

THE ECONOMY OF WORDS: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF EPIGRAMMATIC TED TALK TITLES

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis focuses on the semantic component of epigrammatic TED Talk titles and aims to raise the simple question, how is it possible that so much meaning can be conveyed using so little linguistic means? With a carefully selected corpus of forty TED Talk titles based on the talks that had accumulated the highest number of views, this study applies Qualitative Descriptive Analysis combined with Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by Lakoff & Johnson in 1980. The result is a list of recurrent semantic strategies used in epigrammatic TED Talk titles, including structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors, thus providing evidence to the existence of what could be referred to as a “semantics of brevity”. On the whole, TED Talks have been proved to use their unique micro-genre to convey meaningful information and create expectations for the audience with regard to the message delivered. At the same time, the different forms in which titles appear—namely, noun phrase, imperative, interrogative, or declarative—rather than being grammatical peculiarities per se turn out to be ways of conveying metaphors. This research is an attempt to contribute to ongoing discussions concerning language economy in digital public communication.

Keywords: TED Talks, semantic analysis, conceptual metaphor, semantic density, epigrammatic language, discourse economy, brevity, rhetorical titles

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an aspect of good writing that favors succinctness. The history of Aristotle’s emphasis on clarity and even modern ad copywriting involving struggles over writing a five-word slogan can teach us to be brief. The urge to be economical with words, referred to as economy of words in this thesis, is part of semiotics, a sub-discipline of linguistics that deals with how language builds and transfers meanings. And there may be no better place in modern day culture to observe such urge than in the titles of

TED Talks. TED was originally an event targeting the technology, entertainment, and design industries but after opening its gates on the web in 2006, TED has become one of the most recognizable platforms for idea exchange in the internet era. Every single TED Talk needs to capture the audience’s attention in its title.

TED Talks have been studied more and more in recent years as their own genre. Ludewig (2017) considers TED Talks to be a mixed genre, incorporating elements of the sales pitch, personal testimony, and academic discourse.

Compagnone (2015), meanwhile, contends that the TED organization has successfully transformed academic discussion into an online performance. Pierini (2019) takes this point even further, analyzing the ways in which TED speakers use linguistic tools to render academic concepts comprehensible to lay audiences. The common thread in all three studies is the idea that TED discourse represents a confluence of concision, clarity, and persuasion, and one must ask whether these same elements exist in concentrated form in the title.

Many titles for TED Talks are epigrammatic in nature. In this case, the term epigrammatic refers to the epigram, an element of classical rhetoric defined as a witty, paradoxical statement intended to make a lasting impression on the reader's mind. Such titles as "Grit" by Angela Duckworth, consisting of one syllable and packed with meaning at the same time, are a great example. In turn, titles such as "Do schools kill creativity?" by Ken Robinson present a striking juxtaposition of seemingly inappropriate terms, thus encapsulating an entire discussion in only six words. Titles for TED Talks are much more than mere markers; their function extends beyond that and involves semantically significant actions performed in the process of titling.

Of course, studying titles is not anything new to the field of linguistics; it has been going on for decades in relation to literary titles, newspaper headings, and academic titles of articles. However, TED Talk titles have their unique place in linguistic studies since they use a more varied range of semantic resources that are not typical of newspaper headlines, where grammar of brevity reigns supreme, nor are those titles aiming at descriptive accuracy of academic journals. TED Talk titles use metaphorical expressions, like "The puzzle of motivation," lexical ambiguity, such as "My stroke of insight," juxtaposition of contrasting concepts, like "Choice, happiness and spaghetti sauce," or just plain assertions, like "Sleep is your superpower." TED discourses research backs up these observations. Thus, for example, Scotto di Carlo (2014a) shows that TED speakers tend to rely on the extensive use of figures of speech and metaphors to explain difficult concepts and make them more accessible,

while Scotto di Carlo (2014b) found out that TED speakers intentionally create intimacy with the audience via their language choices.

The present research aims to uncover the mechanisms behind the ability of epigrammatic TED Talk titles to pack such rich meanings into such short expressions. Economy in this case does not mean mere brevity; rather, it is the balance between the amount of content conveyed in the utterance and its form. Such an approach echoes the ancient linguistic concept of Zipf's law, first postulated by George Kingsley Zipf in his seminal 1949 work, suggesting that people instinctively seek the path of least resistance when speaking. Similarly, Grice's (1975) quantity maxim states that one must convey information but do so concisely without excess. In this age of social media and online platforms, the principle is particularly relevant. The theoretical basis for the analysis will be the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, advanced in the 1980s by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. In line with the latter's work, this paper considers metaphor as a fundamental feature of thought rather than simply style. As such, the theory suits the analysis of TED Talk titles, which tend to use conceptual metaphors extensively.

In order to explain why the titles of TED Talks merit careful study, it becomes imperative to take a step back and understand the larger context of communications within which the TED Talks titles exist. In essence, the advent of digital media has changed the entire dynamic of the relationship between text and audience. As Crystal (2011) explains, the Internet age has created new standards in linguistics in which the texts tend to be shorter and quicker to process. Furthermore, there is an emphasis placed on capturing the audience's attention in the first few lines of any communication. The title of any communication is the argument being made as to why the rest of the text matters.

This brings us to the notion of the paratext. Genette (1997), in his seminal work on the boundaries of literary texts, suggests that the title, preface, cover design and similar features should not be considered mere peripheries to the text, but rather something that influences the reader's perception of the main text. Thus, in Genette's

terminology, the title serves as the threshold – an intermediate stage separating the reader from the actual content and controlling the access and the expectations of the viewer. Although Genette wrote his book focusing on printed literature, the idea is easily applied to the digital age. The TED Talk's title is its threshold that millions of viewers have to pass in order to get to its content.

The analysis of headlines offers a unique insight into the workings of language under conditions of compression. In particular, Dor (2003) suggested that newspaper headlines serve as relevance optimizers – brief constructions whose purpose is to help the reader maximize their gain from processing information through minimal expenditure of effort. In other words, for Dor, a proper headline balances the reader's expectations and the article's content, achieving the ideal trade-off between processing costs and cognitive benefits according to relevance theory. The same holds true for TED Talks' titles that face the same optimization dilemma – they should provide enough information to arouse interest while not disclosing too much to make the talk unnecessary. Building on this line of reasoning, Ifantidou (2009) demonstrated that headlines can be seen as a mechanism for creating ad hoc concepts – meanings created at the moment of processing based on general knowledge and pragmatics. Many TED Talk titles appear to operate in just such a fashion – using seemingly familiar words that acquire additional layers of meaning in the context of processing.

However, at the same time, it is impossible to overlook the sensational element of headlines. Molek-Kozakowska (2013) proposed a pragmatic linguistic approach to the analysis of sensationalism in news headlines and discovered that writers of headlines consciously use surprise, emotionality and norm violation in order to engage readers in the story. While TED Talk titles can hardly be considered sensationalist in terms of sensationalism found in tabloids, there is some logic behind such approach – logic of surprise used strategically. Headlines such as “Do schools kill creativity?” or “Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong” use the logic of provocation and norm violation similar to the

one described by Molek-Kozakowska. The only thing different about TED titles is their aim.

Based on the genre theory, Swales (1990) pointed out that genres are not only characterized by certain forms but also by functions in the communication process in a discourse community. In case the TED Talks qualify as a new genre, as was claimed by Ludewig (2017) and others, the titles of TED Talks could be considered a new sub-genre. Another similar point was made by Fairclough (1995), who noted that the language of media is not neutral but is influenced by the context where it is used and the audience at whom it is aimed. TED, as an organization, emphasizes accessibility, inspiration, and stimulation of thought, and it shows in the language of its titles.

The former curator of TED, Anderson (2016) has discussed the art of making TED talks and highlighted that the most important decision made by a speaker during the process is the title – the crucial factor between the success and failure of the presentation.

The function of metaphor in public communication discourse offers another critical dimension. According to Charteris-Black (2004), metaphor does not only belong to poetic or literary language; it is an integral part of the language of politics and media and serves for shaping and framing the discourse. In other words, people use metaphors in their speeches and writing to communicate some abstract ideas in an easily understandable form. This is another good example of why TED Talk titles employ metaphor; metaphor allows to reduce the whole message in a phrase. Finally, according to Kövecses (2010), who wrote a highly popular introductory book on metaphor, conceptual metaphors are not decorative elements; they are the organizing principles of thought itself, which means that people understand the whole areas of experience based on metaphors. Therefore, when someone says “The puzzle of motivation”, he uses one of the conceptual metaphors described by Kövecses (2010).

Finally, the cognitive processes involved in interpreting figurative language need to be considered. Giora (2003) put forth the graded salience theory, which states that the most salient

sense of a word or expression, usually the most frequent, conventional, or familiar sense, is always processed first, irrespective of the context. What are the implications for titles of TED Talks that depend on ambiguity or unconventional metaphors? Take, for instance, the title "My stroke of insight." Processing of *stroke* involves activation of its most salient sense (something that happens suddenly), while its less salient sense (a medical condition related to blood vessels in the brain) arises only upon deeper consideration by the audience. The interaction of both the senses adds to the power of such titles, which are epigrams.

1.2 Research Problem

Despite the large body of literature on TED Talks, very few papers concentrate specifically on the role of titles. In most cases, research concentrates on what takes place within the talk, namely vocabulary analysis (Coxhead & Walls, 2012), persuasion techniques (Ludewig, 2017), figurative language use (Scotto di Carlo, 2014a), closeness-building techniques (Scotto di Carlo, 2014b), or adaptation of academic language to digital context (Compagnone, 2015; Pierini, 2019). This literature is useful, yet the paratextual aspect of TED Talks remains largely underexplored.

There are several reasons why this question is important. First of all, since many people come across talks by stumbling upon their titles alone, a talk title may be the only thing they see before deciding whether to spend time watching the video. In a modern Internet environment where social media recommendations, SEO, and other factors come into play, the title is supposed to carry a significant amount of information. Moreover, a title has a framing function, which means it influences people's attitude to a talk and its interpretation as well as their memory of the talk. Ismail (2016) proved that presuppositions and entailments are used in the titles of news stories to communicate ideas beyond their denotational meaning; TED talk titles are likely to do the same. Furthermore, research of TED titles can lead to understanding how public intellectual dialogue adjusts to the rules of digital

platforms (Scotto di Carlo, 2014c). The gap that will be addressed in this thesis is the lack of a semantic analysis of TED Talk titles.

1.3 Problem Statement

In the last decade, there has been a growing body of research that analyses various aspects of TED Talks' linguistics such as their vocabulary profile (Coxhead & Walls, 2012), rhetorical strategies (Ludewig, 2017), figurative language (Scotto di Carlo, 2014a), and contribution to the diffusion of academic language in the digital age (Compagnone, 2015; Pierini, 2019). However, virtually all of this research is devoted to the analysis of the linguistic features of the talks themselves. In contrast, the title of the talk, the very first contact point that a prospective viewer has with the talk, has not been analysed from the linguistic perspective until now. It is particularly interesting to examine the TED Talk titles in that, under extreme conditions of brevity, they should be attractive, relevant, and set up the expectations of their audience. Thus, there is no published research that provides a detailed semantic account of the mechanisms of communicative efficiency in this genre of extremely brief epigrams. The present study will fill this gap by providing a semantic analysis of the TED Talk titles using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as an analytical framework for forty purposively selected TED Talk titles.

1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- I. What semantic strategies—including metaphor, lexical ambiguity, presupposition, conceptual juxtaposition, and implicature—are employed in epigrammatic TED Talk titles to maximise meaning within minimal linguistic form?
- II. How do these semantic strategies interact with the structural forms of TED Talk titles to produce communicative economy and rhetorical effectiveness?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are twofold:

- (i) to identify and classify the conceptual metaphors employed in epigrammatic TED Talk titles, and
- (ii) to explore how these metaphors interact with the structural forms of the titles to produce communicative economy and rhetorical effectiveness.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Several points are made by this paper that might be of some value. First of all, from a theoretical perspective, this work expands on the notion of discourse economy (commonly attributed to titles, slogans, headlines and aphorisms), extending it into a modern-day digital genre where it has not been applied before. In terms of methodological contribution, this work demonstrates the viability of close semantic analysis within an existing corpus of naturally-occurring paratexts, and this approach can perhaps even be extended to other digital genres in terms of their titles. Lastly, perhaps on a more practical note, this research might prove to be interesting to communicators, public speakers and educators, as it offers some tangible insights into what makes a good title.

1.7 Delimitations

Here are some boundaries that deserve mentioning at the outset. First, the analysis considers only forty TED Talk titles, selected from among the platform's most-watched talks, and thus claims no representativeness of all the title-writing practices used on TED and TEDx talks in general. Second, English language titles only are analyzed here. The research itself follows a qualitative approach and strives to produce meaningful insights into how linguistic means may be used to accomplish certain communication goals rather than conduct a quantitative corpus study. In the latter case, one could have examined the types of titles—i.e., noun phrases, imperatives, etc.—but this was not the focus. Finally, no data about viewers' reception of the talks were gathered. The results reported are based on the linguistic characteristics of the talk titles only.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, the literature review on the topic of TED talk titles is conducted. This includes a brief overview of studies on the subject of TED talks as a form of discourse, followed by a more detailed analysis of the studies dedicated to lexical properties, linguistic economy, epigrams, and semantic compression. However, the point of this literature review is not just to summarize the results achieved by other scholars, but rather to define the theoretical foundation for this research.

2.1 TED Talks as a Linguistic Genre

The notion of TED Talks as an independent genre has been established more slowly. According to Altamimi (2021), the TED project was analyzed in terms of discourse studies, and it has been determined that TED talks are located between three genres: academic lecture, motivational speech, and communication of science. The most striking feature noted by Altamimi regarding TED speeches is that these talks combine various aims such as informing, entertaining, and persuasion, and the way it affects the construction of the overall structure and language in the talk is significant for this research. The reason why it is relevant is that if talks are hybrid in nature, their titles are likely to be hybrid as well.

Several other researchers have also filled out this portrait. For example, Ludewig (2017) has focused specifically on the persuasive aspect, examining how TED speakers blend personal narratives, factual evidence, and appeals to emotion in order to maintain their audience's interest under time constraints. While Ludewig focuses on the spoken word rather than the title, her persuasive perspective undoubtedly applies to the TED title since this is the point where persuasion begins.

A distinct viewpoint was held by Scotto di Carlo (2014c), who focused on how the interplay of ethos, pathos, and logos made complex terms understandable to the average listener. As revealed by the author, successful TED presenters always make a concerted effort to reduce the distance that separates the knowledge level of the speaker from the one possessed by the audience.

In the titles, the urge towards comprehensibility will certainly be evident as well.

Kedrowicz & Taylor (2016) analyzed TED Talks as means of communicating science knowledge and pointed out the role played by speakers in balancing precision and engagement. The use of narratives, analogies, and rhetorical questions can contribute greatly to making scientific information both clear and catchy. Speaking of catchiness, it becomes important to focus on the topic of titles, as a title of the TED talk appears to be one and only thing that people are likely to remember.

These various analyses of TED reveal that the genre involves communicative malleability, rhetorically deft speech, and, most importantly, a strong dedication to wide-spread communication. The one aspect these analyses overlook, however, is an analysis of the titles in TED talks as a locus for a semantic analysis. This is where my thesis takes on the challenge and treats the TED title as much more than a random label, but rather as a semantically rich microtext worthy of analysis.

2.2 Lexical and Discourse Features of TED Communication

Indeed, there have been various studies conducted in an effort to study the vocabulary used in TED Talks. According to a study conducted by Coxhead & Wells (2012), TED Talks occupy the space between conversation language and academic language. This means that while TED Talks are more varied than conversation language, they are still not as dense as language used in an academic paper. This is relevant in the context of titles since it is important that they too use such vocabulary.

Further development of this line of inquiry was done by Nurmukhamedov (2017) using a larger corpus, confirming that 95% of the vocabulary from TED is covered by about 4,000 word families. The bottom line is that the language of TED, which includes their titles, employs a linguistic system that educated users find easy but that needs to convey a rich meaning.

Naqvi et al. (2025) analyzed morphosyntactic features within the contexts of various academic domains to illustrate how specific linguistic structures embody the core values and

conventions of diverse disciplines. The corpus-driven approach by which recurring patterns were identified provides an effective framework to apply to this study despite the difference in discourse types.

Tianying and Bogoyavlenskaya (2023) investigated the phenomenon of the development of metaphors in relation to their transmission and transformation from one culture and language into another from a cognitive and linguistic point of view. This paper is linked to the current research because titles of TED talks contain metaphorical meanings that need to transcend different cultures.

2.3 Economy of Language and Brevity

The idea of linguistic economy dates far back in time. In general terms, it is defined as a phenomenon according to which people try to economize effort in both speech production and perception in all possible contexts and languages. Zipf (1949) expressed the idea as a law of minimal effort; despite the fact that this term predates the invention of the Internet by fifty years, it can be seen as an interesting starting point for discussion of reasons why language always tends to use the shortest way. Regarding titles, economy has a much narrower meaning.

Chovanec (2014) explored the economy of language in newspaper headlines, a genre similar to TED titles in that both require cramming all important information within a very small amount of space. Some of the methods described by Chovanec include omitting function words, substituting a whole clause for a nominal construction, and deliberately using ambiguous language to convey two possible meanings in one headline. While TED titles and newspaper headlines may have little else in common, Chovanec's classification of compression techniques serves as an interesting point of reference.

The effects of brevity as a form of persuasion in the media have been examined by Rotich et al. (2024). According to Rotich et al., brevity should not be viewed as simply a pragmatic approach to deal with space constraints; instead, it should be seen as an indicator of rhetorical strength and confidence and an affirmation of the audience's

intelligence. This idea has much relevance to TED titles.

What happens if the speakers violate Gricean maxims intentionally? This pragmatic perspective can be seen in Nadeem et al.'s (2025) study of how this violation creates multiple levels of meanings that exceed the basic or literal level of meaning. This pragmatic perspective applies directly to TED talks, especially to titles such as "Grit," which provides little information and almost forces the listener to ask why.

Saddique et al. (2025) presented a broader view of linguistic complexity and lexical density within academic texts, studying development using a corpus-based method. The theoretical model for analyzing density as it pertains to communication efficiency allows a transition from previous studies to this current research into the high density of TED titles.

2.4 Epigrammatic Structures and Stylistics

The epigram can be traced back to ancient times. Greek and Latin literature contain numerous pithy expressions with a paradoxical element that make one pause and reflect. Stylistic analysis of literature has always regarded the epigram as a figure of speech characterized by brevity and wit. The titles of TED Talks are not epigrams in the traditional sense of the term; however, many TED Talks incorporate an epigrammatic structure, being concise, witty, easy to remember, and constructed on the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous ideas.

By introducing the concepts of intentional and conventional metaphor usage, Steen (2023) added an innovative angle to research on metaphor studies. The basis of his Intentional Metaphor Theory states that the way in which metaphors function is different when the speaker is trying to have the audience recognize the cross-domain mapping of the metaphor. The significance of this theory can be seen in TED titles. The best TED titles make use of metaphor intentionally. The right balance is one of intentional innovation.

Leech and Short (2007) are still used as a point of reference in literary stylistics. Though their framework includes foregrounding, deviation, parallelism, and cohesion, which are tailored for

fiction, they can be applied to TED talks titles quite unexpectedly. For example, "Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model." is an example of self-referring irony that qualifies as foregrounding since it defies the reader's expectations.

The relevance optimiser theory was developed by Bonyadi & Samuel (2013), who investigated contrasting newspaper headlines and argued that headlines operate as optimizers of relevance: they enable a potential reader to quickly assess if the text is worth their attention. This approach can be applied to TED titles inasmuch as they perform a similar role of optimizing the audience's decision-making about watching the video associated with the title.

2.5 Semantic Compression and Meaning-Making

The semantic compression, or embedding of meaning in a compact linguistic unit, is a pervasive phenomenon in any linguistic discourse, but one that becomes particularly prominent when space becomes scarce. According to Ashiq et al. (2025), when applying conceptual blending theory to literature, one observes how the meaning comes out as a result of combining features from different conceptual spaces in such a way that the resultant blend has properties not exhibited by either of the inputs. This applies to the given title, "The Power of Vulnerability," which combines the concept of power as dominance with the opposite idea of vulnerability.

Wilson & Sperber's (2012) alternative approach via Relevance Theory posits that we analyze utterances by comparing them to our prior assumptions, with effective communicators crafting their messages to achieve maximum relevance (maximal cognitive effect with minimal effort). In this context, the optimal title for a TED talk should provide a genuine epiphany while also being easy to decipher. The dual nature of some TED titles, being both informative and easy to understand, can be viewed as an attempt to maximize their relevance. In particular, Semino (2017) investigated metaphor as a rhetorical phenomenon, emphasizing that the use of metaphorical

language involves both cognitive and persuasive aspects. This is especially true when we speak about TED talks' titles. For example, the phrase "The puzzle of motivation" uses the notion of the puzzle as a structural metaphor in order to create a concrete perception of the issue even before its analysis.

The authors Nadeem et al. (2026), in their study of the role of verbal voice in political discussion forums, have provided an answer to the question of how form functions within meaning-making processes. Even though their investigation is concerned with politics, rather than with TED, the underlying problem statement bears a striking resemblance to that of my thesis.

In sum: from the literature on TED as a discourse genre, on lexical characteristics, on linguistic efficiency, on epigrams, and on semantic conciseness, the conclusion emerges that TED talks can serve as a valuable but underexplored source of research material. No current studies attempt to combine all of these perspectives in a semantic analysis of TED talk titles. This is the goal of the present thesis.

2.6 Broader Perspectives on Figurative Language and Media Discourse

The literature reviewed up until now has served to define TED Talks as a recognized communicative genre and has identified the necessary literature that discusses lexical devices, discourse economy, epigrams, and semantics compression. Nevertheless, other areas of research have been influential for this study too and should be mentioned briefly since they serve to situate TED Talk titles in their theoretical context.

The investigation of figurative language comprehension has traditionally been confronted with the problem of how to understand nonliteral language usage. In his seminal research, Gibbs (1994) claimed that figurative thought is not some sort of an exception to cognition but its core; people do not calculate first the literal meaning of expression and try to figure out after that what figurative meaning should be used here, but simply comprehend figurative language naturally as they comprehend anything else. This conclusion obviously affects on the way TED

Talks are titled. If figurative language comprehension is actually a default mode of cognition and not a cognitive operation which requires effort and additional time, then such metaphoric titles are not requiring anything from audience, but just using something which people already possess in their cognitive repertoire.

Goatly (1997) provided a systematic model to categorize and analyze metaphorical expressions in various texts, emphasizing the potential for a metaphor to be active, tired, or dead. An active metaphor is innovative and attracts attention, while a tired one uses conventional patterns but is nonetheless figurative in nature. Finally, a dead metaphor is too deeply entrenched into the language, and its figurativeness goes unnoticed by speakers. This typology is helpful for analyzing TED titles since it allows making a distinction between titles based on tired metaphoricity and those that actively create cross-domain mappings. For example, "Sleep is your superpower" is somewhere in-between tired and active metaphors since superheroes belong to culture, but the application of this metaphor to sleeping rejuvenates it.

In Cameron (2003), the use of metaphors was expanded to include not only written texts but also verbal discourse in educational settings, where metaphors are used, develop, and evolve during the course of an ongoing discussion in classrooms. Although the titles of TED Talks are not classroom discussions, Cameron's theory about the dynamic nature of metaphors in the process of communication – and not as a static tool applied to the text – is relevant to the current research. The title is not only a label but rather a metaphorical framework in which the whole discussion will unfold and evolve.

The use of metaphors in public and political communication was proven by Musolff (2016) to be more than an expression of how one perceives something. Indeed, such metaphors do not just express what one thinks but actually create a scenario or a narrative frame through which people interpret the situation and form opinions about possible actions to take. Metaphors used in politics imply a certain story line involving heroes, villains, crises, and solutions. In a similar vein,

one may consider that TED titles also perform the function of creating scenarios of events. The metaphor “Do schools kill creativity?” implies a certain situation where schools are perpetrators and creativity is their victim even before people hear what the talk will be about.

Analysis of media language offers a further coordinate system. Van Dijk (1988) showed that the news was not an objective recording of events, but a discourse, which had its structure, conventions, and ideological presuppositions. In Van Dijk’s view, headlines were positioned at the top of news text’s macrostructure and encoded a preferred way of interpreting the news underneath them. Titles of TED Talks operate in a similar fashion by encoding a certain viewpoint, stress point, or interpretative angle on the talk, instead of providing an objective description. Cotter (2010) expanded this analysis with an ethnography of linguistic practices employed by newsrooms, demonstrating how journalists made linguistic decisions in real time under constraints of time, place, and the expectations of the public. The same constraints are faced by TED speakers in the process of choosing a title for their talks – it needs to be concise, platform-independent, and appealing to the general public.

In her influential work on language usage in conversation, Tannen (1989) highlighted the significance of repetition, dialogue, and imagery as means of creating involvement in conversational discourse. The notion of involvement – that is, the perception by the listener/reader of being emotionally and intellectually engaged in the text – is applicable to the analysis of TED titles since all the semantic strategies revealed in this research (direct address, personification, and surprise) seem specifically designed to attract an audience. Similarly, Bednarek and Caple (2012), in their analysis of news discourse, focused on the engagement of readers as a means of constructing the newsworthiness of the text.

Last but not least, there is methodological progress in the field of metaphor identification worth considering. The group of researchers called Pragglejaz (2007) invented an identification procedure, which has been widely used since its publication and which is named the Metaphor

Identification Procedure (MIP). It helped establish criteria of identifying a word usage as metaphoric one, and this approach was used by other scholars who studied metaphors in discourse. Littlemore (2019) further developed the conversation on individual differences in perception of metaphors which come from embodied experiences, culture and cognition. Finally, Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) broadened the perspective of the metaphor studies by including non-linguistic components into the consideration, such as visual, audio and gestural modes. Although the current research does not include non-verbal data, the general development of the field from linguistic text-centered studies towards more dynamic and audience-oriented approach may help us to navigate in the current research topic.

All in all, these discourses reveal something that the narrower literature on TED has yet to realize: a title is far from being just an arbitrary label but a micro-text with semantically meaningful content. In this context, the current research seeks to fill this gap by combining two approaches and focusing on a set of TED Talks’ titles from the perspective of conceptual metaphors.

3. Theoretical Framework

The basis of the theoretical framework of this research lies in the concept of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which was postulated by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) in their book titled *Metaphors We Live By**. This theory offers a uniform perspective in studying the way the meaning is condensed and delivered through figures of speech, and considering the fact that TED Talks titles usually use such condensation to express their meanings, CMT seems to be the right choice.

3.1 The Foundations of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

It is because of this emphasis on metaphor as an indispensable component of cognition rather than just another rhetorical device, which could be easily dispensed with, that Lakoff and Johnson’s theory proved to be such a revolutionary contribution to the field.

According to CMT, understanding consists in creating mental maps of certain concepts based on other, more tangible concepts. In such a case, a certain concept, which is more abstract, becomes a target domain for a concept, which becomes a source domain, thus providing a basis for our understanding of the target concept.

One of CMT's most powerful claims is that these mappings are systematic rather than random. Take the well-known example ARGUMENT IS WAR. Once you accept that mapping, a whole family of expressions falls into place: you can *attack* a position, *defend* a claim, *shoot down* an argument, *win* a debate. The systematicity matters because it means a single metaphorical mapping can generate many different linguistic expressions, all held together by the same underlying logic. For TED Talk titles, this is especially useful. A title can be understood as an economical surface realisation of a broader metaphor that the audience already partly knows—and that recognition does half the communicative work before the viewer even clicks play.

3.2 Types of Conceptual Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson distinguished three main types of conceptual metaphor, and all three show up in TED Talk titles.

****Structural metaphors**** are mappings in which one concept is understood in terms of the internal structure of another. “The puzzle of motivation” treats motivation as a puzzle—something with interlocking pieces that need fitting together to reveal a coherent picture.

Orientational metaphors work through spatial relationships—up versus down, inside versus outside, centre versus periphery. “Inside the mind of a master procrastinator” uses the spatial idea of being *inside* a container to frame psychological exploration as a kind of guided tour.

Ontological metaphors treat abstract things—emotions, ideas, qualities—as though they were concrete objects or substances. “Grit,” for instance, takes the abstract quality of perseverance and treats it as a physical, textured

material—something you can almost hold in your hand.

3.3 Application of CMT to TED Talk Titles

To employ CMT with regard to the analysis of the forty titles in this paper requires performing three main operations. The first operation consists in finding out whether there is an underlying conceptual metaphor in a particular title. Next, it is required to analyse the way in which the metaphor functions in the title and find out how much of conceptual weight it carries, in other words, how much sense is packed into the title. Finally, the type of the metaphor can be defined and its possible effect explained.

Similarly, personification is also done well by CMT, where the concept is regarded as a particular form of ontological metaphor. Titles such as “Your elusive creative genius” and “Sleep is your superpower” are examples of when a human quality is attributed to either an abstract idea or biological process. This is considered an example of ontological metaphor by Lakoff & Johnson, where an intangible entity is made concrete. Lexical ambiguity and juxtaposition are other concepts covered in CMT where cross-domain mappings unexpectedly occur.

The choice of using CMT as one unified theory allows for coherence in the analysis. Another important implication of CMT as the framework used to analyze the data relates to an interesting property of the TED titles. Their brevity does not limit but becomes a necessary condition of creating meaningful titles because through their ambiguity, they encourage listeners to be active participants in forming meanings. This means that CMT provides all the analytical tools to understand and explain the particular nature of TED titles as epigrams.

4. Methodology

The current chapter provides a discussion about the research methodology, which comprises research design, data collection, analysis procedures, and the process followed in conducting the research. All these elements of research methodology are guided by the research

questions stated in Chapter 1 as well as the theory developed in Chapter 3.

4.1 Research Design

Qualitative Descriptive Analysis will be used as the sole research method in the project. As described by Sari (2019) and Ratanakul (2017), this refers to the interpretive textual analysis that focuses on describing and analyzing semantic properties of linguistic data, while avoiding statistical generalization. This methodology is appropriate for this particular case, since the questions asked require close and thorough examination of the way meanings operate in particular titles, rather than the frequency of their occurrence in a very large body of texts. The analysis will focus on three key processes, namely identifying conceptual metaphors in each title, mapping source-target domain relations, and

interpreting these relations in terms of semantic density and rhetorical power in the titles. Using one method allows for a systematic process of analysis for all forty titles in the sample.

4.2 Data and Sampling

The sample comprises forty titles of TED Talks collected from the TED.com website. The sample is purposive and was obtained based on three considerations. First, only titles of talks that had received high views on the site were used in order to ensure that the sample represented titles that had achieved popularity and cultural significance. Secondly, the selection of titles was done to ensure diversity in semantic strategies and structures in order to ensure that the data would be varied enough for analysis. Lastly, only titles in the English language were selected in adherence to the constraints defined in Chapter 1.

Table 4.1: Corpus of TED Talk Titles Selected for Analysis**

No.	TED Talk Title	Speaker	Structural Category
1	Do schools kill creativity?	Ken Robinson	Interrogative clause
2	The power of vulnerability	Brené Brown	Definite NP
3	How great leaders inspire action	Simon Sinek	WH-clause (declarative)
4	Your body language may shape who you are	Amy Cuddy	Full declarative clause
5	The happy secret to better work	Shawn Achor	Definite NP with modifier
6	10 things you didn't know about orgasm	Mary Roach	NP + relative clause
7	How to speak so that people want to listen	Julian Treasure	Infinitive clause
8	The puzzle of motivation	Dan Pink	Definite NP
9	Inside the mind of a master procrastinator	Tim Urban	Prepositional phrase
10	What makes a good life?	Robert Waldinger	WH-interrogative clause
11	The danger of a single story	Chimamanda Adichie	Definite NP
12	Why we do what we do	Tony Robbins	WH-clause (declarative)
13	Grit	Angela Duckworth	Single noun (fragment)
14	The art of misdirection	Apollo Robbins	Definite NP
15	Sleep is your superpower	Matt Walker	Equative declarative
16	Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong	Johann Hari	Full declarative clause
17	A kinder, gentler philosophy of success	Alain de Botton	Indefinite NP
18	My stroke of insight	Jill Bolte Taylor	Possessive NP
19	Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model.	Cameron Russell	Imperative + equative clause
20	The skill of self-confidence	Ivan Joseph	Definite NP
21	Try something new for 30 days	Matt Cutts	Imperative clause
22	Choice, happiness and spaghetti sauce	Malcolm Gladwell	Coordinated NP (list)
23	Go with your gut feeling	Magnus Walker	Imperative clause
24	Your elusive creative genius	Elizabeth Gilbert	Possessive NP
25	How to make stress your friend	Kelly McGonigal	Infinitive clause

- | 26 | The orchestra in my mouth | Tom Thum | Definite NP with locative |
- | 27 | What I learned from 100 days of rejection | Jia Jiang | WH-clause (declarative) |
- | 28 | Plug into your hard-wired happiness | Loretta Breuning | Imperative clause |
- | 29 | 3 things I learned while my plane crashed | Ric Elias | NP + temporal clause |
- | 30 | Strange answers to the psychopath test | Jon Ronson | NP (fragment) |
- | 31 | The surprisingly dramatic role of nutrition in mental health | Julia Rucklidge | Definite NP with adverbial modifier |
- | 32 | Why some of us don't have one true calling | Emilie Wapnick | WH-clause (declarative) |
- | 33 | Teach every child about food | Jamie Oliver | Imperative clause |
- | 34 | Why you should talk to strangers | Kio Stark | WH-clause (declarative) |
- | 35 | The way we think about charity is dead wrong | Dan Pallotta | Full declarative clause |
- | 36 | Got a meeting? Take a walk | Nilofer Merchant | Elliptical interrogative + imperative |
- | 37 | What makes you special? | Mariana Atencio | WH-interrogative clause |
- | 38 | Embrace the near win | Sarah Lewis | Imperative clause |
- | 39 | Life's third act | Jane Fonda | Possessive NP |
- | 40 | How to get better at the things you care about | Eduardo Briceño | Infinitive clause |

4.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework operationalizes the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to address the two research questions. To address RQ1 (identifying semantic strategies), the framework categorizes the semantic mechanisms into: (i) Conceptual Metaphors (structural, orientational, and ontological, including personification), (ii) Lexical Ambiguity and Polysemy, (iii) Presupposition and Implicature, and (iv) Conceptual Juxtaposition. To address RQ2 (interaction with structural forms), the framework maps the identified semantic strategies onto the syntactic categories of the titles (Noun Phrases, Imperatives, Interrogatives, Declaratives, and Fragments) to evaluate how grammatical economy facilitates semantic density.

4.4 Procedure

The data analysis followed a systematic, multi-step procedure. First, the 40 titles were compiled and cataloged according to their structural categories (as seen in Table 4.1). Second, each title was subjected to a close semantic reading to identify the presence of conceptual metaphors, mapping the source domain (concrete/familiar) to the target domain (abstract/novel). Third, other semantic strategies such as ambiguity, presupposition, and juxtaposition were annotated. Finally, the interaction between the identified semantic features and the syntactic structure of

the title was analyzed to determine how the "economy of words" is achieved—how minimal syntactic form maximizes cognitive and rhetorical effect.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents the qualitative descriptive analysis of the forty TED Talk titles. The analysis is structured to directly address the research questions. First, it identifies and exemplifies the semantic strategies employed in the titles (RQ1). Second, it explores how these strategies interact with the structural forms of the titles to produce communicative economy and rhetorical effectiveness (RQ2).

5.1 Semantic Strategies in Epigrammatic TED Talk Titles (RQ1)

The analysis reveals that TED Talk titles rely on a concentrated repertoire of semantic strategies to maximize meaning. These strategies are not mutually exclusive; a single title often employs multiple mechanisms simultaneously.

5.1.1 Conceptual Metaphors

Confirming the applicability of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework, conceptual metaphors are the most pervasive semantic strategy in the data. They allow abstract, complex topics (target domains) to be understood through concrete, familiar experiences (source domains).

Structural Metaphors: These mappings impose the structure of one concept onto another. A prominent example is Dan Pink's title, ***"The puzzle of motivation."*** Here, the abstract target domain of MOTIVATION is structured by the concrete source domain of a PUZZLE. A puzzle implies missing pieces, a mystery to be solved, and an underlying logical pattern that is currently obscured. By using this structural metaphor, the title encapsulates the entire premise of the talk—the traditional understanding of motivation is incomplete, and the "pieces" must be rearranged to see the true picture. Similarly, Apollo Robbins' ***"The art of misdirection"*** structures the deceptive practice of misdirection (target) as an ART (source). Art implies skill, creativity, mastery, and aesthetic value, transforming a potentially negative concept (deception) into an admirable, crafted performance.

Orientational Metaphors: These metaphors organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another, often spatially. Tim Urban's ***"Inside the mind of a master procrastinator"*** employs the container metaphor (THE MIND IS A CONTAINER). The spatial preposition "inside" frames the human mind as a physical space that can be entered, explored, and navigated. This orientational metaphor creates an expectation of a guided tour, making the abstract, inaccessible realm of cognitive psychology tangible and experiential for the audience.

Ontological Metaphors and Personification: These metaphors treat abstract phenomena as concrete entities or substances, often attributing human qualities to them. Angela Duckworth's famous title, ***"Grit,"*** is a masterclass in ontological metaphor. "Grit" refers to the abstract psychological trait of perseverance and passion for long-term goals. However, the word ontologically maps this abstract trait onto a physical substance—small, rough particles of stone or sand. This mapping implies durability, texture, friction, and an unyielding physical nature. The abstract concept of perseverance is thus packed into a single, visceral, four-letter word. Furthermore, Elizabeth Gilbert's ***"Your elusive creative genius"*** employs personification (a

sub-type of ontological metaphor). By describing creative genius as "elusive," the title attributes agency to the abstract concept of genius—it is something that can hide, run away, and evade capture. This personification transforms a static internal trait into a dynamic, externalized entity with which the individual must play a game of hide-and-seek. Similarly, Kelly McGonigal's ***"How to make stress your friend"*** personifies stress as a social entity (a friend) that can be negotiated with and befriended, rather than a mere physiological response.

5.1.2 Lexical Ambiguity and Polysemy

Many TED titles achieve semantic density by exploiting lexical ambiguity, where a single word or phrase carries multiple related meanings, compelling the audience to hold both interpretations simultaneously. Jill Bolte Taylor's ***"My stroke of insight"*** is a quintessential example. The word "stroke" is polysemous: its most salient, everyday meaning is a "sudden occurrence" or "hit" (as in a stroke of luck or genius), but its secondary, medical meaning refers to a cerebrovascular accident. Because the speaker is a neuroanatomist who experienced a brain hemorrhage, both meanings are entirely literal and relevant. The semantic compression here is breathtaking: in four words, the title conveys both the catastrophic medical event and the profound psychological realization it triggered. Similarly, Shawn Achor's ***"The happy secret to better work"*** plays on the syntactic and semantic ambiguity of "happy secret." It can be parsed as a secret that brings happiness, or a secret that is itself happy (personifying the secret). This ambiguity creates a cognitive hook, as the brain attempts to resolve the syntactic tension, thereby sustaining engagement with the title.

5.1.3 Presupposition and Implicature

Epigrammatic titles frequently bypass explicit assertion by embedding assumptions that the audience must accept to make sense of the utterance. Ken Robinson's ***"Do schools kill creativity?"*** is an interrogative title that carries a heavy presupposition. While on the surface it asks a yes/no question, the very act of posing the question presupposes that "creativity" is

something living and vital that *can* be killed, and that "schools" are entities capable of such lethal action. The implicature is that the educational system may be fundamentally hostile to human potential. Johann Hari's ***"Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong"*** is a declarative title that heavily relies on implicature. It implicates that the audience possesses a coherent (but flawed) body of knowledge about addiction, and that the speaker possesses the exclusive, corrective truth. This strategy employs the logic of provocation described by Molek-Kozakowska (2013), challenging the audience's competence and triggering a defensive curiosity that necessitates watching the talk.

5.1.4 Conceptual Juxtaposition

A hallmark of epigrammatic wit is the unexpected pairing of concepts from disparate semantic fields. Malcolm Gladwell's ***"Choice, happiness and spaghetti sauce"*** creates a striking semantic collision. "Choice" and "happiness" belong to the abstract domains of philosophy, psychology, and economics. "Spaghetti sauce" belongs to the mundane, concrete domain of domestic grocery shopping. By yoking these domains together in a coordinated noun phrase, the title creates an ad hoc concept (in the sense of Ifantidou, 2009): the profound philosophical implications of human choice are grounded in the trivial act of selecting a condiment. This juxtaposition achieves immense economy by compressing a complex sociological argument into a single, surprising list.

5.2 Interaction of Semantic Strategies with Structural Forms (RQ2)

The second research question asks how these semantic strategies interact with the grammatical structures of the titles to produce communicative economy and rhetorical effectiveness. The data demonstrates that the syntactic form of a title is not merely a grammatical container, but a rhetorical tool that constrains and amplifies the semantic payload.

5.2.1 The Definite and Possessive Noun Phrase as a Relevance Optimizer

Noun phrases (NPs), particularly definite and possessive NPs, constitute the largest structural category in the data (titles 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 18, 20, 24, 26, 31, 39). Structurally, NPs achieve extreme economy by ellipsis: they omit the main verb and the copula, presenting a concept without asserting an action or state. This omission forces the audience to infer the missing relationship, thereby optimizing relevance (Bonyadi & Samuel, 2013).

When combined with ontological metaphors, the definite NP functions as a "semantic bomb." Brené Brown's ***"The power of vulnerability"*** (Definite NP) does not explicitly state that vulnerability *has* power; it presupposes the existence of this power as an established, tangible entity (indicated by the definite article "The"). The ontological metaphor (POWER IS A SUBSTANCE) and the structural ellipsis interact perfectly: the audience must mentally supply the missing verb (e.g., "Discover the power..." or "Vulnerability has the power..."), and in doing so, they actively co-construct the meaning. Similarly, Chimamanda Adichie's ***"The danger of a single story"*** uses the definite article to presuppose that a single story is not just potentially dangerous, but is an established, concrete hazard. The possessive NP, as in Jane Fonda's ***"Life's third act"*** or Jill Bolte Taylor's ***"My stroke of insight,"*** adds a layer of personal ownership and intimacy. By syntactically linking the abstract (life/stroke) to the personal (my/third act), the title creates a narrative frame before the talk even begins.

5.2.2 The Interrogative as a Provocation Frame

Interrogative titles (1, 10, 36, 37) explicitly engage the audience by asking a question, thereby setting up a relevance gap that promises to be filled by the talk. However, when combined with conceptual metaphors and presuppositions, the interrogative becomes a tool of epistemic challenge. Ken Robinson's ***"Do schools kill creativity?"*** maps the educational institution (SCHOOL) onto the semantic field of a killer (a structural metaphor where CREATIVITY IS A LIVING ORGANISM). The interrogative

structure packages this violent structural metaphor as a genuine inquiry, softening the blow just enough to be provocative without being alienating. Nilofer Merchant's ***"Got a meeting? Take a walk"*** uses an elliptical interrogative followed by an imperative. The question presupposes the audience's mundane reality (sitting in meetings), while the imperative proposes a spatial shift (walking). The interrogative here acts as a setup, creating an information gap that the imperative immediately fills with a simple, actionable metaphor (WORK IS MOVEMENT).

5.2.3 The Imperative as an Action-Oriented Metaphor

Imperative titles (21, 23, 28, 33, 38) are inherently directive and pragmatic. They achieve economy by omitting the subject ("You"), creating a sense of direct, unmediated address. When combined with metaphor, the imperative forces an abstract concept into a physical, actionable schema. Sarah Lewis's ***"Embrace the near win"*** uses the verb "embrace," a physical action of bodily encirclement, as an ontological metaphor for psychological acceptance. The imperative structure commands the audience to physically enact a cognitive shift regarding failure. Loretta Breuning's ***"Plug into your hard-wired happiness"*** mixes an orientational/container metaphor ("plug into") with an ontological metaphor (the brain as a "hard-wired" electrical circuit). The imperative verb "plug" demands immediate, physical connection, disguising a complex neurological argument as a simple, mechanical action. The syntactic economy of the imperative mirrors the conceptual economy of the metaphor: both strip away hesitation and demand immediate cognitive compliance.

5.2.4 The Equative Declarative as an Identity Assertion

Equative declarative clauses (4, 15, 19, 35) explicitly link two concepts via the copula "is" or "are." This structure is rhetorically powerful because it presents a metaphorical mapping as an objective, empirical fact. Matt Walker's ***"Sleep is your superpower"*** is an equative declarative that asserts an identity between the biological

process of sleep and the fantastical, cultural concept of a superpower. By using the declarative form rather than an imperative ("Use sleep as a superpower") or a noun phrase ("The superpower of sleep"), the title eliminates any sense of suggestion or advice. It presents the ontological metaphor as an incontestable reality. Amy Cuddy's ***"Your body language may shape who you are"*** uses a full declarative clause with a modal verb ("may shape"). The verb "shape" is a structural metaphor (IDENTITY IS A PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE THAT CAN BE MOLDED). The inclusion of the modal "may" softens the assertion, creating a pragmatic stance of scientific humility while still introducing a profound structural mapping between physical posture and psychological identity.

5.2.5 The Single-Word Fragment as Ultimate Semantic Density

The most extreme manifestation of the "economy of words" is the single-word fragment. Angela Duckworth's ***"Grit"*** reduces an entire philosophical and psychological discourse to a single, ontological noun. This radical brevity intentionally violates Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity, providing far less information than seems required. However, as Nadeem et al. (2025) suggest, this violation generates multiple levels of meaning. The single word acts as a void of information, forcing the audience to project their own schemas onto it. The semantic strategy here is pure ontological metaphor and lexical polysemy: "grit" invokes toughness, friction, endurance, and dirt. The structural form—the isolated fragment—amplifies the metaphor by presenting it as a solitary, unyielding monument. The economy of the form is precisely what generates the rhetorical power; the audience is compelled to click the talk to resolve the cognitive tension created by such extreme compression.

5.3 Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that epigrammatic TED Talk titles are not merely short; they are semantically dense micro-texts that operate according to a specific "semantics of brevity." This semantics relies on the systematic interaction

between conceptual mappings (metaphors, personifications, juxtapositions) and syntactic compression (ellipsis, noun phrases, imperatives). The findings align with and extend previous research in several ways. First, they confirm Scotto di Carlo's (2014a) observation that TED discourse relies heavily on figurative language, but they push this observation into the paratextual realm. Titles do not just *use* metaphors; they *are* the metaphors, condensed into their most economical form. Second, the findings support Dor's (2003) relevance optimizer theory. Every title in the corpus balances the cognitive cost of processing against the cognitive benefit of the insight promised. A title like "The puzzle of motivation" costs very little to process (the metaphor is conventional enough to be instantly grasped), but it promises a high cognitive reward (the solution to a pervasive human frustration). Third, the analysis validates Genette's (1997) concept of the paratext as a threshold. The semantic strategies identified—especially presupposition and implicature—are mechanisms of control. They pre-frame the talk, dictating not just what the audience will think about, but *how* they will think about it. By asking "Do schools kill creativity?", Robinson ensures the audience will view the educational system through a frame of violence and loss, even before he speaks a word. Furthermore, the interaction between form and meaning reveals that grammatical economy is not merely a constraint imposed by the digital environment; it is a rhetorical resource. The omission of verbs in NP titles, the omission of subjects in imperatives, and the radical ellipsis of single-word fragments all require the audience to fill in the missing gaps. This active cognitive participation is what makes the titles epigrammatic. As Giora (2003) predicted, the audience processes the salient, literal meaning first, but the structure forces them to search for the less salient, implied meaning. The "economy of words" is thus revealed to be an economy of *visible* words, compensated by a surplus of *invisible* cognitive work performed by the audience.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the semantic mechanisms that allow epigrammatic TED Talk titles to convey profound meaning through minimal linguistic form. By applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to a corpus of forty highly viewed titles, the research has uncovered the systematic semantic strategies that constitute a "semantics of brevity" in digital public discourse.

6.1 Summary of Findings

In response to RQ1, the study identified four primary semantic strategies employed in TED Talk titles: (1) Conceptual Metaphors (structural, orientational, and ontological, including personification), which map abstract, complex ideas onto concrete, familiar schemas; (2) Lexical Ambiguity and Polysemy, which pack multiple layers of meaning into a single lexical item; (3) Presupposition and Implicature, which embed assumptions and challenge audience knowledge without explicit assertion; and (4) Conceptual Juxtaposition, which creates ad hoc meanings by colliding disparate semantic domains. These strategies allow titles to function as compressed arguments rather than mere descriptive labels.

In response to RQ2, the study demonstrated that these semantic strategies are deeply intertwined with the structural forms of the titles. Noun Phrases achieve economy through syntactic ellipsis, forcing the audience to infer the relationship between the modifier and the head noun. Interrogatives use provocation and epistemic challenge to frame the talk's premise. Imperatives combine physical action verbs with abstract targets to make psychological concepts actionable. Equative Declaratives present ontological metaphors as incontestable empirical facts. Finally, Single-Word Fragments exploit radical Gricean violation to generate maximum curiosity and cognitive projection. The grammatical form is not merely a vessel for the semantic strategy; it is an active amplifier of its rhetorical effect.

6.2 Implications

Theoretically, this research expands the boundaries of discourse economy and paratextual

analysis into the digital genre of TED Talks. It proves that the "economy of words" is not a deficit of language, but a highly structured, cognitive-linguistic strategy that leverages the audience's inherent capacity for metaphorical thought (Gibbs, 1994). Methodologically, the study demonstrates the viability of combining Qualitative Descriptive Analysis with CMT to unpack the semantic density of micro-texts, offering a replicable framework for the analysis of other digital paratexts, such as YouTube video titles, podcast episode names, or Instagram captions.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for public speakers, educators, and communicators. A successful title does not merely summarize the content; it metaphorically restructures it, presupposes its importance, and implicates the audience's need to hear it. By understanding how structural forms interact with conceptual mappings, communicators can craft titles that function as true relevance optimizers in an attention-scarce digital landscape.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive semantic analysis of forty high-view TED Talk titles, several avenues for future research remain. First, the current study is delimited to qualitative analysis; future research could employ quantitative corpus methodologies to determine the statistical distribution of the semantic strategies and structural forms identified here across the entire TED archive. Second, this research did not collect audience reception data; experimental studies could investigate how different demographic groups process and interpret the metaphors and ambiguities in these titles, testing Giora's (2003) graded salience theory in a live digital context. Third, a comparative analysis could be conducted between TED Talk titles and titles from other digital genres (e.g., academic paper titles, clickbait journalism, or YouTube vlogs) to determine whether the "semantics of brevity" identified here is unique to the TED brand of intellectual activism or a universal feature of digital titling. Finally, future studies might consider the multimodal interaction between the title and the

talk's thumbnail image, exploring how visual and linguistic metaphors interact to create the ultimate paratextual threshold.

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