person to person. Moreover, the statistical treatment also shows that there is no significant difference between the two groups of commencement speakers ( $p$ -value = 0.188 > 0.05) in the use of figurative language.

## Results

### *Frequently Used Figurative Expressions*

The results presented revealed no significant difference in the overall use of figurative language in commencement speeches between speakers from the entertainment and business industries, which implies that both entertainers and business people did employ figurative language in similar amounts. However, a close look at Table 5 will reveal slight differences in the use of specific figurative language types between the two groups of speakers.

**Table 5***Frequency of the Individual Figurative Expressions*

Figures	Entertainers	Businessmen	Total	p value	Significance
Metaphor	329	304	633	0.701	
Repetition	238	203	441	0.510	
Personification	221	252	473	0.565	
Parallelism	178	190	368	0.606	
Rhetorical Question	102	53	155	0.048	*
Anadiplosis	62	58	120	0.802	
Metonymy	55	47	102	0.644	
Exclamation	96	37	133	0.035	*
Hyperbole	49	32	81	0.195	
Simile	44	20	64	0.042	*
Quotation	36	25	61	0.355	
Euphemism	16	15	31	0.910	
Antithesis	12	25	37	0.092	
Paradox	22	11	33	0.179	
Total	1460	1272	2732		

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As demonstrated in Table 5, the more frequently used figurative expressions were metaphor, repetition, personification, and parallelism. Commencement speakers might use these figurative expressions to enrich their discourses. The more frequently used figurative expressions seemed to achieve their pragmatic function with a less complicated structure. This may be one of the possible reasons why they were favored by the commencement speakers.

The following examples (2) to (5) illustrate the use of these four types of figurative expressions.

1. The clock has run out and the future with a capital "F" now rests with all of you all because you went to Yale. You are now the anointed, the charge holders, the best and brightest. Each of you is a shining hope for our nation in the world. (E3\_ Tom Hank)
2. And I'll tell you what, I worked and I worked. And as you heard, I had some great success there. I was the youngest VP there and youngest SVP. And I went on and created some great products and did all these things. And

about a decade went by after my graduation. (B5\_ Marc Benioff)

In example (2), the speaker used the metaphor *a shining hope* to describe the role of the graduates in the future world. As Leigh (1994) stated, metaphor is an implied analogy. Some commencement speakers tended to use metaphor to implicitly achieve this analogy effect. In the example, metaphor was used to tell the graduates how important they were to the world. Instead of directly expressing the importance of the graduates, the speaker used a metaphor to enrich his expression.

Repetition is demonstrated in example (3). The purpose of using repetition was to emphasize a certain meaning or to deepen an impression (Leigh, 1994; Zou, 1993). The speaker said *I worked and I worked* to express how he exerted himself to reach significant successes. He also used his own experiences to encourage the graduates and shared his work attitude with them so that, like him, they would also strive to achieve their goals after graduation.

3. The imagination is always manufacturing scenarios, both good and bad and the ego tries to keep you trapped in the multiplex of the mind. Our eyes are not viewers, they're also projectors that are running a second story over the picture that we see in front of us all the time. Fear is writing that script, and the working title is, "I'll never be enough" (E9\_Jim Carrey)
4. Let's get started. It turns out most of you were born the same year as the internet as we know it. You probably cannot imagine a world without texting, emailing, blogging, friending, tweeting, googling, and watching YouTube videos probably when you were supposed to be studying on D level. (B7\_Susan Wojcicki)

Example (4) demonstrates personification. As Brown (2011) and Delbaere et al. (2011) stated, through the use of personification, the anthropomorphic process gives these non-human things character and makes them become vivid and friendly toward people. Commencement speakers tend to make abstract concepts behave as if they were a living person, which allows the audience to gain a deeper impression of the notion that the speaker wishes to impart to them. In example (4), the speaker said, *Fear is writing that script*. Here *fear* behaves like a human in writing something. Personification in the sentence was used to bring the image of *fear* to life. Through the sentence, the speaker also tried to embolden the graduates to strive hard in their future endeavors.

Parallelism is demonstrated in example (5). The parallel structure can bring artistic effects and emphasize certain information (Yen & Chang, 1997a). In example (5), *texting, e-mailing, blogging, friending, tweeting, googling, and watching* show what the younger generation believed existed.

The more frequently used figurative expressions in the commencement speeches differed slightly from some previous studies on individual figures and celebrities. Obama used metaphor, metonymy, and parallelism (Li et al., 2016). Emma Watson's *HeForShe* public speech contained parallelism, rhetorical questions, and irony (Yuan, 2018). In advertisements, personification brings emotional resonance to the target receivers (Delbaere et al., 2011). Popular songs frequently use metaphor, repetition, parallelism, metonymy, and anadiplosis (Zhang & Zhao, 2005).

Computer-mediated communication uses metaphor, euphemism, paradox, and rhetorical questions (Li, 2014).

In these different domains of language use, the frequency of figurative language changes as factors vary, such as the materials that the figurative language can apply to, the purpose of the figurative language, and the background of the speakers and target receivers.

#### *Less Frequently Used Figurative Expressions*

As demonstrated in Table 5, the less frequently used figurative expressions were quotation, euphemism, antithesis, and paradox. Commencement speakers also used these figurative expressions, but the frequencies were lower. This does not mean they were insignificant. Quotation, euphemism, antithesis, and paradox were usually utilized in the commencement speeches as punch lines; punchlines do not have to be many, or they lose their effect. Commencement speakers tended to use them to inspire the audience to deliberate on specific issues. The examples from (6) to (9) illustrate the less frequently used figurative expressions.

5. There's an old African proverb that I love. It says if you want to go quickly, go alone. But if you want to go far, you must go together. There's a lot of wisdom in that. It may seem easier to go alone—just do it yourself—but you will maximize your impact if you go together – taking the time to assemble the right team and build the right relationships so you can go as far as possible. (B3\_Steve Case)
6. Congrats to the men's soccer team. National champions for the seventh year in a row! Great sports tradition here, but I gotta be honest, I feel like we could work on your mascot a little. (E7\_Ed Helms)

Quotations lend authority to speakers. According to Zou (1993), the use of quotation endows speakers' words with persuasion and power. As Geană (2018) indicated, people tend to use inspirational quotations on different occasions to enrich their utterances. In example (6), the speaker quoted an old African proverb, *It says if you want to go quickly, go alone, but if you want to go far, you must go together*, to highlight his point. Commencement speakers tended to use quotations less maybe because they already had many of their own stories to share and did not have to rely

on other people's statements.

Euphemism is demonstrated in example (7). When unpleasant words appear in conversation, people tend to choose euphemism as a way to milden the effects. These words are replaced by moderate words to produce an indefinite expression (Almoayidi, 2018; Fernández, 2006; Leigh, 1994; Zou, 1993). In example (7), the speaker said *I feel like we could work on your mascot a little* to euphemistically opine that the mascot of the university may need to undergo some changes, instead of criticizing the mascot directly. The use of euphemism also corresponds to Leech's (1983) politeness principle. It can indirectly express something discourteous and embarrassing (Lang, 2013; Zhang, 2012). Generally speaking, commencement exercises, occasions of jubilation, and positivity, might not be the proper venue for the use of euphemistic expressions; this is the time instead for words of motivation and encouragement.

7. People who had the audacity to challenge and change the way we all live. People like Gandhi and Jackie Robinson, Martha Graham and Albert Einstein, Amelia Earhart and Miles Davis. These people still inspire us. They remind us to live by our deepest values and reach for our highest aspirations. (B9\_Tim Cook)
8. I felt completely and totally inadequate in the face of this woman's death. But sometimes it's the people you can't help who inspire you the most. I knew that the sex workers I linked arms with in the morning could become the woman I carried upstairs in the evening—unless they found a way to defy the stigma that hung over their lives. (B4\_Bill Gates & Melinda Gates)

Antithesis is demonstrated in example (8), where the contrasting expressions *deepest values* and *highest aspirations* might seem to achieve a comparison effect and may allow people to acquire a better understanding of what the speaker really wanted to share with the graduates, as suggested by Klebanov et al. (2010).

Paradoxes might seem to be ridiculous, but they allow people to view situations from a different perspective (Leigh, 1994; Zou, 1993). In example (9), through the use of a paradox in *it's the people you can't help who inspire you the most*, the speaker might pique the interest of the audience, who would probably agree

that there may be some truth to it.

Antitheses and paradoxes make up less than 3% of the total number of figurative expressions in commencement speeches because both types seem to involve extreme situations, whereas most speakers might aim instead at orienting the young graduates to the mundane occurrences in life; thus, they focus more on preparing them in overcoming everyday obstacles and less on exaggerating them and sounding absurd.

The findings regarding the less-used figurative language in commencement speeches are slightly different from previous studies. In public speaking, Yang et al. (2019) analyzed the use of figurative language in public speeches delivered by undergraduates, which indicated that some rhetorical devices are less used by undergraduates, such as paradox, hyperbole, antithesis, and metonymy. For undergraduates, parallelism, quotation, simile, and metaphor are some of the more frequently used ones. Students might have undergone fewer social experiences than people who have entered the workforce. Therefore, they tended to quote other people to make themselves sound more persuasive.

### Professional Background and the Use of Figurative Language

Table 5 reveals significant differences in the use of certain figurative expressions between commencement speakers from the entertainment and business industries. They are rhetorical questions ( $p$ -value =  $0.048 < 0.05$ ), exclamation ( $p$ -value =  $0.035 < 0.05$ ), and simile ( $p$ -value =  $0.042 < 0.05$ ). Entertainers used these figurative expressions significantly more than business people.

Sociolinguists have attempted to find character in the language use of people with different occupations, but studies that related to professional background and language use have not explained this phenomenon extensively (Forrest & Dodsworth, 2016). However, as Hirsh and Peterson (2009) indicated, there is a significant relationship between personality traits and language styles. Language use can also disclose some aspects of personality traits (Pennebaker & King, 1999).

Entertainers used rhetorical questions in delivering commencement speeches significantly more than business people ( $p$ -value =  $0.048 < 0.05$ ). Asking rhetorical questions would allow them to interact with the audience, who, upon being invited to ponder on the "questions," may be encouraged to think more

deeply on the issue or situation at hand. Example (10) demonstrates the use of rhetorical questions.

9. Our founding fathers were obsessed with liberty and yet, at the same time, they owned slaves. We can marvel at how blind they were. But maybe we should also ask ourselves: Where are our blind spots today? Which of our positions will look equally absurd to generations to come? What are we rationalizing, or refusing to see? (E7\_Ed Helms)

In (9), the speaker continuously asked Rhetorical Questions *Where are our blind spots today? Which of our positions will look equally absurd to generations to come? What are we rationalizing, or refusing to see?* to encourage the graduates to acquire more knowledge but stay humble and honest toward the world.

Rhetorical questions are used to inspire people to consider certain issues. What the study found is similar to some previous studies. Speakers use rhetorical questions to emphasize specific information, as well as produce emotional resonances with the audience and interact with them (Yen & Chang, 1997b). This finding matches the thoughts of Kogan (2002), who stated that teamwork is important for entertainers: they need to depend on each team member to deliver a brilliant performance for their audience. The audience's response is valuable to them. Entertainers rely on the audience's feedback to improve their performance; they learn whether the audience is interested in what they performed or not (Greengross & Miller, 2009). As Yuan (2018) stated, Emma Watson used rhetorical questions to lead the audience into pondering issues about gender equality. Rhetorical questions can indeed serve as a suitable means to inspire an audience to consider certain issues and help them get involved in the process. Perhaps, business people are a bit different in this regard. Although they do make use of rhetorical questions, they might emphasize more on seeking answers and providing advice.

The second figurative language showing a significant difference between the two groups of speakers is exclamation ( $p$ -value = 0.035 < 0.05). Exclamation can be a suitable way for people to express strong emotions (Zou, 1993), as demonstrated in example (10).

10. About a week before the due date, you wake up in the middle of the night, "Huh, I have a paper due and I haven't done the reading, Oh my god!" (E1\_Meryl Streep)

In example (10), the speaker said *Oh my god!* to describe how she felt when she was invited to be the commencement speaker, which is similar to what students feel when they are nearing a deadline but have yet to begin to prepare.

Exclamation is used to express strong emotions, such as being scared, surprised, exasperated, and cheerful (Zou, 1993). This finding is in line with the studies of Schütz (1995, 1997) and Stever and Lawson (2013), who stated that entertainers tend to disclose more information about themselves to the public. Extroversion is one of the character traits of entertainers (Greengross & Miller, 2009; Nettle, 2006); this character can be found in the language used in social media and talk show interviews. Furthermore, this result further supports the observation that entertainers are good at expressing emotions (Kogan, 2002). Entertainers tend to use exclamations appropriately to make an audience conscious of their feelings and emotions. Wang (2013) also indicated that exclamation is frequently used in blogs; bloggers use exclamation to directly express their feelings to the readers. Business people, on the other hand, tend to exude a staid appearance, allowing them to maintain an objective aura and authority about them.

Lastly, entertainers used simile in commencement speeches significantly more than business people ( $p$ -value = 0.042 < 0.05). The use of simile can directly make an audience recognize the analogy effect to make themselves more easily understood. In example (11), the speaker directly used *like Pavarotti*, a famous Italian tenor, to describe how excellently the person auditioning in front of him sang. If the speaker just said *the person sang well*, the audience would fail to understand this.

11. Early in my career, I auditioned for a part in a Broadway musical. A perfect role for me, I thought, except for the fact that I can't sing. So I'm in the wings; I'm about to go on stage but the guy in front of me is singing like Pavarotti and he's just going on and on and on. (E2\_Denzel Washington)

Generally speaking, expression ability is one of the traits of entertainers (Kogan, 2002); they are good at finding analogies in daily life to describe their emotions and what they are going to narrate vividly. As previous studies indicated, simile is one of the more frequently used figurative language in the famous singer Celine Dion's songs (Ardhyanti & Supriyatiningih, 2020). Even though the statistical results revealed that both commencement speakers from the entertainment and business industries slightly used simile in their speeches, as Table 5 illustrated, entertainers still used this figurative language significantly more than business people. Similes are one of the least used figurative speech types among both groups, which is especially true for the business people, perhaps for the reason that metaphorical expressions, which are very similar to similes, maybe more entrenched in language, and formulating similes would require a bit more creativity than utilizing metaphors, which are more frequent, more formulaic, and more familiar.

## Conclusion

The study aimed to understand the use of figurative language in commencement speeches delivered by speakers from the entertainment and business industries. Several findings are provided here. Overall, the commencement speakers from the entertainment and business industries used figurative language extensively in their speeches. Also, there is no significant difference between the two groups of commencement speakers in using semantic and syntactic types of figurative expressions. The more frequently used figurative expressions in commencement speeches were metaphor, repetition, personification, and parallelism, which achieved a pragmatic function with less complicated structure; the less frequently used ones were quotation, euphemism, antithesis, and paradox. Moreover, the results of the study revealed the different ways that figurative language is used in commencement speeches by speakers from the entertainment and business industries. In interacting with the graduates, entertainers used rhetorical questions more than business people to effectively engage their audience, exclamations to explicitly express their emotions, and similes to directly share their feelings. These findings show that different figurative language types may be used by speakers

from various professional backgrounds to achieve different goals, which might prove useful to English for Special Purposes practitioners, as well as to language learners.

There were certain issues left out in this study. Even though most commencement speakers usually shared their stories and experiences to encourage the graduating students, certain issues might be discussed in particular colleges, such as medical college, business college, and law college; this was left unanalyzed in the study. The reaction of the audience toward the use of figurative language may be explored; there may also exist gender differences in the use and comprehension of figurative language. Accordingly, these elements can be considered in future studies.

## Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

None

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