

A Pragmatic study of Persuasive Strategies in Selected Speeches of WHO Director-General during the Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the persuasive strategies employed by the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General in selected speeches during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a pragmatic approach, the research analyzes speech acts and rhetorical techniques to understand how language was strategically used to influence global response to the crisis. The study applies speech act theory and Aristotle's persuasive strategies to dissect the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms employed in these high-stakes communications. Findings revealed a predominant use of assertive and directive speech acts complemented by evidence-based argumentation and emotional appeals. The Director General's speeches demonstrated a sophisticated blend of factual presentation, urgent calls to action, and moral imperatives, aimed at fostering international cooperation and addressing global health inequities. This research contributes to our understanding of effective crisis communication in public health offering insights into how strategic language use can shape policy decisions and public behavior during global emergency. The study's implications extended to future public health messaging strategies and the leadership communication in crisis situation.

Keywords: COVID-19, World Health Organization, speech acts, persuasive strategies, rhetoric, pragmatics

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global health crisis that challenged leaders worldwide to effectively communicate vital information and guidance to the public. As the head of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Director-General played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge, advocating for preventive measures, and rallying international cooperation during this tumultuous period. This study aims to analyze the persuasive strategies employed by the WHO Director-General in selected speeches delivered during the COVID-19 crisis through the lens of pragmatics. Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics, focuses on the study of language in context, accounting for the dynamic interplay between the speaker's intended meaning, the listener's interpretation, and the situational factors that shape communication. By examining the Director-General's speeches through a pragmatic lens, this research endeavors to unveil the intricate ways in which language was harnessed to achieve specific communicative goals, such as instilling trust, inspiring action, and fostering global solidarity in the face of an unprecedented health emergency.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis in modern history. António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, announced that the world is facing “the most challenging crisis since World War II (The Associated Press, 2020).” On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a number of pneumonia-like cases that had an unknown cause in Wuhan, a city in China. The initial expectations were that a disease had originated from a seafood market in the city (Huang et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). The disease was later identified as a new coronavirus

strain — a large family of viruses that range from mild symptoms to severe illness — and it was initially named “2019- n COV,” then COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). Only three months after the initial outbreak, the novel virus spread very fast, affecting more than 110 countries. At least 118,000 people tested positive, which resulted in an official announcement by the WHO on March 11, 2020, declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO, 2020; Ducharme, 2020).

To cope with the pandemic, governments attempt to influence public opinion to gain immediate and popular acceptance of their policies. Therefore, they make use of persuasive strategies to win public compliance with what is critical to the success of their efforts in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the world leaders have been put under pressure to fight the virus by communicating regularly their views, policies, achievements, and updates pertaining to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis to the public. This communication is apparently informational but ultimately intends to persuade the public. The WHO Director-General presented a range of safety and protection measures, calling on the public for adhering to the respective measures in order to control the spread of the coronavirus and ward off its unpleasant consequences, especially, on health and the economy. They increase their communicative messages by presenting an array of effective rationales to make its claims credible to the target audience and by using different strategies to influence the attitudes and behaviors of people.

Previous studies

There are previous research analyzed persuasive strategies used by influential speakers. Setiawan (2014) analyzed persuasive

strategies used by Obama on his victory speech in 2012. The result showed that Obama mostly used pathos rather than ethos and logos. It indicates that Obama persuaded hearers by arousing their emotion. Shabrina (2016) analyzed persuasive strategies used by Hillary Clinton. The result showed that Hillary Clinton used ethos to show her good image and used pronoun 'we' to take hearers as the same position with her. Pathos was used by Hillary Clinton to affect hearers emotion by driving herself as a part of them and logos was used to give logical and factual evidences. Nurrosyidah (2016) analyzed persuasive strategies used by Jokowi in his political speech. The result showed that Jokowi used ethos by telling his reputation, character and knowledge. Pathos was used to affect hearers emotion by using figurative language and logos was used by telling factual data, statistic and example.

Jarraya (2013) investigated persuasion in political discourse in the last speech of the former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, delivered one day before he left the country in the middle of the Tunisian Revolution that sparked the so-called Arab Spring. Sentences are analyzed to check their illocutionary force in light of Searle's typology of Speech Act Theory. Then, an analysis of agency is carried out to investigate the persuasive dimension of the use of deictic pronouns to construct the self-image as well as the image of the Other. The speech is also examined using the three appeals of Aristotle, and its use of diglossia is analyzed. Lastly, the Gricean maxims are used to check whether the Cooperative Principle is observed or not and whether the deviation is intended for persuasive ends. The findings of this study indicate that multiple speech acts are used in the same utterance either with or without an explicit performative verb. Some speech acts may be used as a medium to carry others. It also shows how the strategic use of deictic pronouns and agency with certain illocutionary forces helps construct otherness as well as the self.

Abouelenine (2021) examined the persuasive strategies found in President Joe Biden's Inauguration Speech. It aims at highlighting the persuasive strategies used to reveal the identity of the speaker. In the micro-analysis provided by this study, segments of speeches are illustrated to verify the illocutionary act in order to know the speaker's intended meaning in terms of Searle's Speech Act Theory based on the five categories of speech which are: assertives, commissives, expressives, directives, and declaration. Afterwards, the use of deictic pronouns such as: the first-person singular pronoun "I" and the exclusive and inclusive "WE" is analysed based on Fairclough's assumption in Critical Discourse Analysis with the aim to either show the speaker's integrity or to give a devoted and close impression. A brief explanation is provided to facilitate the process of understanding the meaning behind its use. Lastly, the use of Aristotle's persuasion appeal as: Ethos, Logos, and Pathos is examined. Ethos is used to show truthfulness. Pathos is used to express emotions and feelings. Logos is used to support arguments through logical assumptions and facts. The findings indicate that multiple speech acts can occur in a single utterance with different connotations based on the context. The excessive use of a certain act can be significant. The analysis of speech acts reveals a lot about the speaker's identity and the relationship between the speaker and the audience.

The study of Al-Luhaibi, (2023) attempted to get a linguistic analysis for a press conference for the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi held in Baghdad in 07/06/2022 two years after AlKadhimi took office. This linguistic analysis is conducted from the perspective of persuasion to examine speech acts as persuasive devices and how Al-Kadhimi employed them to persuade his addressees. It also investigates which type of speech acts Al-Kadhimi relied on as a central persuasive device to achieve the act of persuasion. This study adopts speech act theory in analysing speeches because the later focuses on the interpretation of acts via words and

reflects the intent of the addresser in the type of the speech act selected. The importance of this research lies in how to know and use the bases of linguistics in studying the styles of persuasions in English language in general and in political discourse as a special case. This study finds that Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has focused more on commissives and expressive speech acts within the descriptions in the assertives to prepare the addressees for successful persuasion for accepting the directives which are the main goal of his speech.

Abd Elhai (2020) in his contrastive study investigated the persuasive strategies used by the previous Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia in his political talks in both Arabic and French. It sheds light on persuasive strategies as an important aspect of communication manifesting in plethoric contexts including advertisement, classroom, and so on. This research is conducted within Aristotle's theory of Ethos, Pathos and Logos and analyzed a set of eight political interviews and press conferences (4 in Arabic and 4 in French) in which Ahmed Ouyahia is involved . The findings reveal some parallels and differences in the employment of persuasive strategies cross linguistically. The Algerian Prime Minister and leader of RND exhibited the use of Logos as the most prevalent rhetorical strategy in both Arabic and French talks, followed by Pathos and Ethos with different degrees of application.

The study of Alkhawaldeh (2021) explored the common linguistic strategies used by the Jordanian government to enhance its credibility and convince the public of the importance of effective adherence to its Covid-19 related policies (e.g. social distancing, face mask wearing, and self-hygiene). As an eclectic method of inquiry, the study draws generally on the perspective of discourse analysis and pragmatics. In addition, our analysis is informed by a corpus-based approach. The synthesis of our findings demonstrates that the government consistently and systematically utilizes various strategies for its persuasive intention (e.g. metaphor, repetition, and religious quotation). It also shows that the rationale beyond the respective

persuasive techniques seems to win public compliance and cooperation, reassure the public, undermine opponent's counterclaims, and project a trustworthy and praiseworthy image.

The study by Badr (2022) examined persuasive strategies employed in two Standard Arabic written Friday sermons by Al-Sistani, primarily addressing the 2019 Iraqi protests. The research aims to identify the persuasive strategies utilized in these sermons, including illocutionary speech acts, pragmatic functions, persuasive appeals, and their respective strategies. The study's significance lies in revealing how these persuasive strategies were employed to persuade the audience. The data selection was based on the inclusion of diverse persuasive illocutionary speech acts, pragmatic functions, persuasive appeals, and strategies, as well as the lack of prior research exploring persuasion from this perspective. The analysis adopted a qualitative approach, investigating fifteen examples. The findings indicate the use of three types of illocutionary speech acts: representatives, directives, and expressives.

The research of Oktiani & Putri (2022) examined the persuasive strategies employed in selected UNICEF speakers' speeches (BTS - RMand Jin, Millie Bobby Brown, and David Beckham). The observation aimed to determine the types of persuasive strategies used in selected UNICEF speakers' speeches and how they were implemented. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach in its research design. In the data analysis process, the analysis was conducted by describing and interpreting each data point in the form of words or utterances according to the context. A purposive sampling of all facts was used to collect data. In addition, the research used Aristotle's theory of persuasion as a reference to help understand and analyze the data found from the speech. According to the data analysis, the research discovers 49 data points that utilize persuasive strategies. They employ all of Aristotle's persuasive strategies to persuade their audience. These are the strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos.

Amir (2021) investigated President Jo Biden's persuasive strategies and the covert ideology evident through his inaugural address on 20 January 2021. The basis for this analysis is Fairclough's assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis, which claims that ideologies of people reside in their texts which means that it is not possible to "read off" ideologies from the texts" and that "texts are open to diverse interpretations". The paper, therefore, analyzes various components like "the rule of three," the past references, the biblical examples, etc. and concludes that overall theme for the inauguration address revolves around the strength from America's heroic past which demands that the Americans must go back to the good, old American values of tolerance, unity, and love.

AbuAlhuda, & Alshboul (2022) investigates the persuasive strategies and techniques used by King Abdullah II in his two speeches regarding the covid 19 pandemic. It also aims to critically analyze these persuasive strategies and techniques using critical discourse analysis. Moreover, it aims to explore the most and the least frequently persuasive strategies and techniques employed in these two speeches. The data consists of two speeches delivered virtually at the World Economic Forum. The first speech is delivered on the 21st of September 2020 and the second speech is delivered on 28 January 2021. The study adapts Johnstone (2008) as a theoretical framework for data analyses. The findings reveal that King Abdullah II employed three persuasive strategies, namely quasilogical, presentational, and analogical in the two speeches respectively. Findings also reveal that the presentational strategy is the most frequently used.

Research Design

The research design for this analysis is qualitative, employing a systematic approach to investigate the persuasive strategies and speech acts employed by the Director-General in selected extracts from speeches delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis draws upon various theoretical frameworks, including speech

act theory, implicature analysis, and persuasive strategy analysis, to provide a comprehensive examination of the communicative techniques employed.

The primary focus of the research is to identify and analyze the locutionary acts (literal meanings), illocutionary acts (intended meanings or forces), and perlocutionary acts (actual effects or consequences) present in the selected speech extracts. Additionally, the analysis explores the use of implicatures, or implied meanings, conveyed through these speech acts, as well as the persuasive strategies and rhetorical devices employed to enhance the impact and persuasiveness of the Director-General's communication.

Model of Analysis

The analysis follows a systematic model that combines elements from speech act theory, implicature analysis, and persuasive strategy analysis. The model is designed to provide a comprehensive examination of the communicative techniques employed in the selected speech extracts, offering insights into the Director-General's intended messages, underlying implications, and persuasive appeals.

4THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used in this study combines two theories: speech act theory and persuasive strategy. Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) is concerned with the ways in which utterances can be used not only to describe or report information but also to perform communicative actions. Actions performed through such utterances are called speech acts, and they may involve promising, complaining, offering, and other functions. In pragmatics, this theory can help to explain and analyze the linguistic meaning of utterances in the WHO Director-General by examining the speaker's intention (illocutionary force) in producing utterances and the addressee's interpretation of these utterances. Analysis of Extracts

Extract 1: "Our commitment in the coming year – and in the coming five years – is to dramatically strengthen our ability to deliver results in countries."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is making a statement about the WHO's commitment to strengthen its delivery of results in countries.

Illocutionary act:

1. Assertive - The Director-General is asserting the WHO's commitment.
2. Commissive - The Director-General is making a promise or commitment on behalf of the WHO.

Implicature: By making this commitment, the Director-General is implying that the WHO recognizes the need to improve its country-level impact and is pledging to take concrete steps to achieve this.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of the word "dramatically" suggests a sense of urgency and determination, appealing to the audience's emotions. Showing Evidence: The specific timeframe of "the coming year" and "the coming five years" provides a tangible metric to evaluate the WHO's progress. Personal Character of the Speaker: The collective "our" and "we" language positions the Director-General as part of the WHO team, lending personal investment and credibility to the commitment.

Extract 2: "First, to support countries to make an urgent paradigm shift towards promoting health and well-being and preventing disease by addressing its root causes."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is outlining the first priority as supporting countries in shifting towards a greater emphasis on health promotion, disease prevention, and addressing root causes.

Illocutionary act:

1. Directive - The Director-General is calling on countries to make this "urgent paradigm shift."

Implicature: The Director-General is suggesting that the current approach is insufficient and that a fundamental change in mindset and priorities is needed to improve health outcomes.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of "urgent" conveys a sense of importance and the need for immediate action. Showing Evidence: Framing this as a "paradigm shift" suggests a well-reasoned, evidence-based approach to addressing the root causes of disease.

Extract 3: "The second priority is to support a radical reorientation of health systems towards primary health care, as the foundation of universal health coverage."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is presenting the second priority as supporting a significant transformation of health systems towards primary care as the basis for universal health coverage.

Illocutionary act:

1. Directive - The Director-General is calling for a "radical reorientation" of health systems.

Implicature: The Director-General is implying that the current health system structure is inadequate and requires a fundamental shift towards primary care to achieve universal health coverage.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of "radical" suggests a dramatic, necessary change, appealing to the audience's sense of urgency. Showing Evidence: Linking this priority to the established goal of universal health coverage lends credibility and importance to the proposed reorientation.

Extract 4: "The third priority is to urgently strengthen the systems and tools for epidemic and pandemic preparedness and response at all levels, underpinned by strong governance and financing to ignite and sustain those efforts, connected and coordinated globally by WHO."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is outlining the third priority as strengthening pandemic preparedness and response systems and tools at all levels, with appropriate governance, financing, and global coordination by the WHO.

Illocutionary act:

1. Directive - The Director-General is calling for urgent action to strengthen pandemic preparedness and response systems.

Implicature: The Director-General is suggesting that current systems and tools are insufficient, and that a comprehensive, multilayered approach is required to improve global health security.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of "urgently" conveys a sense of importance and the need for prompt action. Showing Evidence: The detailed description of the components (systems, tools, governance, financing, global coordination) demonstrates a well-considered, systematic approach.

Extract 5: "The fourth priority is to harness the power of science, research innovation, data and digital technologies as critical enablers of the other priorities – for health promotion and disease prevention, for early diagnosis and case management, and for the prevention, early detection, and rapid response to epidemics and pandemics."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is presenting the fourth priority as leveraging science, innovation, data, and digital technologies to support the other priorities, including health

promotion, disease prevention, and pandemic response.

Illocutionary act:

1. Directive - The Director-General is calling for the harnessing of these enabling tools and technologies.

Implicature: The Director-General is suggesting that advancements in science, research, and digital capabilities are essential for achieving the other priority areas, and that the WHO will focus on utilizing these resources.

Persuasive strategies: Showing Evidence: The specific examples provided, such as health promotion, disease prevention, and pandemic response, demonstrate the versatility and broad applicability of the technologies. Personal Character of the Speaker: The Director-General positions these technologies as "critical enablers," conveying a sense of their importance and the WHO's commitment to leveraging them.

Extract 6: "The fifth priority is to urgently strengthen WHO as the leading and directing authority on global health, at the centre of the global health architecture."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is presenting the fifth priority as strengthening the WHO's position as the leading and central authority on global health.

Illocutionary act:

1. Directive - The Director-General is calling for the urgent strengthening of the WHO's role and influence.

Implicature: The Director-General is suggesting that the WHO needs to bolster its leadership and centrality within the global health ecosystem to effectively drive progress on the other priorities.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of "urgently" conveys a sense of necessity and importance. Showing Evidence: The description of the WHO as the "leading and directing authority" and "at the centre of the global health architecture" lends credibility to the organization's role and the need to strengthen it.

Extract 7: "If countries use all of these strategies and tools in a comprehensive way, we can end the acute phase of the pandemic this year – we can end COVID-19 as a global health emergency, and we can do it this year."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is stating that if countries employ the strategies and tools outlined, the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic can be ended this year.

Illocutionary act:

1. **Assertive** - The Director-General is making a confident claim about the potential to end the COVID-19 pandemic's acute phase.

Implicature: The Director-General is conveying a sense of optimism and possibility, implying that the solutions are within reach if countries take comprehensive action.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The use of "we can" and the repeated emphasis on "this year" evokes a sense of possibility and urgency. Showing Evidence: The reference to "all of these strategies and tools" suggests a well-rounded, evidence-based approach underlying the Director-General's claim.

Extract 8: "Vaccines alone are not the golden ticket out of the pandemic. But there is no path out unless we achieve our shared target of vaccinating 70% of the population of every country by the middle of this year."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is stating that vaccines alone are not sufficient to end the pandemic, but achieving the 70% vaccination target is a necessary condition.

Illocutionary act:

1. **Assertive** - The Director-General is making declarative statements about the limitations of vaccines and the criticality of the 70% vaccination target.

Implicature: The Director-General is acknowledging the importance of vaccines while also recognizing their limitations, and emphasizing the necessity of broader, equitable vaccine distribution to reach the global population.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The metaphor of a "golden ticket" suggests a sense of disappointment in the limitations of vaccines, appealing to the audience's frustrations. Showing Evidence: The specific target of 70% of the population in every country lends credibility and urgency to the vaccination goal. Personal Character of the Speaker: The use of "our shared target" conveys a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to this objective.

Extract 9: "How can this be acceptable to any of us? We simply cannot end the emergency phase of the pandemic unless we bridge this gap."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is expressing moral outrage at the unacceptable situation of low vaccination rates in certain regions, and asserting that the pandemic's emergency phase cannot be ended without addressing this gap.

Illocutionary act:

1. **Expressive** - The Director-General is conveying a strong emotional response to the lack of progress in vaccinating

populations, particularly in Africa.

2. Assertive - The Director-General is making a definitive statement about the necessity of bridging the vaccine equity gap to end the pandemic's acute stage.

Implicature: The Director-General is appealing to the audience's sense of moral conscience and responsibility, while also highlighting the inextricable link between vaccine equity and ending the pandemic's emergency phase.

Persuasive strategies: Appeal to Emotion: The rhetorical question "How can this be acceptable to any of us?" heightens the sense of moral indignation and calls the audience to reflect on the issue. Showing Evidence: The specific reference to low vaccination rates in Africa lends credibility and specificity to the Director-General's concerns.

Extract 10: "Even before the pandemic, the world was off track for the 'triple billion' targets of the 13th General Programme of Work. Now, we're even further behind."

Locutionary act: The Director-General is stating that the world was already off track in achieving the "triple billion" targets set out in the 13th General Programme of Work, and that the pandemic has further exacerbated this lack of progress.

Illocutionary act:

1. Assertive - The Director-General is making factual claims about the state of progress towards the "triple billion" targets.

Implicature: The Director-General is setting the stage by acknowledging the pre-existing challenges, and then emphasizing the significant setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the urgency of the situation.

Persuasive strategies: Showing Evidence: The reference to the "triple billion" targets and the 13th General Programme of Work lends credibility to the Director-General's statements by invoking established global health goals and frameworks. Personal Character of the Speaker: The use of "we're" positions the Director-General as part of the broader global community, conveying a sense of shared responsibility for the lack of progress.

Conclusion

The analysis of the WHO Director-General's speeches during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a sophisticated application of persuasive strategies aimed at influencing global response and cooperation. By employing a combination of assertive and directive speech acts, the Director-General effectively communicated the urgency and gravity of the situation, encouraging adherence to preventive measures and fostering international solidarity. The integration of evidence-based argumentation and emotional appeals further enhanced the impact of these communications, ensuring that messages were both credible and compelling.

This study shows the critical role of strategic language use in crisis communication. The Director-General's ability to blend factual information with moral imperatives and urgent calls to action illustrates the power of rhetoric in shaping public behavior and policy decisions during global emergencies. The findings highlight the importance of clear, persuasive, and empathetic communication in managing public health crises, providing valuable insights for future public health messaging strategies and leadership communication.

The findings of this research have implications that reach far beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic. They provide a framework for analyzing and enhancing crisis communication in a wide range of situations. Through gaining insight into the mechanisms of effective persuasion, public health leaders can enhance their readiness and response to future emergencies, ultimately leading to improved global

health outcomes and equity. This research emphasizes the crucial role of strategic language in crisis communication.

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ملخص

تتناول الدراسة الحالية تحديد وانتاج فعل الكلام المقنع كظاهرة لغوية تداولية في بعض الخطب الخاصة بمدير الصحة العالميه بشأن مواجهه فيروس كورونا واستخدام افعال الكلام المقنع اعتماداً على أساليب أرسطو الإقناعية السؤال الذي يحاول البحث الاجابه عليه هو ما هي اسراتيجيات الإقناع المستخدمه في خطابات مدير منظمه الصحة . وسوف يشمل البحث تحليل للاستراتيجيات المستعمله في خطابات مدير منظمه الصحة العالميه في مواجهه فيروس كورونا وتحليل افعال الكلام المستعمله في استراتيجيات الإقناع وتحليل الادوات الاسلوبيه المستعمله طبقا لارسطو (٢٠٠٧) ولوكاس (٢٠٠٩). وتتضمن الدراسة تحليل نوعي للإجابة على تساؤلات الدراسة وانجاز الأهداف و تحقيق فرضيات الدراسة. وسوف تقدم الدراسة تحليل تداولي للإقناع في الخطب. وبالنسبه للجزء النظري من الدراسة، سوف يتم التوضيح وبشكل موجز مفاهيم مثل البراغماتية، نظرية افعال الكلام، فعل الكلام المقنع، تقنيات الإقناع وأنواعه. تتناول خطابات مدير منظمه الصحة العالميه في مواجهه فيروس كورونا كأهم موضوعاتها لتفحص مدى فعالية الاستراتيجيات التداولية في الإقناع. وتطمح الدرسته في اضافته منظور إلى ظاهرة الإقناع من وجهة نظر تداولية. كما تعتمد الدرسته على إن هناك استراتيجيات ذو فعالية كبيرة في الإقناع منها أساليب أرسطو الإقناعية .

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإقناع، التداولية، البراغماتية، افعال الكلام ، افعال الكلام

المقنع.