Story 5 SCRIPT:

by Elisa Brosera and Annemarija Apine

What makes a successful TED talk?

Why do some TED Talks rack up millions of views, change lives and are talked about everywhere?

All TED Talks are good. Why are some great?

To answer this question, I investigated the data.

I collected the 5 most viewed videos and the 5 least viewed videos on their channel to analyze how linguistics impacts their success.

Here are my findings:

The first thing I did was to compare the length of words used in all talks.

The top videos use significantly shorter words.

Now, I would like to show you 2 examples. Can you guess which one is from the top viewed video?

[]

What you have just watched is an extract from the most popular TED talk in history with 72 million views.

And an extract from one of the least popular TED talk with 212 thousands views.

Interestingly, these are also the videos with the second lowest average word length and with the highest average word length in the sample.

Here’s a bar graph plotting the average word length of each video.

The top videos use on average shorter words. You can see it right?

You may wonder now: what can we deduce from it?

Short words are generally simple and simple language makes understanding easier. Your audience must not be distracted by long pretentious words.

It is true that some topics may require complex terminology. Specific jargon uses long words but explaining the concepts behind it doesn’t have to.

Is procrastination an intrinsically simple word? No, it is not. However, Tim Urban, in ‘Inside the mind of a master procrastinator’, communicates with simple and vivid words what happens in the mind of a master procrastinator and how to cope with it.

In practice, this means making concrete examples and using vivid anecdotes, similes and metaphors to help listeners create clear mental images. This facilitates the listeners’ understanding by tapping into one or more of the audience’s five basic senses.

In his talk, Tim Urban uses the image of ‘instant gratification monkey’ to explain why we are tempted to procrastinate. The little monkey will take control over our life leading till the panic monster comes!

[]

Concrete, vivid, clear words help the listener visualize your speech.

But isn’t it true that easy words can be used in a wide range of scenarios? Aren’t they linked to more than one theme?

We will understand the relationship between simple words and topics next. For now, let’s sum up the first lesson: use simple language to explain powerful ideas.

The second thing I did was to evaluate whether variety in topics makes a TED talk more popular.

I will give you a few details of my analysis. Bear with me for a few seconds.

From the union of all words used in the talks, 10 topics to which words relate have been defined. This means that each topic can be visualized as a seemingly unrelated list of linked words, rather than a specific theme per se.

In this slide you can see the key words per topic:

[]

We will get back to themes in our next video. For now, it may be interesting to understand the weights videos assign to each topic. Is diversifying topics a good strategy and if so, how can it be interpreted?

This heatmap shows the correlation between talks and each topic. Do you notice how the top talks have more dark squares? - it means that they relate to more topics even though they touch upon them more briefly.

In contrast, unpopular videos seem to be strongly associated with just 1 or a couple topics.

Does this mean that the unpopular video ‘Open science now!’ by Michael Nielsen’ is a talk about topic 1, that ‘Why the African diaspora is crucial to the continent's future’ by Lindiwe Mazibuko, also in the bottom 5, is a talk about topic 4, that ‘Why the world needs sharks’ by Ocean Ramsey is a talk on topic 5 and that ‘Do schools kill creativity?’ by Sir Ken Robinson touches all these topics? That is an extreme interpretation which differs from my claim substantially.

I believe that the power of simple words is in their universality. Simple concrete visual language is unlikely to be related to 1 unique theme.

Consider again the procrastinating monkey taking the helm of our life. Is this imagery about zoology? Or is it just an effective metaphor that can be used to explain many concepts, in this case a complicated brain pattern: procrastination?