

The Relationship Between Aristotle's Rhetoric and Tense Choice in CEO Letters

ความสัมพันธ์ของศิลปะการโน้มน้าวใจตามแนวคิดของ อริสโตเติล กับการเลือกใช้ Tense ในสาส์นจากประธานกรรมการบริหาร

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between tense choice and Aristotle's rhetoric, Ethos, Logos and Pathos, in CEO letters. First, in order to be able to examine the tense choice in each persuasive mode, the content of CEO letters was allocated to the three modes following the study on Rhetorical Appeals in Thai Annual Reports by Chakorn (2008). Next, a quantitative analysis was conducted to examine the frequencies of tense choice within each mode by counting the finite verb forms in main and subordinate clauses. Finally, a sentential contextual analysis then followed to explain how the basic meanings and uses of the dominant tenses serve the associated persuasive functions. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that there tends to be a relationship between tense choice and Aristotle's rhetoric. In addition, the results from sentential contextual analyses showed that the basic meanings and uses of tense choice as defined in general grammar served the persuasive functions.

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ของการเลือกใช้ Tense กับวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจตามแนวคิดของอริสโตเติลในสาส์นจากประธานกรรมการบริหาร วิธีการดังกล่าว ประกอบด้วย การโน้มน้าวใจโดยความน่าเชื่อถือของผู้เขียน (Ethos) การโน้มน้าวใจโดยการให้เหตุผลข้อเท็จจริง (Logos) และ การโน้มน้าวใจโดยการเร้าอารมณ์ของผู้อ่าน (Pathos) เพื่อสามารถหาความถี่ของการเลือกใช้ Tense ในแต่ละวิธี ในขั้นตอนแรก ผู้วิจัยแบ่งเนื้อหาของสาส์น เข้าสู่สามกลุ่มวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจตามการศึกษาวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจตามแนวคิดของอริสโตเติลในรายงานประจำปีของประชากรในปี 2551 หลังจากนั้นนักวิจัยได้หาความถี่ของการเลือกใช้ Tense ในแต่ละวิธีโดยนักกลุ่มกริยาแท้ที่อยู่ในประโยคหลัก และอนุประโยค หลังจากนั้นผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาในระดับประโยคเพื่ออธิบายว่าความหมายและการใช้ Tense แบบพื้นฐานสนับสนุนวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจอย่างไร ผลจากการวิเคราะห์

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หาความถี่ของ Tense สะท้อนให้เห็นว่า มีแนวโน้มของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการเลือกใช้ Tense และวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจดังกล่าว และผลการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาในระดับประโยคที่ตามมาแสดงให้เห็นว่าความหมายและการใช้ Tense แบบพื้นฐานสนับสนุนสอดคล้องกับวิธีการโน้มน้าวใจดังกล่าว

Key Words: Aristotle's rhetoric, Tense choice, CEO letters

คำสำคัญ: ศิลปะการโน้มน้าวใจตามแนวคิดของอริสโตเติล การเลือกใช้กาล สำนักรจากประธานกรรมการบริหาร

Introduction

When the trading became truly international, there was a demand for business English courses as the English language has been used as a tool to survive in economic competition with other countries [1]. However, Thais still have low English proficiency according to the TOEFL score data summary reported by Educational Testing Service, 2009. According to some error analyses of the compositions and translations produced by Thai learners, tense misuse is the top-ranked error [2, 3, 4, 5]. Therefore, the researcher aimed to suggest an effective way of tense teaching to Thai learners in order to solve the problem.

In Thai context, the tense teaching and learning has focused on time reference. In most text, tense and aspect are introduced in terms of temporal reference despite the fact that tense serves not only for time relations, but also for other purposes such as subject matter and rhetorical functions in scientific and technical discourse [6, 7, 8]. Realizing the relationship between tenses and purposes, Taylor [7] aimed to identify factors that affect tense choice. He concluded that the tense choices were associated with the rhetorical functions. Similarly, Martinez [8]

suggests that rhetorical function influences the choice of tense. However, persuasive rhetoric was not included in their studies despite its counterparts in all genres and modes of discourse [9, 10].

Realizing the importance of persuasion in business contexts, some researchers have studied persuasive discourse by using the Greek framework of western rhetoric; i.e., the Concept of Persuasive Rhetoric as structured by Aristotle: Ethos (convincing by moral competence); Logos (argument from reason); and Pathos (emotional appeals) [11, 12]. Following the Aristotelian Concept of Persuasive Rhetoric, Chakorn [13] analyzed these three modes of persuasion in 54 Thai CEO letters. The study showed that Aristotle's rhetoric was an important part of CEO letters. However, these studies do not investigate any relationship between the three persuasive modes and any grammatical structures.

In terms of business English, there are many types of written texts such as business letters, memos, business plans, and annual reports (Robinson, 1991 cited in [14]). An annual report is considered one of many marketing tools. Shareholders and investors review it to make decisions on invest-

ment. However, it is suggested that investors not only consider the content, but also the attitudes and intentions of chief executive officers [15]. The attitudes and intentions are usually presented in CEO letters. Undoubtedly, because of the main purpose to persuade readers, the art of persuasion is clearly found in CEO letters [11, 12, 13].

Considering the important role of CEO letters to maintain stockholders' and investor's confidence in a company, the obvious persuasive rhetoric in CEO letters, the serious problem with tense use on the part of Thai learners, and the relationship between tense choice and rhetorical functions, the researcher believes that the use of tenses in CEO letters in relation to the rhetorical functions deserves more consideration.

Methodology

In order to be able to suggest the tense teaching in relation to the persuasive function, the relationship between tense choice and the persuasive modes must be examined. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the frequency of tenses in each mode of persuasion as defined by Aristotle and to explain the relationship between tense choice and persuasive functions. In other words, both qualitative methods and quantitative methods were required.

Before the main analysis, a pilot study was done to evaluate the reliability of the Research Tool, the Categories of Persuasive Modes for Classification (Appendix 1). The contents of four CEO letters

were analyzed by the researcher and a native English speaker with one year experience of teaching English writing to undergraduates in Thailand. She was trained by the researcher using the Handbook for Analysis of Persuasion in CEO Letters constructed by the researcher based on the result of the study by Chakorn [13] and Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. In addition, an expert, the other native speaker who is familiar with Aristotle's three modes of persuasion because of his experience in political debate as a debater and an adjudicator, was consulted on how to improve the categories. Following the suggestions, the categories for classification (Appendix 1) were improved and ready for the use in the main analysis. During the pilot study, not only was the effectiveness of the research tool improved, but the researcher (considered to be another user of the research tool) also acquired additional knowledge of the three persuasive modes and was better able to classify the content of the letters into the three modes with 83.75 % of inter-rater reliability. In addition to the Categories of Persuasive Modes for Classification which were improved during the pilot study, the other research tool was a table for counting finite verb forms in the corpus. It was constructed by the researcher and checked by an expert based on the English tense-aspect system from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman [16]. The research tools were used in the main analysis containing three main stages as presented below.

In the first stage, using the corpus of ten CEO letters from the world's top

hundred multinationals with various lengths from many types of company published online in 2009, the researcher categorized each CEO letter's content into Ethos, Logos and Pathos following the categories of the persuasive modes. Next, the researcher examined finite verb phrases in both main clauses and subordinate clauses following the research by Taylor [7]. Using the table for counting tenses, the researcher classified the verb group by form relying on the Scope for Tense Counting constructed by the researcher based on the research methodology of Taylor [7], and checked by an expert who has been teaching grammar to undergraduates for more than twenty years. After that the frequency was calculated into percentages and transformed into bar charts, ready to be analyzed. Finally, the researcher analyzed

the tense occurrence in each mode, considering the tense functions as described by Celce-Murcia and associating them with the persuasive functions found in the CEO letters.

Results

The results of the quantitative analysis review the tense choices for the persuasive modes: Ethos, Logos and Pathos. In addition, the results of the contextual analysis help to explain how the basic meanings and uses of tenses support the persuasive modes.

To answer the question of which tenses are dominant in each mode, Table 1 presents the distributions and frequencies of these forms by mode.

Table 1 The distributions of finite verb forms in the three persuasive modes in the corpus of ten letters

Verb forms	Ethos		Logos		Pathos	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1. PS	177	38.7	216	33.1	151	55.1
2. Pt. S	84	18.4	275	42.1	31	11.3
3. FS	103	22.5	35	5.4	23	8.4
4. PP	43	9.4	53	8.1	22	8.0
5. M	33	7.2	34	5.2	29	10.6
6. PC	16	3.5	37	5.7	12	4.4
Rare 4 tenses	1	0.2	3	0.5	5	1.8
Totals	457	99.9	653	100.1	273	99.6

According to Table 1, even though there is not a one-to-one relationship between tense choice and persuasive functions, the results of the quantitative analysis show that there tended to be a relationship between tense choice and Aristotle’s rhetoric (persuasive functions) in CEO letters since the results clearly show that each persuasive mode has dominant tenses. Ethos has the present simple tense, the future simple tense and the past simple tense. The past simple and the present simple tenses are dominant in Logos. Pathos contains primarily the present simple tense.

According to the cross-mode comparison, it is evident that the present simple tense is primarily used in Pathos, the past simple tense mostly in Logos and the future simple tense is used mostly in Ethos. Even though it cannot be stated that a tense can be used for only one specific mode, this comparison reflects the tendencies for using certain tenses in certain modes as can be seen in the following bar chart.

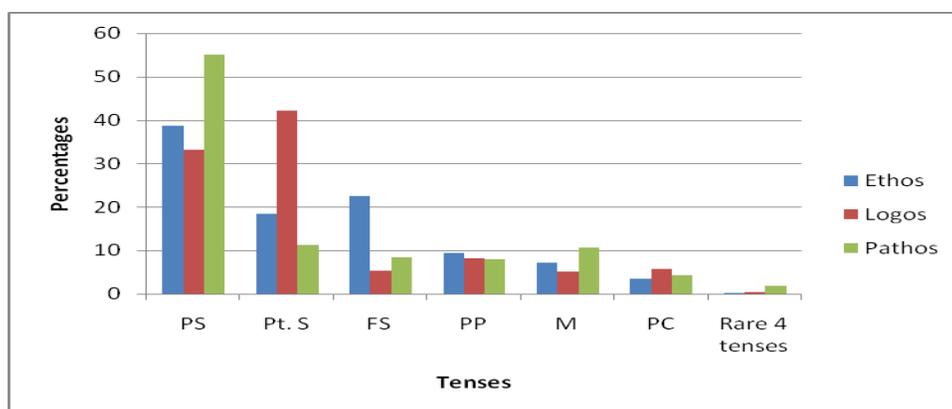


Figure 1 Finite verb forms in the three persuasive modes in the ten CEO letters

To explain this phenomenon, a sentential contextual analysis follows to explain the relationship between the rhetorical functions and their associated tenses as presented below. In Ethos, the future

simple tense is used mostly when offering a guarantee. To guarantee, the future simple tense is used for giving a promise to the readers to reassure the readers and to enhance the credibility of the company.

Table 2 The basic meanings of future simple serving the persuasive functions in Ethos

Persuasive functions	Examples	Basic meanings and uses of future simple
Guarantee: promise to act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We <u>will continue</u> to apply our exploration capabilities.... (L1.22) - The Group <u>will also strengthen</u> the overall balance.....(L2.27) - The Group <u>will continue</u> to place top priority on.....(L2.30) - We <u>will operate</u> in an environment where the differences between well and poorly managed banks will be more evident. (L6.30) - ...we <u>will buy</u> back about CHF 15 billion of Nestle's shares during 2010 and 2011,... (L8.44) 	An action to take place at some definite future time

According to the examples in Table 2, the writers of the CEO letters reassure the readers about the company's future action. Often, they promise the readers what they will do in the next operative year. Therefore, the future simple tense, whose basic use is for action taking place at some definite future time, is mostly used. It can be said that the future simple tense is widely used in the corpus because it is usually used to promise the readers what action will take place in the future.

In Logos, the past simple tense is mostly used to report the economic overview, the company's actions and its operative results. The writers are reporting situations that already happened. This tense is used when operative results are reported. Some economic overview, policies and actions are also written in the past simple tense. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between the sub-functions of Logos and the basic meanings of the past simple tense.

Table 3 The basic meanings of past simple serving the persuasive functions in Logos

Persuasive functions	Examples	Basic meaning and uses of past simple
Economic overview: economic situation, economic crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2009 <u>was</u> a year in which the Group <u>faced</u> significant challenges. (L2.2) - The economic environment <u>was</u> challenging for refining and marketing in 2009. (L3.22) - In a number of important respects, 2009 <u>was</u> a year of transition. (L7.1) 	Past condition
Operative action: action report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To channel our skills more quickly, more effectively and more economically, last year I <u>reorganised</u> our business units. (L1.47) - It also <u>strengthened</u> controls over investment, <u>optimised</u> investment portfolios and vigorously <u>reduced</u> costs and <u>improved</u> efficiency. (L2.5) - We <u>continued</u> to enhance our financial strength during 2009. (L7.20) 	Completed action in the past
Result of operation: financial data, improvement,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The reliability of our refineries also <u>improved</u>. (L1.4) - And our cash inflows and outflows <u>were broadly balanced</u> in both Upstream and Downstream. (L1.6) - The profit of S&P “industrial” companies <u>declined</u> 16% in 2009. (L4.35) 	Completed action Past condition

According to Table 3, past economic overview is often provided in CEO letters; therefore, past simple is mostly used for this sub-mode. Also, operative action and result

are many times written in past simple as the action and the situation already occurred and appeared. The completed actions and past results can be reported as evidence in Logos.

To conclude, all mentioned sub-modes involve past situations; therefore, the past simple tense is found as the most frequent tense of Logos.

In Pathos, the present simple tense is the dominant tense. It is used to express thanks, show commitment to society, show

the requirement for continued support, and visualize future prospects. The use of figurative language and the concern of the writer to the readers are also found primarily in the present simple tense. These can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 The basic meanings of present simple serving the persuasive functions in Pathos

Persuasive functions	Example	Basic meanings and uses of present simple
Thanks: gratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Thank</u> you for investing in Chevron. (L3.48) - We <u>are</u> grateful for your support, and we will prove ourselves worthy of your trust. (L4.259) - I <u>appreciate</u> your continued trust in our company and in our team's ability to innovate and deliver results. (L5.74) - We <u>are</u> profoundly thankful for your support. (L7.25) 	Perception of feelings that occurs at the moment of speaking
Commitment to society: connection to community, benefit to society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chevron's performance and growth <u>are intrinsically linked</u> with the communities where we <u>operate</u>. (L3.28) - Funds from this program <u>support</u> efforts across the country to help our young people succeed in school and go on to good careers.(L5.63) 	Habitual actions in the present
Anticipation of support: anticipation for investment and association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing solutions <u>requires</u> technical breadth, customer value and societal trust.(L4.179) - I <u>look</u> forward to seeing our revitalised organisation succeed in 2010 and beyond. (L1.54) - Providing solutions <u>requires</u> technical breadth, customer value and societal trust. (L4.179) 	Fact or general truth

Table 4 The basic meanings of present simple serving the persuasive functions in Pathos (Cont.)

Persuasive functions	Example	Basic meanings and uses of present simple
Visualizing future prospect: positive prediction, implied promise, confidence of good results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I <u>believe</u> we <u>can also achieve</u> good growth in mature markets. (L6.105) - But Chevron employees have risen to challenges for more than 130 years.... And I'm <u>confident</u> we will continue to do so. (L3.46 & 47) 	Fact or general truth: belief
The use of figurative language: word repetition, slogan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They <u>are</u> the ones who <u>give</u> life to the words "people innovating for people."(L5.72) - Americans <u>are</u> angry. People around the world <u>are</u> angry.(L4.235) - As such they <u>are also absolutely aligned</u> with "Good Food, Good Life". (L8.53) 	Fact or general truth Perception of feelings that occurs at the moment of speaking
Concern of writer to reader: understanding the reader's needs, sensitivity to the readers, promise to repay the readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Companies <u>have</u> a clear responsibility to treat their employees appropriately. (L7.70) - We <u>consider</u> the allocation of profits to shareholders to be one of our most important management responsibilities. (L9.45) 	Fact or general truth

According to Table 4, there are relationships between the sub-functions and the basic uses of the present simple tense. Basically, the present simple tense is used when the writer mentions an action presently or habitually happening or a fact, general truth, or perceptions of feeling that occur or

exist at the moment of speaking. Examples include thanks to the readers by expressing a feeling of gratefulness; a commitment to society by telling the readers of habitual action supporting society; a feeling showing requirement for continued support, idea or belief of the writer about the economic

situation in the form of the use of figurative language; the concern to the readers by the explanation of the present situation of the company; and how it will benefit the reader. To conclude, the basic meanings and uses of the present simple tense serve the persuasive functions of Pathos. It is noted that the basic meanings of the present simple tense which is mostly related to fact or general truth mostly serve the persuasive functions of Pathos more than Logos whose definition is a way of persuasion by fact. To explain the phenomenon, the results of the study show that the fact about the companies' operation is mostly reported as the past action in the past simple tense.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis review the tense choices for the persuasive modes: Ethos, Logos and Pathos. In addition the results of the contextual analysis help to explain how the basic meanings and uses of tenses support the persuasive modes.

Even though there is not a one-to-one relationship between tense choice and persuasive functions in CEO letters, there are the dominances of specific tenses in each mode. The use of the future simple tense dominates in Ethos; the past simple tense dominates in Logos; and the present simple tense dominates in Pathos.

In addition, the contextual analysis also emphasizes and clarifies the relationship between Aristotle's rhetoric and tense choice in CEO letters. The results of the analysis

of the relationship between the rhetorical functions and the dominant tenses show that the persuasive functions were served by some basic meanings and uses of their associated tenses.

To conclude, this study supports the hypothesis that tense choice can be related to the persuasive functions (Aristotle's rhetoric) in CEO letters. In agreement with studies [7, 8, 17, 18], the present study shows that the rhetorical uses of tense in CEO letters can also be explained by temporal factors and by the basic meanings of the tenses.

The results of the study reflect the equal and inseparable importance of basic meanings and uses of tenses and the rhetorical functions. In other words, both the rhetorical functions and the basic meanings and uses of tense affect the tense choice.

Apart from the present study, the relationship between rhetorical functions and tense choice has been mentioned by Martinez [8], and Malcolm [18]. These studies indicate that there is a statistically correlation between tense choice and rhetorical functions in specific professional contexts, such as scientific, technical, humanities, economic, and business discourse. In addition, Taylor [7] examined the relationship between tense choice and other rhetorical functions, viz., *Deictic Function* (utterances through which the writer communicates with the reader), and *Referential Function* (references to other sources) which are unique to the journal article genre. However, the rhetorical functions which were examined in the present

study are different. They were persuasive functions (Aristotle's rhetoric) which are unique to CEO letters.

Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, this researcher realizes the serious problem of tense misuse in Thai learners and aimed to make recommendations for tense teaching in relation to Aristotle's rhetoric. The findings of this study show the possibility of certain recommendations on tense teaching and learning in relation to persuasive rhetoric.

To teach grammar in relation to rhetorical function, this researcher recommends tense teaching using the rhetorical grammar approach because of the advantages of the approach presented below.

In rhetorical grammar teaching, the learners learn how a given grammatical concept creates and/or alters meanings. According to Lefstein [19] while rule-based grammar teaching tends to focus on rules to be obeyed, one's correctness, and decontextualised grammar exercises, rhetorical grammar teaching focuses more on meaningful communication. Micciche [20] states that tense teaching and learning in the rhetorical grammar approach will help the learners not only to acknowledge these relationships, but also to understand the feeling and attitude of writers. This will help lead to achieving meaningful and purposeful language use.

The present study has focused solely on the genre of CEO letters. A further study

could be done on persuasive writing in other business genres such as the business memo, business letter, business plan, business proposal, etc. The relationship between tense choice and Aristotle's rhetoric in those business writings in which a persuasive function is at the centre or whose main purpose is to persuade should be analysed. Moreover, further study can be conducted on other persuasive texts in other areas such as language use in Sciences, Psychology, Law, Politics, etc. Similar to this study, the tense choice of these texts should be analyzed in relation to their rhetorical functions.

During the sentential contextual analysis, it was found that the issue of vocabulary deserved more consideration since it tends to determine the persuasive modes. While the relationship between the rhetorical function and tense choice can be described, the persuasive modes can also relate to some specific vocabulary. To better understand how to write CEO letters effectively, besides tense choice an analysis on the relationship between vocabulary and persuasive function should be looked at.

Moreover, to identify the effectiveness of tense teaching in the rhetorical-grammar approach in the persuasive context, this researcher recommends further research on tense teaching based on the rhetorical-grammar approach. In further research, the most frequently used tenses in the corpus of persuasive writing should be taught to one or two groups of students. The content used in the teaching should be from persuasive

business writing. The students' attitudes and achievement could be measured to determine the effectiveness of the teaching. Hopefully, further research based on the rhetorical-grammatical analyses would help solve the problem of *tense misuse* in Thai learners according to many error analyses previously referenced [2, 3, 4, 5, 21].

Even though the results of this study support the hypothesis that tense choice can be related to the persuasive functions (Aristotle's rhetoric) in CEO letters, there are some limitations that need to be addressed.

As mentioned earlier, in the first stage of this study, the CEO letters were taken from annual reports published online by the world's top-ranked multinationals. At first, the researcher tried to collect CEO letters from the most successful multinationals (the world's top ten multinationals). However, not all top ten multinationals publish the annual report online. Therefore, only five letters are from the top ten multinationals. The other five letters are taken from multinationals which from lower ranks (nos. 13, 20, 36, 84, and 86). To conclude, the CEO letters in the corpus are from the world's top hundred multinationals.

In addition, in choosing the CEO letters, the researcher tried to construct a corpus which included a sufficient range of text and various types and ethnic origin. However, the proportions of ethnicity are not equal. Half of the letters (five letters) are from English native speaking countries. In addition, the small corpus size limits the

variety of type. Therefore, a bigger size of the corpus is recommended. In other words, more CEO letters should be used in further analysis so that better generalization of the rhetorical functions could be made.

As long as discourse analysis is used for examining aspects of the structure and function of language in use, discourse analysis of grammatical structure and persuasive functions is necessary because of the fact that all genre and modes of discourse may have persuasive components [9, 10]. However, there are not many rhetorical-grammatical analyses focusing on the persuasive modes. The present study has led to a picture of tense use in business persuasive writing. Further research on the relationship between grammatical structures and persuasive functions are recommended. Hopefully, further rhetorical grammatical analysis will lead to more options for effective grammar teaching and learning.

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