

# COMMUNICATIVE TYPES OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING SETTING

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**Abstract.** The present paper focuses on the study of the communicative nature of self-disclosure as a technique of verbal influence on people. The phenomenon of self-disclosure is interpreted as the process of divulging private information to others. The aim of the study is to determine the specific features of self-disclosure in a public speaking context. The paper discusses the communicative conventions and parameters of the public speaking scenario as the factors that determine a certain manner of self-disclosing. The key assumption of the study is that public self-disclosure should be viewed as a tactic of self-presentation that promotes the speaker's image building. In order to indicate the verbal forms that speakers use while disclosing private information in public the discourse and lexical-grammatical analyses of eight celebrity interview texts are conducted. The results of the research demonstrate that the speakers use recurrently certain verbal patterns which are identified as statements of self-description (it includes statements of self-confirmation, self-assurance, personal preferences and personal aspirations), self-narrative and attitude statements. The study also shows which types of the statements are used more frequently than the others, particularly, the statements of self-confirmation, personal aspirations and self-narratives are apparently preferred by the speakers as tactics of public self-disclosure. The paper highlights the fact that the self-disclosure tactics are employed by public speakers selectively and that their choice is motivated by the speakers' strategic goal of impression management.

**Keywords:** *self-disclosure, self-presentation, public speaking, communicative tactic, private information, verbal pattern.*

**Киричук Лариса. Комунікативні типи саморозкриття в ситуації публічного мовлення.**

**Анотація.** Статтю присвячено вивченню комунікативної природи саморозкриття як методу вербального впливу на людей. Явище само-розкриття визначається як процес розголошення приватної інформації про себе. Мета дослідження – визначити специфіку саморозкриття у ситуації публічного мовлення. У статті проаналізовано умови й параметри сценарію публічного мовлення як чинники, що зумовлюють певну манеру саморозкриття. Базовою позицією дослідження є трактування само-розкриття як тактики самопрезентації, що сприяє створенню іміджу мовця. Для визначення вербальних форм, які використовують мовці, розголошуючи приватну інформацію про себе, було здійснено дискурсивний та лексико-граматичний аналіз 8 текстів інтерв'ю зі знаменитостями. Результати дослідження засвідчили те, що мовці постійно використовують певні вербальні моделі, які визначаються як висловлювання автохарактеризації (до цієї групи належать висловлювання самоствердження, самопереконавання, особистих уподобань та особистих прагнень), автонаративу та висловлювання особистої позиції. Дослідження також продемонструвало, які саме типи висловлювань використовують частіше, ніж інші, зокрема, висловлюванням само-ствердження, особистих прагнень та автонаративу як тактикам саморозкриття надається очевидна перевага. Стаття акцентує вибірковість застосування мовцем тактики

саморозкриття, оскільки їх вибір є мотивованим стратегічною метою мовця здійснювати контроль за створенням враження.

*Ключові слова:* саморозкриття, самопрезентація, публічне мовлення, комунікативна тактика, приватна інформація, вербальна модель.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years the scholars' interests have focused on conversational techniques used by an individual in different types of discourse. Specifically, there is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of the study of communicative tactics, their intentional aspects and functions in an interaction. One of the conversational tactics speakers frequently resort to is self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure is interpreted as both the conscious and subconscious act of revealing a person's inner being to others or an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another. This may include thoughts, plans, goals, dreams, aspirations, emotions, likes, dislikes, failures, successes, etc. (Cozby, 1973; Derlega et al., 1993).

Before sharing private information, whether it is personal experience or a life story or attitudes and values, the speaker is likely to be aware of its potential risks in a certain situation; on considering the situation s/he may proceed with disclosing either high risk or low risk information. Consequently, the research of self-disclosure should also include an overview of the situational context in which self-disclosure is taking place.

The phenomenon of self-disclosure has been studied by scholars as the process of relational development and as a conversational tactic in different types of discourse. The research to date, in particular, has tended to focus on the interactional role of self-disclosure in interpersonal, and/or intimate, and/or on-line communication. However, little researchers' attention has been paid to defining its distinguishing features in a public speaking context.

The objective of the present paper is to examine the specific features of self-disclosure in a public speaking situation in order to define its typical verbal patterns employed by public actors while disclosing private information. The study of the communicative types of self-disclosure in a public context seeks to indicate the regular tactics used by the speaker to influence the process of impression management. In this light, the analysis undertaken within this project may eventually contribute to our understanding of some mechanisms of public image building.

### 1.1. Background

Self-disclosure has been studied within the framework of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and psychology and the scholars have worked out a few theories and approaches within the self-disclosure studied.

Social penetration theory argues that the process of relationship development occurs primarily through self-disclosure which increases in breadth (the range of topics discussed) and in depth (sharing sensitive information) as a relationship

progresses (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The theory offers an ‘onion’ approach to self-disclosure stating that in most relationships people gradually reveal the layers of their personality like we peel the layers from an onion.

Social comparison theory states that people evaluate themselves in comparison with others (Hargie, 2011). More precisely, disclosing information about their intellectual aptitude helps them decide whether they are superior or inferior to others or whether they are the same or different from others. Disclosing about abilities or talents can also lead to self-validation (if the addressee reacts positively). Hargie O. points out four main categories of self-disclosure that include 1) observations (of what one has done and experienced), 2) thoughts (one’s judgements about one’s experience), 3) feelings (expressing an emotion, e.g., ‘I am happy’), 4) needs (that are communicated as variations of the prototypical statement ‘I want/need to do’).

The Johary window theory suggests that parts of oneself are open, hidden, blind and unknown, and that in a relational context the amount of information the speaker discloses fluctuates depending on what the listener knows about him/her (Luft & Ingham, 1969). Bringing information from one of the ‘windows’ of self to the open in an interaction with others helps the speaker form or modify his/her self-concept and determines the trajectory of the relationship. Hence, the Johary window theory is referred to as a disclosure model of self-awareness.

S. Jourard (1971) defines self-disclosure as making oneself ‘transparent’ to others through communication, i.e. when one tells others things about him/herself which help them see his/her uniqueness as a human being. Jourard S. believes that self-disclosure fosters openness, healthy relationships and an enthusiasm to grow within the personal and social sphere.

The brief overview of the approaches to the self-disclosure research makes possible to highlight the following positions that our further analysis will be based upon:

1. Self-disclosure can serve as a tool to establish relationship between the speaker and others, so that it would ensure favorable atmosphere for communicating one’s message as well as influencing others.

2. Self-disclosure is a process through which a person is constructing his/herself or validating his/her image. This occurs by setting up a balance between privacy and publicness in an interaction.

3. Self-disclosure is situationally bound, that is the amount, breadth and depth of information disclosed is monitored by the speaker depending on the contextual variabilities. In fact, the process of self-disclosure involves many speaker’s decisions including what, when, where and how to disclose. All these decisions may vary by context as people follow different patterns of self-disclosure in different types of discourse – academic, or professional, or personal, or public, etc.

## **2. Methods**

The method used in our research to process the data is discourse analysis, which is traditionally applied to interpretation of linguistic occurrences in newspaper reports and media interviews. According to this qualitative approach the cases of

self-disclosure are treated as forms of social practice which are employed to reflect social realities. The macro-analytical approach to the study of the public speaking situation makes it possible to trace how broader social processes determine the choice of a self-disclosure pattern in a certain interactional context, while the details of verbal expressions are examined on the micro-analytical level. Thus, following the methodology of discourse analysis we outline the distinguishing features of the public speaking context in which self-disclosure is occurring and then we index the speakers' system of verbal structures of self-disclosure that are recurrently used. The study, thus, involves lexical-grammatical analysis of the texts of eight interviews with outstanding personalities – Oprah Winfrey, Daniel Pink, Thich Nhat Hanh, JK Rowling, Tina Fey, Ellen De Generes, Jay-Z and Barak Obama. Identifying the linguistic features of speakers' self-disclosure allows us to point out the typical self-disclosure patterns which are categorized as the self-disclosure types, namely, self-description, self-narrative and attitude statements. The lexical-grammatical analysis of the self-description "I structures", in particular, results in indicating the following types of self-description: the statements of self-confirmation, self-assurance, personal preferences and personal aspirations.

### **3. The study**

*Self-disclosure in public speaking situations.* Public speaking is traditionally viewed as an oral presentation of one's knowledge, thoughts, ideas, feelings, etc. in which the speaker addresses an audience. The speaker's performance style is conditioned and limited by the situational factors, such as social significance of the topic(s), the demographical, psychological and multicultural parameters of the audience and the social status and transparency of the speaker. In this research we focus on the extemporaneous type of public speaking which occurs when the speaker is asked to talk about a particular topic without prior notice.

Among the communicative contexts (interpersonal, intimate, small-group, organizational, mass-mediated, computer-mediated communication, etc.) the public speaking one is characterized by the direct/indirect contact with the audience, in other words, the speaker is aware of the audience's attitudes, expectations, preferences and, thus, s/he tries to follow the prototype of the speaker that is expected in the definite communicative context.

The process of self-disclosure in a public speaking situation assumes a particular character that makes it distinguishable against interaction in other types of communicative situations. While achieving their communicative goals competent public speakers use self-disclosure selectively in order to make an impression of being open and honest and, thus, authentic. Public persons having had an experience of acting in spotlight situations are, habitually, able to discern the social expectations of the audience and then to proceed by utilizing an appropriate type and/or level (superficial or deep) of self-disclosure. This involves the process of self-monitoring which is viewed as a component of self-presentation (Schlenker, 1985).

*Self-disclosure and self-presentation.* M. Leary (2012) claims that because people's outcomes in life depend heavily on how others perceive and evaluate them, they are motivated to convey certain impressions of themselves to others and to refrain from conveying other, undesired impressions. Thus, no matter what else they may be doing, people typically monitor and control their public identities that involves the process known as self-presentation (or impression management). A great deal of public behavior is, in part, determined or constrained by people's concern with others' impressions and evaluations of them.

The terms 'impression management' and 'self-presentation' are used synonymously and both mean a goal-directed process in which an individual attempts to influence the perception of other people (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary, 1995; Leary, 1996). Scholars hold the view that speakers construct the image of themselves to claim personal identity and present themselves in a verbal manner that is consistent with this image. They also believe that images people have of themselves are shaped in and by social interaction (Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker, 2003). In this light self-presentation (impression management) appears to become a selective behavior, that is individuals decide on displaying the aspects of themselves which seem most appropriate to the social context. While controlling the process of their self-presentation they define the parameters of the situation and establish the expected behaviors that fit for the interaction.

Public behavior forces the actor to build an image by which s/he will be recognized by others. The public images of celebrities have usually been shaped and strengthened over years of personality development through the recurrent use and subsequent validation by others. The motivation to engage in self-presentation tends to increase when a person is in the focus of people's attention. Speaking in public is a spotlight performance that makes the individuals become highly aware of their public identities that constitute their public images. (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Therefore, self-presentational behaviors of public persons seem to be primarily driven by the desire to create an impression of themselves on others and, thus, to sustain, reinforce or modify their public images. This habitually occurs when the presenters specify their unique characteristics that distinguish themselves from most others of the comparative class. In other words, public speakers attempt to personalize themselves making their image salient, easily recognized and remembered. This task is effectively achieved by using the self-disclosing verbal tactics that include I-structures ('I am ...', 'I like ...', 'I want ...', etc.) and their varieties ('my desire', 'my goal', 'in my opinion', etc.).

On the other hand, a public speaking event takes place in the framework of a communicative scenario that involves a prototypical speaker. It has commonly been assumed that the conventions and maxims of communication in a social situation set up the standards by which a particular behavior is judged as effective or valuable. Public personalities are usually high self-monitors that is they are able to sense what type of person is expected in the situation and, correspondently, they try to meet the prototype of the social actor to keep up with through the interaction. Therefore, their

public claims and verbal patterns serve as ‘bricks’ used to build up the image that fits the prototype.

The key qualities of the model person that are socially accepted and, in fact, expected in any public speaking context are honesty and openness. (Rosenfeld, 2014). These qualities can be displayed efficiently when the speaker engages in self-disclosure that, by its nature, involves bringing some facts of one’s private life to the open. It should be noted that public personalities are usually aware of being observed by other people and being accountable to the public, that is whatever they say can be checked and verified afterward, hence, they are sooner inclined to choose ‘honesty as the best policy’ and to act veraciously and bona fide while revealing some facts of their private selves.

Consequently, public actors use self-disclosure as a self-presentational technique in order to typify (that is to meet the requirements of the model of the prototypical public speaker) as well as to specify (that is, to personalize or distinguish) their public identity that might promote their image of high sociability.

Self-disclosure and self-presentation are sometimes viewed as divergent processes, namely, self-disclosure is defined as open and honest presentation of the self, whereas self-presentation is seen as a process of making some desired impression on other people. Particularly, the researchers of the therapeutic effects of self-disclosure regard it as an attempt taken by an individual to convey private information about the self. In contrast, self-presentation is viewed as an attempt to package or fabricate information that is in the actor’s best interests. (Baumeister, 1982). However, the other scholars (Jourard, 1971; Johnson, 1981) claim that self-disclosure even in a therapeutic situation includes a great deal of impression management and that a speaker’s objective self-report is a way to instruct others about how one is to be regarded (that is self-presentation) rather than a source of factual information about the self (that is self-disclosure). In this connection, Schlenker (1985) suggests an integrative approach where the private and public selves are seen as intertwined.

It can therefore be assumed that through self-disclosure a presenter informs about his/her attitudes, judgements, experience, plans, etc. and simultaneously attempts to manage impressions on others. As far as a public speaking situation is concerned self-disclosure should be regarded here as a social act intended to impose a certain perspective on the audience from which the presenter is to be observed. It is worth noting that although self-presentation entails giving factual or evaluative information about the public speaker’s self, this information is evidently aimed at projecting a desired public self-image. Since self-disclosure in a public context is used selectively to control the perceptions of others and is, eventually, aimed at influencing the audience, it should be regarded as a tactic of self-presentation.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The theory of self-presentation elaborated by M. Leary distinguishes four tactics, namely, self-description, attitude statement, nonverbal behavior and social associations (Leary, 1996). Proceeding from the definitions of these tactics, we may

presume that self-description and attitude statement pertain directly to explicit self-disclosure whereas nonverbal behavior and social associations should be regarded as implicit self-disclosure. According to M. Leary, self-description involves sharing individual values, political, social or religious affiliations, occupation, experience or life accomplishments, etc. Attitude statements are made when speakers evaluate their acts or their positioning towards other objects. Attitude statements do not need to be outspoken or direct to be noticed, they can be discerned by the audience in the topic the speaker addresses to or some stylistic devices s/he uses in his/her talk (emphasis, repetition, inversion, epithets, etc.).

As it was stated above the process of self-disclosure occurs when a speaker reveals private information about him/herself or shares his/her feelings, aspirations, opinions, experiences, etc. It may include descriptive and evaluative aspects, that is a speaker informs about actual facts of his/her personal life and simultaneously expresses his/her subjective attitude towards them. Since self-disclosure is actor-focused behavior, it is realized verbally by employing 'I-structures' (or 'my-structures') that may indicate its various semantic types. Specifically, the verbal forms of self-disclosure extracted from the texts of eight celebrities' interviews (217 positions) are identified as the markers of certain type of information that is being disclosed. The lexical-grammatical analysis of the collected data resulted in indicating the following patterns of self-disclosure.

Pattern 1. Here belong the structures: 'I am + noun/adjective ...', 'I always/ever/ /generally/usually ...', 'I + present tense verb structures'. The occurrences that correspond to this pattern are regarded as the statements of self-confirmation, for example:

1. *I'm a small group person. I don't want an argument, but I want a conversation that really matters.* (JK Rolling).
2. *I feel like I've got happier and happier. I feel like I'm hitting my stride.* (JK Rolling).
3. *I'm not much of a woo-woo guy.* (Daniel Pink).
4. *I feel comfortable wearing this kind of robe.* (Thich Nhat Hanh).
5. *I'm the boss!* (Tina Fey).
6. *I'm clearly a political leader now.* (Barack Obama).
7. *There will be conflicts and difficulties, and I don't pretend that everybody is going to agree with me all the time.* (Barack Obama).
8. *I'm nonjudgmental in an interview.* (Oprah Winfrey).
9. *I am a thinker. I figure things out. I don't have a high level of education, but I'm practical and I have good instincts.* (Jay-Z).

Pattern 2. It consists of 'I structure' with the verbs of mental activity (*to think, to believe, to understand, to know, to be sure, etc.*). The text fragments where this pattern occurs are identified as the statements of self-assurance, for example:

1. *I knew I could win some argument.* (Barack Obama).
2. *I understood my affiliation to Africa and black people from an early age, but only in positive terms.* (Barack Obama).

3. *I thought I had something interesting to say about how our cultures collide as the world shrinks.* (Barack Obama).

4. *I knew there had to be a different way for me to understand myself as a black man.* (Barack Obama).

Pattern 3. It includes 'I structure' with the verbs of liking (*to like, to love, to admire, to prefer*), predicative forms of the 'fond- type' (*'I am fond of ...', 'I am crazy about ...', 'I am interested in ...'*), 'my structures' with the adjectives *favorite/loved/dear*, etc. The text fragments where this pattern is used are identified as the statements of personal preferences, for example:

1. *I love acting, because it's a vocation from myself.* (Oprah Winfrey).

2. *I don't love it that people recognize me all the time.* (Tina Fey).

3. *I love everything that I do. I love it.* (Oprah Winfrey).

4. *And that first album, Reasonable Doubt, is my favorite, because all the emotions and experiences of 26 years came out in it.* (Jay-Z).

5. *I like to try new things because I get bored so easily.* (Ellen De Generes).

Pattern 4. Here belong 'I structure' with the words of wish-indicating semantics, such as *to want, to try, to be going to, would like*, etc. and 'my structure' with the nouns *goal/desire/wish/aim/intention*, etc. This pattern is referred to as the statement of personal aspirations, for example:

1. *I want to do more than just win.* (Barack Obama).

2. *I want to be part of many voices that help the entire country rise up.* (Barack Obama).

3. *That's is the model I want to encourage.* (Barack Obama).

4. *Instead of trying to compete, I'm going to have my own things, and my own things may be the street or rap music.* (Barack Obama).

5. *My desire is to make sure that my kids are sane, happy, and health – which they are.* (Barack Obama).

6. *I'm not trying to turn everyone into star designers, I'm trying to help people become more literate about design.* (Daniel Pink).

7. *I would like to have a little more balance.* (Oprah Winfrey).

8. *I try to live every moment like that, to keep the peace in my self.* (Thich Nhat Hanh).

9. *I want people to like me – but not at my expense.* (Ellen De Generes).

Pattern 5. It is identified as a succession of 'I structures' with the past (or descriptive present) tense verbs in the predicate that are used to report about connected actions or events. The text fragments in which this pattern is detected are interpreted as self-narrative or storytelling, for example:

1. *When I wrote Mean Girl, I had some archetypes in my head – like the prettiest girl and the most popular girl. And when I was working on the script, I threw in some names of real people from high school and mixed them up with other random names. I later heard from a friend who went to my high school reunion that some of my former classmates weren't pleased. When they saw the movie, they were like, 'What did I do to her?'. I was inadvertently hurtful. So I apologized to the women whose names I used.* (Tina Fey).

2. (*What gives you pleasure?*) *Seeing people around me happy. Here's a story. The first time I went to Capri, Italy, I had some spaghetti, ... it was prepared in such a fresh way that I immediately called my friends to come and share it with me ... That made me happy.* (Jay-Z).

Pattern 6. It includes 'I structure' with attitude-expressing predicate and the structures with a qualifying predicative used to evaluate other objects (people, events, etc.). The text fragments containing this pattern are indicated as attitude statements, for example:

1. *I believe the American people are decent people, you're struck by how tolerant and loving they are.* (Barack Obama).

2. *I know this man. He is brilliant, he is decent, he is everything you'd want.* (Barack Obama, Michelle Obama).

3. *I know that people are fundamentally good.* (Barack Obama).

4. *I know that there is great suffering and tragedy in the world, but ultimately, it's worth it to live.* (Barack Obama).

5. *I have deep, deep love and affection for the people who've grown up watching.* (Oprah Winfrey).

1. The overview of 217 text fragments that contain 'I structures' shows that each of the items corresponds to one of the indicated patterns of self-disclosure. However, the distribution of the patterns throughout the list is uneven, that is, pattern 1 is applied to 49 items (25,5 %), pattern 2 is applied to 22 items (10 %), pattern 3 is applied to 27 items (12 %), pattern 4 is applied to 42 items (19,4 %), pattern 5 is applied to 46 items (21 %), and pattern 6 is applied to 21 items (9,6%). This kind of pattern distribution testifies to the fact that while performing in a public context individuals seem to be more inclined to disclose their private information by using patterns 1, 4 and 5, in other words, they prefer the statements of self-confirmation, personal aspirations and self-narratives.

2. The distribution of the self-disclosure patterns also differs from speaker to speaker. Thus, a political leader (Barack Obama) uses pattern 2 (statements of self-assurance) in 17 occurrences out of 22 indicated for this pattern. It may speak to the preferences of a certain type of self-disclosure considering the speaker's occupation and public status.

3. The indicated patterns of self-disclosure are classified according to the key communicative aim the speaker purposes while revealing private information in a public speaking situation. Specifically, s/he may wish to describe him/herself, or to tell a story about some events so that to add meaning to current circumstances or to expose his/her private self by evaluating other objects, that is, s/he may use self-description, self-narrative or attitude statement tactics.

4. The self-disclosure tactic of self-description is realized by employing patterns 1, 2, 3, 4, namely, the statements of self-confirmation, self-assurance, personal preferences and personal aspirations. The self-narrative tactic manifests itself in using pattern 5, that is, storytelling. The self-disclosure tactic of attitude statement is realized by using pattern 6, that is, by expressing one's evaluative attitude towards the world (objects (things and people), events, phenomena, etc.).

5. Since public actors attempt to describe themselves by exposing different aspects of their selves, they use different types of statements to inform about their personal qualities, convictions, opinions, preferences, likings, plans, aspirations, etc. that are embodied in corresponding patterns. The variety of verbal forms and semantic functions of self-disclosure proves its versatile rather than homogeneous communicative nature.

6. Using the tactics of self-disclosure selectively in a public speaking context actors attempt to look open, sincere and distinguishable personalities, so that the audience would trust and like them.

## **5. Conclusions**

Self-disclosure as a tactic of individual's self-presentation in a public speaking context is frequently used by performers to influence audience's perceptions and to manage impressions. The verbal forms and content as well as appropriateness of self-disclosure is determined by the situational factors, such as the audience's expectations and the speaker's status and the level of his/her transparency and accountability to the public. Since the speakers' ultimate goal is to build or reinforce or modify their public image they attempt to achieve it by accommodating their verbal behaviors to the conventions and requirements of the public speaking scenario, therefore they select carefully the verbal forms of their statements, particularly, when it involves divulging private information. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is the one of the versatile and flexible nature of self-disclosure. As the results of the research demonstrate the most recurrent types of self-disclosure are a) self-description that is realized by using the statements of self-confirmation, self-assurance and the statements of personal preferences and personal aspirations; b) self-narrative that is realized by using a storytelling pattern, and c) attitude statement that is realized by using the statements indicating the speaker's evaluative opinion about the world. The findings of the research also show that the public speakers prefer to disclose private information by employing the statements of self-confirmation, statements of personal aspirations and self-narrative. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, we believe that this study offers some insight into the mechanism of impression management and image building in public speaking situations.

This research has thrown up a few issues in need for further investigation. Firstly, a natural progression of this work is to examine more closely the correlation between the tactics of self-disclosure and the situational factors of public speaking to define the contextual conditions that promote disclosing behaviors. Secondly, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to explore the emotional versus rational content of self-disclosing in a public speaking situation that might help elicit new tactics of self-disclosure.

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