

An Exploration of the Application of English Rhetorical Devices in College Students' Public Speech Competitions

Yan He*

Guangdong University of Business and Technology, Zhaoqing 526000, Guangdong, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Public speech demonstrates an individual's critical thinking ability, language expression skills, and, most importantly, the depth of thought. This is also true for college students. Using the public speech platform to showcase themselves and propagate their ideas is of profound significance for the cultivation of their comprehensive quality. Taking English as a requirement for public speeches can further enhance students' cross-cultural understanding and communication abilities. The use of various rhetorical devices to train and improve the appeal of language and the persuasiveness of speeches is worthy of in-depth discussion and practice. Therefore, combining the types of rhetorical devices with the actual situation of college students, this paper puts forward several feasible and effective suggestions and strategies, hoping to provide a reference for college students to improve the quality of their English speeches.

Keywords: College students; Public speech; Competition; English rhetorical devices

Online publication: November 14, 2025

1. Introduction

Against the background of globalization, college English public speech competitions are in full swing, such as the "FLTRP · Guocai Cup" English Public Speaking Contest, the National College Students English Speech Competition, and the "21st Century Cup" National English Speech Competition, which are widely popular. Many college student contestants want to demonstrate their personal charm and in-depth thinking in the competitions, and their application of rhetorical devices has reached a sophisticated level, which is also the key point discussed in this paper. From the perspective of speech theory, as early as Aristotle's Rhetoric, three major elements, logical appeal, emotional appeal, and ethical appeal, were proposed, and these elements are realized through the use of rhetorical devices, whose importance is self-evident. For college students, the rhetorical devices they use are nothing more than parallelism and rhetorical questions related to logic, metaphors and hyperbole related to emotion, as well as repetition and quotation, etc., through which they optimize language

expression and enhance the appeal and impact of language. The specific analysis is as follows:

2. The application and classification of rhetoric in speeches

2.1. Semantic rhetorical devices

As the name suggests, semantic rhetorical devices refer to the re-expression of language that deeply explores the depth and creativity of linguistic meaning. They can break through the conventional semantic associations of words, construct brand-new meaning connections, endow speeches with stronger imagery and associative space, and thus bring a better experience to the audience. The application of semantic rhetorical devices does not rely on sentence structures or phonetics; instead, they convey emotions and viewpoints solely through “ingenious ideas” at the semantic level. Common types include metaphor, personification, metonymy, hyperbole, etc.

For example, in a speech, the sentence “Ideal is a lighthouse that illuminates the path forward” transforms the abstract “ideal” into the concrete and perceptible “lighthouse”, allowing the audience to quickly understand the guiding role of ideals. In the first-prize work Youth and Global Citizenship of the 2023 “FLTRP · Guocai Cup” (National English-Speaking Competition), the contestant used the expression “Global challenges are like a jigsaw puzzle, each youth’s effort is a crucial piece”, which visualized abstract global challenges as a jigsaw puzzle, enabling the audience to intuitively grasp the importance of youth power^[1-3]. Semantic rhetorical devices can free speeches from plain and straightforward narration, move the audience with more vivid images, and deepen the memory points of the viewpoints expressed.

2.2. Syntactic figures of speech

Syntactic figures of speech also have their unique advantages. By adjusting sentence structures and optimizing sentence combinations, they make the rhythm of a speech more accurate and the logical hierarchy clearer; correspondingly, the language expression becomes highly powerful and expressive. They do not change the inherent semantic meaning of words themselves, but instead concentrate the audience’s attention and highlight key information through creative sentence design. Common types include parallelism, antithesis, repetition, rhetorical questions, and echo question (a figure of speech that uses a negative form to emphasize a positive meaning or vice versa). For instance, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” the continuous use of the parallel structure “I have a dream that one day...” creates a powerful rhythmic cadence. It progressively unfolds the ideal vision and strengthens the emotional impact. In the 2023 “FLTRP · Guocai Cup” second-prize work Cultural Heritage in the Digital Era, the contestant continuously used the structure “If we digitize folk songs, we preserve voices of the past; if...” This progressive expression demonstrates the significance of digitizing cultural heritage protection, with clear logic and strong appeal^[4]. There are many more examples like these, all of which require analysis based on specific contexts. However, it is undeniable that syntactic figures of speech make speeches more logical and ingenious.

2.3. Phonological figures of speech

Phonological figures of speech refer to techniques related to sound characteristics, specifically the varied combination of syllabic, rhythmic, and metrical elements. They make the content of a speech pleasant to the ear and easy to remember, enhance its auditory appeal, and help the audience deepen their impression of the content through the auditory experience. Such rhetorical devices rely on the physical properties of speech sounds, with common types including rhyme, reduplication, alliteration, assonance, and more. For example, at the end of a

speech, using a rhyming line like “In the name of youth, we answer the call of the times; with a striving posture, we create the beauty of the future” makes the sentence catchy due to the rhyme between “times” and “future,” facilitating audience memory and dissemination. The use of reduplication, such as “gentle wind, warm light,” creates a soft atmosphere through the repeated adjectives “gentle” and “warm,” narrowing the distance with the audience ^[5-7]. By adopting such techniques, public speeches become less rigid, instantly draw the audience closer, achieve “one-step perfection” in overall fluency and approachability, and are highly compatible with the temperament of college students.

3. Suggestions on the use of rhetorical devices in college students’ speeches

3.1. Grasp the correct semantic relationship

The prerequisite for using semantic rhetorical devices is to accurately grasp the semantic relationship. Otherwise, even the most exquisite rhetorical expressions will lose their value and may even mislead the audience and weaken the persuasiveness of the speech. When college students participate in public speech competitions and skillfully design and use rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, metonymy, and hyperbole, they must first ensure that there is a reasonable and close logical connection between the tenor and the vehicle (in metaphor), as well as between the original object and the personified object (in personification). This connection should not only conform to the laws of objective cognition but also align with the theme and contextual needs of the speech. For example, when elaborating on the theme of “persistence,” comparing “persistence” to “a kite with a broken string” violates semantic logic. A kite with a broken string will lose control and fall, which is contrary to the core connotation of “persistence leading to steady progress.” Such inappropriate metaphors will cause cognitive confusion among the audience. On the contrary, comparing “persistence” to “a hiking stick in hand when climbing a mountain” not only reflects the supporting role of persistence in moving forward but also highly fits the speech context of “overcoming difficulties and moving towards goals,” enabling the audience to quickly understand and agree with the viewpoint.

Secondly, the use of the above rhetorical devices should also be practical, avoiding distortion caused by excessive rhetoric, which would instead reduce the effectiveness of the speech ^[8]. The use of hyperbole is a typical example here. For instance, the statement “The efforts we make for our dreams can stop the earth from rotating” violates objective facts and is quite absurd. It will also affect the audience’s trust in the speech and the speaker themselves, leading to many doubts. In addition, some metonymic references between people and things should also conform to common social laws. For example, using “red scarf” to refer to “Young Pioneers” is a fixed association formed based on universal social cognition. However, if one uses “book” to refer to “diligent students” in a speech, it lacks sufficient semantic connection support, making it difficult for the audience to understand and hindering the transmission of information. In daily practice, college students should strengthen the analysis and judgment of semantic logic, improve the accuracy and rationality of using semantic rhetorical devices, and make semantic rhetoric truly serve the theme of the speech, thereby enhancing the appeal and credibility of the speech.

3.2. Choosing appropriate sentence structures

Choosing appropriate sentence structures is key to the effective application of syntactic figures of speech in college students’ English public speeches. Different sentence structures produce distinct expressive effects;

only when they align with the speech's theme, content logic, and emotional tone can the function of syntactic rhetoric be maximized, making the speech more logical and engaging. Therefore, when college students select sentence patterns for syntactic figures of speech, such as parallelism, antithesis, repetition, rhetorical questions, and echo questions, it is essential to consider the overall framework and structure of the speech and maintain a good balance. For instance, if the speech theme is "Youth and Responsibility," when using the parallel structure of "Youth is...; Youth is...; Youth is..." it is advisable to include 3 to 5 clauses. Each clause should be of similar length, with key words highlighted ^[9,10]. However, it is also important to avoid distracting the audience due to an excessive number of clauses or disorganized sentence patterns. When the theme is "Setbacks and Growth," employing the antithetical sentence "Setbacks are thorns, yet they sharpen the steps of progress; Growth is a rainbow, always shining after storms" can clearly convey the idea that "growth comes only through setbacks" by contrasting "setbacks" with "growth" and "thorns" with "rainbows."

Meanwhile, the concise and concise expression makes it easy for the audience to remember and spread. The selection of rhetorical questions and echo questions should be based on the speech's interactive needs and emotional intensity. Rhetorical questions are often used to introduce topics and inspire thinking. For example, opening a speech with the rhetorical question "What is true success? Is it the accumulation of wealth, or the realization of value?" can quickly capture the audience's attention and guide them to think deeply along the speech's train of thought. Echo questions are more suitable for strengthening emotions and intensifying tone. For example, ending a speech with the echo question "In the face of the call of the times, how can we hold back? How can we slack off?" can arouse the audience's emotional resonance and strengthen their determination to act ^[11,12]. All of these require repeated attempts to find suitable sentence structures and create innovative combinations (on the premise of conforming to objective facts) based on different thematic scenarios. College students are expected to keep practicing in daily speech training, analyze the differences between various expressive effects, and gradually master the rules of matching sentence structure selection with speech content and emotions, ultimately making syntactic figures of speech a powerful tool for organizing speech logic and enhancing expressive effects.

3.3. Mastering diverse phonetic features

Speech is an auditory art, and phonetic features directly influence the communication effect of figures of speech. When college students use figures of speech, integrating diverse phonetic features such as level and oblique tones (in Chinese), rhyme, and reduplication can endow rhetorical expressions with a "melodic beauty of sounds." This helps the audience deepen their understanding of the content through auditory memory and enhances the overall appeal of the speech. For college students participating in public speaking competitions, they must fully master the characteristics and application techniques of various phonetic figures of speech during pre-competition training, and apply them flexibly in combination with the speech scenario and their own expressive habits. Rhyme is the most commonly used type of phonetic figure of speech. Its core lies in maintaining the consistency and naturalness of rhymes, avoiding forced rhyming that undermines the fluency of the speech. In English speeches, common rhyming methods include end rhyme and alliteration. End rhyme is suitable for speech conclusions or paragraph summaries; for example, "Let's strive with passion, chase dreams with action, and build the future with dedication."

The repeated end rhymes of "passion," "action," and "dedication" make the sentence catchy, enhancing the speech's appeal and communicability. Alliteration, on the other hand, is ideal for emphasizing key words

and creating a specific atmosphere. When describing a striving scenario, phrases like “persistent pursuit, powerful progress” use alliteration of “persistent” and “powerful” (both starting with “p”) to highlight the determination and strength in striving, capturing the audience’s attention. Reduplication (or repeated syllable rhetoric) enhances the vividness and emotional color of language by repeating syllables. Its application must align with the characteristics of the described object and the emotional tone of the speech. When depicting a warm scene, reduplicative expressions such as “soft sunshine, gentle breeze” (with “soft” and “gentle” carrying a subtle repetitive rhythmic feel) create a mild and comfortable atmosphere, narrowing the distance with the audience ^[13–15].

When expressing strong emotions, phrases like “firm faith, endless courage” use reduplication to emphasize the steadfastness of faith and the boundlessness of courage, conveying a positive and uplifting force. Although alliteration (consonant repetition, note: differentiated from the above “alliteration” in a broader sense) and assonance (vowel repetition) are used relatively less frequently in English speeches, their proper application can enrich the layers of phonetic expression. Alliteration (consonant-focused) emphasizes the repetition of consonants; for example, “clear and concise” repeats the consonant “c,” making the expression more rhythmic. Assonance focuses on the repetition of vowels; for example, “bright and light” repeats the vowel “i,” rendering the pronunciation more harmonious and pleasant.

4. Conclusion

Rhetoric helps enhance the appeal of language expression, strengthens the persuasiveness and logic of viewpoints, and has always played a crucial role in various processes that require language expression and communication. In college students’ public speaking competitions, it is also necessary to learn and apply these techniques to materialize abstract viewpoints, popularize complex ideas, establish emotional resonance with the audience, and improve the quality and standard of speeches. Based on the above, from the language perspective, rhetorical devices can be divided into three categories: semantic rhetorical devices, syntactic rhetorical devices, and phonological rhetorical devices. These three categories optimize speech expression from different dimensions. Of course, college students should grasp correct semantic relationships, select appropriate syntactic structures, and master diverse phonological features when applying them. In the future, they will further deepen the application of these techniques to improve their speaking ability and overall quality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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