

## STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF MODERN ENGLISH COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES

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*This paper investigates structural features of modern English commencement speeches. In the article, the commencement speech is defined as a speech delivered at the graduation ceremony by outstanding people, who gained national or international recognition in some field (e.g. science, medicine, business or entertainment). We suggest that commencement address belongs to the entertaining-commemorating type of discourse and its main purpose is to show respect and inspire graduates, to honour the beginning of their independent life.*

*To meet the needs of the study, Nagorska's approach to the speech structure has been adapted. The linguist distinguishes three main parts of a speech: Introductory, Basic and Final Communicative Units. The article focuses on the analysis of Introductory (ICU) and Final Communicative Units (FCU).*

*The results of the study show that ICU starts with the greeting (formal or informal, sometimes both to avoid repetition) that is followed by the address to group or individual addressee. The speakers invariably greet and address the graduates but they may deliberately skip address to other members of the gathering. The keynote speakers tend to air gratitude but usually it appears as a reaction to active audience, their applause or excited exclamations, in that case orators deviate from the original text of their speech and spontaneously thank everybody for their warm welcome. The invariable feature of ICU of all the commencement speeches in question is the expression of honour as every speaker is genuinely grateful for the trust and opportunity to share his/her experience and inspire the younger generation.*

*In FCU the speakers repeat the main message of the speech or challenge the students in order to leave a deep imprint on their memory and induce them to life-changing actions. They inspire graduates not to be afraid of failures and hardships, contribute to the community/country and find their true vocation.*

**Key words:** commencement speech, Introductory Communicative Unit, Final Communicative Unit, address, greeting.

**Шабельник К. О., Торговец Ю. І.**

### Структурні особливості сучасної англomовної випускної промови

*Представлене дослідження є спробою окреслити структурні особливості сучасної англomовної випускної промови. У статті остання визначається як урочиста промова з нагоди завершення навчання у закладі вищої освіти. Випускна промова зазвичай виголошується видатними людьми — акторами, співаками, політиками, бізнесменами — які зробили вагомий внесок у розвиток суспільства та досягли значних успіхів у певній галузі. Досліджувана промова належить до розважально-урочистого типу дискурсу, оскільки її основною метою є шанування досягнень випускників та надихання їх на нові звершення. Підхід Тетяни Нагорської до структури промов видався найбільш релевантним для цієї розвідки і був успішно адаптований з огляду на особливості та мету дослідження. Дослідниця виділяє три основні частини промови: вступний комунікативний блок, основний комунікативний блок та заключний комунікативний блок. Наша стаття зосереджується на аналізі вступного (ВКБ) та заключного комунікативних блоків (ЗКБ).*

*Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що вступний комунікативний блок зазвичай починається з привітання (офіційного чи неофіційного, іноді обох, щоб уникнути повторення), за яким іде звертання до групового або індивідуального адресата, при цьому усі спікери звертаються до випускників, іноді випускаючи звертання до інших присутніх. Промовці також можуть починати промову з висловлення подяки, але зазвичай вона виникає як спонтанна реакція на оплески або емоційні вигуки аудиторії, в такому разі спікери відхиляються від прописаного плану промови. Усі спікери у ВКБ вказують на те, що виголошу-*

вати промову для них це надзвичайна честь, вони пишуться можливістю поділитися своїм досвідом та дати настанови молодому поколінню.

У заключному комунікативному блоці спікери актуалізують основну думку виступу та ставлять перед випускниками випробувальні завдання, щоб залишити глибокий відбиток у їхній пам'яті й спонука-ти до рішучих дій.

**Ключові слова:** випускна промова, вступний комунікативний блок, заключний комунікативний блок, звертання; привітання.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, commencement speeches have become extremely popular. Famous universities around the world invite well-known politicians, entrepreneurs, talk-show hosts, actors and singers to deliver this keynote address in order to motivate and encourage graduates, give them some constructive advice on how to face the challenges of adult life. Obviously, nothing can be more inspiring than examples set by outstanding and successful people.

There are studies of speeches' key features like storytelling, humour and motivation (Matt Cramer, Anthony Perrella, and Bethany McKay). Despite the constant interest of linguists in public speaking, there are few articles which present complex approach and analysis of structural features of modern English commencement speeches and it causes the relevance of the research.

The **aim** of the paper is to determine structural features of modern English commencement speeches by analysing their Introductory and Final Communicative Units.

## Theoretical background

Oral presentation or public speaking is a specific form of communication i.e. the art of speaking in a structured manner on a particular topic in front of a group for a specific purpose at a specific time and place (Storz, 2013). According to McKay (2020), there are four general purposes for public speaking, namely to deliver a message, to sell an idea, to persuade and to commemorate or entertain. These purposes may overlap, but still taking into account the purpose of the speech all of them can be categorised based on 4 main concepts: informing, demonstrating, persuading, and entertaining or commemorating. Entertaining or commemorating speeches often strengthen the bonds between audience members from recalling a shared experience or intend to amuse audiences through humour, stories, or illustrations. Examples of this purpose include a toast, such as a best man's speech at a wedding reception; a eulogy to praise the dead; a commencement speech at graduation; or presenting an award ("Types of Speeches and Speaking Occasions", n.d.). Thus, commencement speech belongs to the entertaining / commemorating type. A commencement speech or commencement address is a speech given to graduating students,

generally at a university, although the term is also used for secondary education institutions (Sensagent, n.d.).

Schmidt (2009) says that the purpose of a commencement speech is to honour the young people who have completed the requirements for graduation and celebrate with them this memorable occasion. The researcher states that the task of a commencement speaker is to inspire the members of the graduating class. Therefore, the commencement speakers should be very attentive to choosing the words for messages they want to deliver, because graduation day for students and their families is a major milestone and something they will remember forever (Steuer, 2020). In many cases, it is the last formal on-campus encounter with the college community and a crucial moment in the graduates' forming of lifelong impressions of their alma mater (Taylor, 2006, p. 145). Consequently, speakers must tailor their words to the graduates, while considering that their audience extends to the parents, grandparents, younger siblings, teachers, and anyone else who might see the speech online (Zandan, n.d.).

A typical speech, and commencement address consists of the following parts: beginning (initial part, introduction), middle (main part) and end (final part, conclusion). Nagorska elaborated her approach to the speech structure. The researcher states that an ordinary speech consists of: Introductory Communicative Unit (ICU), Basic Communicative Unit (BCU) and Final Communicative Unit (FCU). According to the linguist Introductory Communicative Unit is the first important element of a public speech which psychologically prepares the audience to the speech perception and meaningfully introduces listeners to its essence. This part serves to establish contact between the speaker and the audience. Moreover, the speaker formulates the purpose and the tasks of the speech and briefly describes its core topics.

**Basic Communicative Unit** is the main part of a speech where thesis and arguments are presented. They are shown as a detailed chain of reasoning aimed at the justification of a specific idea. BCU can be divided into several parts, in terms of the quantity of micro themes that the speaker considers in his/her speech. Micro themes of BCU are distinguished by a set of keywords that are the conceptual centres of the text.

In Final Communicative Unit, the author summarises what has already been said and gives

a comprehensive assessment of things mentioned in the speech (Nagorska, 2007, pp. 54–55).

**Introductory Communicative Unit of the commencement speeches.** Nagorska's approach was a bit modified and adjusted to suit the needs of the research.

Thus, commencement speakers tend to start their speeches by greeting and addressing the audience. It is common and considered to be a long-established form of etiquette.

(1) *Hello. Good morning class of 2019* (Bell, 2019).

In this example, an informal greeting (*Hello*) is followed by a formal one (*Good morning*) and the address to a direct, group addressee (*class of 2019*). Greeting '*Hello*' plays an essential role in everyday conversational routines and is commonly used as a ritual form of politeness for building and maintaining social relationships. It is an effective tool in demonstrating politeness or enhancing the speaker's positive and friendly image. Formal greeting (*Good morning*) signals the time of the day and, in this particular case, is used to avoid repetition.

(2) *Hello, president Burwell chairman Board of Trustees, Jack Purcell members of the Board of Trustees, Dean's faculty, family, friends Eagles and most importantly graduating class of 2019 good evening!* (Adichie, 2019).

In the example (2), an informal greeting (*Hello*) is followed by the address to direct, individual and group addressee (*president Burwell, chairman Board of Trustees, Jack Purcell members of the Board of Trustees etc.*). We can see that the speaker names everyone who was on the stage with him. In accordance with the agenda there are always Greetings from the President, Greetings from the Board of Trustees, Introduction of the Graduating Class, Representative Student Speaker Address and Introduction of the Guest Speaker. Consequently, the speaker greets everyone who delivered a speech before him/her. Then he/she addresses groups, starting with teaching staff and ending with graduating students (*Dean's faculty, family, friends... graduating class of 2019*), and uses formal greeting that indicates the time frame of the event (*good evening*).

Sometimes when the greeting and addressing part is over the speakers proceed to thank the listeners. It helps them establish contact with the audience and create a friendly atmosphere. It is an excellent opportunity to show how genuinely and sincerely grateful they are to all the members of the university community for the opportunity to give the speech:

(3) *Thank you so much for having me. Thank you to the faculty, to the guests, the families and to all the gorgeous students among us* (Bell, 2019).

When the speaker is extremely popular and the audience is very emotional and active, they burst into applause before the orator begins speaking. In this case he or she starts the speech by thanking the listeners:

(4) *Thank you very much, everybody. And congratulations to the class of 2017...*

*... I want to thank President Jerry Falwell and his incredible wife ... Let me also extend our appreciation to the entire Falwell family, Trey, Sarah, Wesley, Laura and Caroline ... Most importantly to our new graduates, each of you should take immense pride in what you have achieved ...* (Trump, 2017).

Donald Trump expresses his gratitude twice, at first spontaneously, then according to the text of his speech. At first he addresses an indirect group addressee (*everyone*). *Everyone* is an indefinite personal pronoun that does not refer to any specific person but to a total group of people. So, Donald Trump erases boundaries and treats all the audience members equally. Then he congratulates the graduating class and, following the script, thanks the faculty.

Let us consider one more example of speaker's thanksgiving that appears as the reaction to the applause. This time it is followed by an unusual, catchy address, which is used to trigger the audience's emotions and make the speech more memorable:

(5) *Thank you, guys. Wow. Thank you! Spartans! Woo, woo, woo, woo!*

*Wow, thank you so much, Chancellor Gilliam...* (Jeong, 2019).

The first part (*Thank you, guys. Wow. Thank you*) is unprepared. The audience are so glad to see the speaker that they burst into applause and the speaker reacts to it. Afterwards he thanks everyone, following his speech. There are a few points in this example that we want to delve into. Firstly, the speaker uses an informal address *guys* which refers to both male and female, and establishes a homely atmosphere. Then the second address follows but this time it is *Spartans!* Dr. Ken means UNC Greensboro Spartans, the official name of the athletic teams that represent the University in different competitions. This metaphorical name implies that graduates possess qualities that Spartans had: they are brave, strong and smart. Then, Dr. Ken reinforces his speech with exclamation of cheering for sports teams (*Woo, woo, woo, woo!*) to show his excitement and positive feelings. This exclamation helps us understand that the speaker and the graduates are on the same wavelength.

Viola Devis also starts her speech by thanking spontaneously in response to the audience's warm welcome.

(6) *Someone shouts, ["I love you!"] Thank you. I love you, too. And I'm going to show you how much I love you. This speech, these pages have all of my breakfast items on it. Avocado toast, jelly, everything [Laughs]. President Beilock, distinguished faculty, alumnae, family, friends, the 657 or so sisters in the audience, graduating class...* (Davis, 2019).

Gratitude contributes to the immediate establishment of the contact between the speaker and the listeners. It is important to underscore that Viola Davis reinforces the moment with a joke (*This speech, these pages have all of my breakfast items on it. Avocado toast, jelly, everything*). Humour helps her create a strong bond with the audience, because this little joke tells everyone how diligently she prepared her speech and how important it was for her. When the spontaneous part is over, she starts her planned speech by addressing the audience in a specific, formal order.

All the speakers show a strong tendency to express how honoured they are to deliver the commencement speech. Having analysed the research material, we came to the conclusion that this particular part of ICU was the most significant to the speakers and none of them skipped it:

(7) *It is an incredible honor to stand here before you today* (Bell, 2019).

(8) *...they really seriously pale in comparison to this honor today Berkeley* (Timberlake, 2019).

It is common knowledge that the essence of this type of speech is determined by the context of the gathering. Still some speakers mention the occasion and goal of the gathering. They also refer to the place and time of the event:

(9) *It really is an honor and a privilege to be here at home, in Greensboro North Carolina ... And I am honestly honored to be here at UNCG just to celebrate the Spartan class of 2019* (Jeong, 2019).

(10) *I'm very honored to be your commencement speaker* (Adichie, 2019).

(11) *And I'm thrilled to be back at Liberty University...Right here, the class of 2017, dressed in cap and gown, graduating to a totally brilliant future... But here we are celebrating together on this very joyous occasion* (Trump, 2017).

So, as we can see, the ICU includes three components — thanking, which is in all the commencement speeches from our corpus; addressees' respects, which may be expressed formally and lengthy, or emotionally and colloquially; and, finally, spontaneous interactions with the audience, represented by emotive lexicon, jokes and witty observations.

**Final Communicative Unit.** It has long been acknowledged that the main pragmatic function of the final part of a text is not only to sum up its major points, but also to get across and reinforce the message that might have a far-reaching and long-lasting positive effect on audience's personal life and career (Torhovets, 2015, p. 48). Consequently, in FCU the speakers highlight their key ideas and also challenge the students with different tasks, helping the graduates find their place in life.

The tasks that the speakers set vary, but all of them are aimed at inspiring the young people.

Justin Timberlake encourages students not to be afraid of making mistakes:

(13) *You have to dare to suck, you have to feel you will never make something great if you are afraid that it is going to suck that it is going to fail so I'll leave you with that ... and that fire in your belly that got you here, keep it, love it, keep throwing logs on it...* (Timberlake, 2019).

His final message influences the emotions of the graduates. Justin Timberlake seems to be a bit pushy using a modal verb of obligation *have to* and a slang vulgar verb *to suck* that has strong negative connotation. He employs them to emphasise the idea of interdependence between failure and success, to prove that fear keeps us from doing amazing, extraordinary things. Justin encourages graduates to learn from their mistakes, move on and achieve new goals, remain enthusiastic and passionate about music by using a vivid metaphor *that fire in your belly that got you here, keep it, love it, keep throwing logs on it*.

A lot of speakers emphasise the idea of making a difference, making a contribution. Donald Trump states that students have to care about their country and contribute to its development and prosperity:

(14) *Now it falls on the shoulders of each of you here today to protect the freedom that patriots like George earned with their incredible sacrifice. Fortunately, you have been equipped with the tools from your time right here on this campus to make the right decisions and to serve God, family and country...We must always remember that we share one home and one glorious destiny, whether we are brown, black or white. We all bleed the same red blood of patriots.* (Trump, 2017).

Donald Trump touches upon basic American values - *freedom* and *equality*. He evokes strong patriotic feelings stating that Founding Fathers fought to death holding on to their deep-seated beliefs and it is a sole duty of the younger generation to secure rights and freedoms of all the citizens of the USA. Trump sounds even more categorical when unfolds the concept of equality; he uses a modal verb of obligation *must* to remind graduates about affinity

of their goals. A well-known saying *We all bleed the same colour* contributes to the profound effect of his message, emphasising that the same blood rushes through their veins, they cherish common values and beliefs and each of them strives for a better future and they must build this future together.

Viola Devis and Chimamanda Adichie induce students to make a contribution as well. They speak about commitment to others, a positive change that graduates can bring into people's lives:

(15) *So with my hands up, what I am saying that on this day of your genesis, your leap, your commencement, your mark in your history, perhaps your elixir is simply this: that you can either leave something for people or you can leave something in people* (Davis, 2019).

Viola Devis underscores the scale of the event, the importance of the day. A powerful metaphor draws parallels between graduation and leap, it is the beginning of a new page in the graduates' life, yet nobody knows what expects them when they land, what trials await them. She shares one essential principle that lies in the importance of serving the community and people.

(16) *Change the world! ... Be ashamed to die until you have done one act that benefits humanity and humanity can be one person* (Adichie, 2019).

Chimamanda Adichie quotes Horace Mann, an American educator and politician. This saying helps to strengthen the key idea of the speech, enhances its emotive expressiveness. Imperative sentences motivate students to take immediate action.

All speeches end with words of gratitude. First of all, it is polite. Secondly, they show how much the speakers appreciate the audience. Moreover, it is a conventional way to end the speech. Some speakers make it short and concise:

(17) *Thank you* (Adichie, 2019).

Sometimes the words of congratulation are added:

(18) *Thank you, and congratulations* (Bell, 2019).  
(19) *...I want to thank you, the students. I also want to thank you, the family, for getting them there. And I want to thank and congratulate Liberty. May God bless the class of 2017. May god bless the United States of America. May God bless all of you here today* (Trump, 2017).

Donald Trump finishes his speech in a very 'presidential' manner. He uses the phrase *God Bless the United States of America*, which has been a traditional ending of presidential addresses since the time of Richard Nixon.

## Results and Discussion

Traditionally, a speech consists of three parts and following Nagorska's approach we call them Introductory, Basic, and Final Communicative Units.

The results of ICU analysis demonstrate speakers' tendency to start their speeches with the greeting that may be formal or informal. The choice of the greeting does not depend on the speaker's status or position and is completely arbitrary. The results prove that all the speakers with no exception address the audience. They may do it in a formal or an informal way to establish a friendly atmosphere. Some speakers start the speech by thanking the audience, but usually it is a spontaneous reaction to the listeners' applause and exclamations. One more interesting finding, invariable in all the commencement speeches under analysis, is the expression of honour. Successful people who have earned wide national and international recognition are invited to give this speech, which is an arduous and honourable task, so speakers feel obliged to emphasise that it is a great pleasure for them to be on the stage. Some speakers mention the occasion of the gathering, time and place of the event.

In FCU, speakers highlight the main idea of the speech and set graduates challenging tasks (e.g. to contribute to the community and country, to overcome fear, to change the world), encouraging them to keep moving forward no matter what and help others. The findings of the research show that all the speakers end their speeches expressing gratitude.

## Conclusions

Commencement is an important event in graduates' life. They honour and commemorate the beginning of their independent, adult life. Hence, the presence and guidance from famous people make this event more memorable. Keynote speakers in turn have to inspire and motivate young people to make a difference.

ICU of commencement speeches contains the greeting, address, expression of gratitude and honour. We have also identified that the level of speech formality does not depend on the position and status of the speaker. Politicians may use informal greetings and use jokes, while actors may stick to particular patterns and formal tone. However, we have to note that Donald Trump pays special attention to basic American values such as *freedom* and *equality*, he also emphasises the idea of *servicing the country*, which is connected to his position.

Another finding of the research suggests that commencement speakers are really honoured to give the speech and in order to show it they usually thank the audience twice: at the beginning (ICU) and at the end (FCU) of the speech.

This paper presented the insight into the structure of commencement speeches, leaving plenty of space for further researches. Thus, future studies can investigate linguistic and stylistic features of commencement speeches.

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