

WILL SMITH'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH AT THE 94TH ACADEMY AWARDS; SEEKING JUSTIFICATION WITH PATHOS AND ETHOS APPEAL

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Abstract

The 94th Academy Awards ceremony in 2022 will be the most memorable moment in history because the unexpected event of actor Will Smith slapping comedian Chris Rock in front of the audience and broadcast live on television. Not long after the incident, Will Smith was named best actor and had to deliver a short speech when receiving the award. It is interesting to analyze the points of Will Smith's speech after the slapping he did. This study analyzes Will Smith's speech when he received an award using rhetorical analysis by describing the elements of logos, ethos and pathos. The results of the analysis show that Will Smith's speech contains points that put forward elements of Pathos and Ethos to seek justification for his actions and to gain public sympathy.

Keywords: speech; rhetorical analysis; logos, ethos; pathos

Introduction

What put Martin Luther King Jr, Adolf Hitler, Nelson Mandela, Soekarno, and Barrack Obama in the same category is their undisputed ability as an orator and how they use that public speaking ability to create the greatest power in the world: the power of the people. It is astonishing that by using words, formulating sentences, and telling it in such way, they have achieved their goals and mark their spots in history.

Another name for the use of words and symbols to achieve a goal is rhetoric. Although rhetoric is frequently characterized as the art of persuasion (changing or reinforcing attitudes, ideas, values, or behavior), human being are employing rhetoric whether in informing, persuading, or even entertaining listeners since they're trying to achieve a purpose (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016).

In communication study, rhetoric is included as one of seven communication traditions (Craig, 1999). As the concept of communication gained traction in the twentieth century, rhetorical theory blossomed, and the scope of rhetoric was enlarged from its beginnings in public speaking and written composition to include any form of communication. Communication is a practical art of discourse in the rhetorical tradition, concerned with learning communication skills, having a critical awareness of approaches, and making intelligent decisions about what and how to communicate in practical situations (Craig, 1999).

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Many ideas regarding communication in general and persuasion, in particular, come from Aristotle, a Greek philosopher and rhetorician who lived and wrote in the fourth-century b.c.e. Aristotle created a holistic approach to studying rhetoric or public speaking as it was known at the time (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016). Aristotle emphasized the need of tailoring speeches to individual audiences and situations in his primary work, *Rhetoric*. This method is now known as audience-centered communication. The audience-centered approach emphasizes adapting to audiences and increasing your credibility as a speaker with the specific groups you're speaking to (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016).

Audience-centered public speaking indicates that presenters must first grasp their audience's expectations and situations in order to engage with them during the presentation. Audiences expect what they hear to be relevant to them, or else they will turn off the speaker. Audience-centered speechmaking tactics can be used with solid knowledge about who the speaker will be speaking to in order to grab and hold the audience's attention (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016).

Aristotle described rhetoric as the process of determining the available means of persuasion in a given situation. When persuasion is the goal, the communicator uses symbols (words and nonverbal messages, such as visuals and music) to influence people's attitudes, beliefs, values, and conduct. Aristotle defined three general strategies of persuasion: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, or, in his words, "available means" (Beebe & Beebe, 2012).

Persuasion is an art because it includes probability rather than certainty: we can't tell exactly what will happen if the persuader applies this or that tactic. But, since it relies on hypotheses to explain why individuals are persuaded by a communicator, persuasion is also a science. A theory is a creative interpretation or explanation of why processes (or events) occur as they do. Science is the search for 'truth,' whereas a theory is a creative interpretation or explanation of why processes (or events) occur as they do. In a nutshell, a theory is a technique of knowing something. Persuasion theory is an attempt to understand and interpret how persuasion works. A communication theory also tries to explain how communication happens (De Wet, 2017).

The speaker's overarching goal is expressed in the general purpose of communication, which answers the question, "What do I want my speech to accomplish?" It usually corresponds to one of the three most popular speech types: informational, persuasive, or entertaining. The purpose of an informative speech is to describe, explain, or demonstrate something. When you speak to persuade, you're attempting to reinforce, modify, or change the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, values, and behaviors of your audience. In an entertaining speech, the speaker aims to capture the audience and make them enjoy the speech. Awards ceremonies, workplace parties, roasts, and toasts are frequently used as the setting for such remarks (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016).

Most of the public speaking is done on a special occasion. One of many special occasions speeches we often watch on TV is the acceptance speech during the awards

ceremony. For this research, we will particularly analyze one acceptance speech being delivered on the 94th Academy Awards.

The Academy Award is the world's most prestigious event for the movie industry. The 94th Academy Awards ceremony in 2022 will be one of the most memorable moments in history. Aside from the diversity of the winners, the 94th Academy Awards was highlighted due to its unexpected event involving 2 of the world's famous actors: Will Smith and Chris Rock (Stevens, 2022).

Chris Rock was doing his skit for the Oscar's and at one point he mentioned a statement and address it to Jada Pinket Smith (Will Smith's wife), which was supposed to be a joke, but later elevated into something disrespectful. Chris Rock was referring to Jada Pinket Smith as GI Jane due to her hairstyle. Jada Pinket Smith is currently having a health condition called alopecia areata that caused her to lose her hair (O'Kane, 2022). Will Smith did not take the joke lightly and decided to walk to the stage and slapped Chris Rock in his face followed by shouting "*keep my wife's name out of your mouth* (Stevens, 2022).

Not long after the incident, Will Smith was announced as "best actor" and had to deliver his acceptance speech. Will Smith won as the best actor in the King Richard movie. Smith played the role of Richard William, a father who determined to make his children tennis champions, who are now well-known as Venus William and Serena William. It is interesting to analyze an acceptance speech that is being delivered right after an unexpected incident that involved emotional impulse.

Based on that background, this research will analyze Will Smith's acceptance speech on 2022 Academy Awards using Rhetorical Analysis by observing the elements of *Logos, Ethos and Pathos* Will Smith use in delivering his speech.

Research Method

This research employs the qualitative method, with literature review and rhetoric analysis as the main tools to analyse acceptance speech. For data collection, the text of speech was available online and the speech can also be seen from YouTube platform. Furthermore, the coding process was done by categorizing words and phrases of the speech into Aristotle's persuasion approach; logos, pathos and ethos. This rhetorical analysis argue that Will Smith's speech relies more on Pathos and Ethos element rather than logos to gain audience sympathy.

Result and Discussion

The author or speaker uses appeals to persuade their audience. In rhetoric, three major appeals are discussed: logos, ethos, and pathos, which were founded by the philosopher Aristotle and are frequently referred to as the rhetorical triangle (Lutzke, J., & Henggeler, 2022).

Logos appeals to the audience's reason through logical reasoning. Because the speaker's ethos appeals to his or her status or authority, the audience is more likely to trust them. Pathos elicits a response from the audience by appealing to emotions such as

wrath or sympathy. These three appeals are referred to as the rhetorical triangle. They are necessary for rhetorical analysis, even though they are not all used in every piece of rhetoric (Caulfield, 2020).

There are certain common guidelines to follow when accepting an award. Most importantly, award recipients should express gratitude to the presenter, organization, and audience; show humility, and keep their remarks brief. Furthermore, some acceptance speakers may provide context for the award by addressing the job or activity that earned them the prize or by sharing a brief personal story that is relevant to the occasion (Lull, J., & Coopman, 2016).

When a speaker or author utilizes logos to persuade an audience, it must be based on logic, rigorous organization, and objective facts. An author can appeal to the intelligence of an audience by offering facts that can be fact checked (using many sources) and comprehensive explanations to support key arguments (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022). Based on the analysis of this study, there was no logos appeal on the entire Will Smith's acceptance speech.

When an author or speaker uses pathos, he or she is attempting to elicit emotional responses from the audience in order to persuade them to agree with the author's or speaker's thesis. When an author uses pathetic appeals, he or she wants the audience to feel something: fury, joy, pride, sadness or happiness (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022).

Pathos-based rhetoric is any rhetorical style that uses pathos to get the listener to "open up" to the topic, the argument, or the author. Emotions can make us vulnerable, and an author or speaker may exploit this vulnerability to persuade the audience that the argument is compelling (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022).

The following are some examples of pathos or pathetic appeals:

- a) People, places, or events that are described in a way that allows the reader to feel or experience them.
- b) Detailed depictions of persons, places, or events that make the reader feel as if he or she is witnessing the occurrences.
- c) Sharing personal experiences that help the reader feel a sense of empathy or connection with the person being portrayed.
- d) Using emotive vocabulary to put the reader in that emotional mentality (what is the author trying to make the audience feel, and how is he or she achieving it?)
- e) Using whatever facts that may cause the viewers to feel something. This could include instilling empathy or disgust in the audience for the person/group/event under discussion, as well as a sense of connection to or rejection of the person/group/event under discussion (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022).

Will Smith acceptance speech is dominated by the pathos appeal where Will Smith tried to captivate the emotional side of the audience by speaking with passion and attempting to draw sympathy or any other emotional response from the audience (Caulfield, 2020). While shedding a few tears he was portraying himself as the hero of the family and no matter what he does, all can be justified since it's for the protection of his family. In his less than 3 minutes speech, Will Smith's early part of the speech was

loaded with the first-person statement (starting with the word “I”; I got to..., I am..., I want to...) as he highlighted his role to be the protector of the loved ones and link himself to the character he played on the movie through these sentences:

Text 1

“Richard Williams was a fierce defender of his family. In this time in my life, in this moment, I am overwhelmed by what God is calling on me to do and be in this world.”

Text 2

“Making this film I got to protect Aunjanue Ellis, who is one of the most strongest, most delicate people I ever met. I got to protect Saniyya and Demi, the two actresses that played Venus and Serena. I’m being called on in my life to love people and to protect people and to be a river to my people.”

Emotional appeal is frequently required for effective persuasion. "It is feeling and intensity of imagination that make us eloquent," said Quintilian, a Roman rhetorician. You can become a more convincing speaker by adding "emotion" and "power of imagination" to your logical arguments. Emotional appeals, or pathos as Aristotle called them, are meant to make listeners feel sad, angry, guilty, terrified, pleased, proud, sympathetic, reverent, or anything similar (Lucas & Stob, 2004). Will Smith’s acceptance speech tried to resonate with the audience’s emotion and is filled with the fatherhood elements and how a father supposed to act while the loved ones need him even justify that the crazy thing he did was out of love.

Two dimensions of ethical appeals are audience values and authorial credibility/character. On the one hand, an author or speaker making an ethical appeal aims to appeal to the audience's values or ideals, such as patriotism, tradition, justice, equality, dignity for all mankind, self-preservation, or other social, religious, or philosophical ideas (Christian values, socialism, capitalism, feminism, etc.). These values are sometimes equated to emotions, however they are felt collectively rather than individually. When an author or speaker invokes the values that the audience cares about to justify or support his or her argument, it is called Ethos. The audience will believe that the author or the speaker is making a "correct" argument (in the sense of moral "rightness," i.e., "My argument is based on principles that are important to you. As a result, you must accept my argument"). The audience's values are hence the emphasis of the first portion of the definition of ethos (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022).

This meaning of referring to what is "correct" in an ethical appeal, on the other hand, ties to the second definition of ethos: the author or the speaker. The author-centered or speaker-centered ethos centers around two concepts: the author's legitimacy and his or her character (Gagich, M., & Zickel, 2022).

Will Smith arguably tried to emphasize his credential as a father, a husband, “fierce defender of the family”, “protector” and a “river to his people”. Will Smith also uses

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ethos appeal in his speech by highlighting his role as a Hollywood actor who has to face the common practice and injustice in the entertainment world and generalizing that the audience also has experienced or will experience similar occurrence through this sentence:

Text 3

"I know to do what we do, you gotta be able to take abuse, and you gotta be able to have people talk crazy about you. In this business, you gotta be able to have people disrespecting you, and you gotta smile and you gotta pretend like that's OK.."

As Kenneth Burke (1969) put it, we use language to get other people to cooperate. We utilize words to make a difference in society and organizations, and this ability to make a difference with words is known as rhetorical agency. We could say that the phrase refers to the ability of speech to influence the outcome of a situation (Burke, 1969).

In the end of his speech, Will Smith tried to show his love for his mother and once again emphasizing his role as the protector and caregiver to the family in the sentence below:

Text 4

"...to my mother...a lot of this moment is really complicated for me, but to my mother... Being able to love and care for my mother, my family, my wife."

Text 5

"...I want to be an ambassador of that kind of love and care and concern."

Text 6

"...I look like the crazy father just like they said about Richard Williams. But love will make you do crazy things".

After analyzing the speech text, Will Smith's acceptance speech at the 94th Academy Awards was dominated with:

- a. pathos appeals by speaking with passion, showing his emotional side (crying while doing the speech), and attempting to elicit sympathy or any other emotional response from the audience (Caulfield, 2020).
- b. ethos appeal by presenting a moral argument that might emphasize his own morally commendable behavior as an actor, a husband, father, and son to earn people's trust (Caulfield, 2020).

For further study, it is suggested to do research about the audience perception towards Will Smith's acceptance speech at the 94th Academy Awards and find out whether the pathos and ethos appeal affect the audience as expected.

Conclusion

From rhetorical analysis, it is clear that Will Smith's rhetoric in his acceptance speech at the 94th Academy Awards ceremony in 2022 consists of pathos and ethos appeal. By framing his speech with his role and credential as a protective and crazy-loving father, husband, and son, Will Smith ensures through his speech that his previous action before receiving the award was an act out of love.

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