

A Pragmatic Analysis of Persuasive Language in Children-Oriented Discourse: The Case of Smash Boom Best Podcast

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates persuasive language strategies employed in children-oriented debate discourse by analyzing the *Smash Boom Best* episode "Forts vs. Puzzles." The research aims to identify the rhetorical strategies used to persuade young audiences and examine how these strategies function within educational debate media. A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted, with spoken utterances transcribed from the episode published on the official Brains On! YouTube channel serving as the primary data. The analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis guided by Aristotelian rhetorical theory, focusing on the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as audience adaptation and opponent weakening strategies. The findings indicate that emotional appeal (pathos) is the most dominant strategy, realized through immersive storytelling, humorous expressions, and emotionally engaging metaphors. Logical appeal (logos) is demonstrated through simplified scientific explanations, factual evidence, and historical references that support the speakers' arguments. In addition, persuasive effectiveness is strengthened through rebuttals, verbal contradictions, irony, and audience-centered analogies tailored to children's experiences. These findings demonstrate that persuasive discourse in children's debates is dynamic, multilayered, and audience-sensitive, contributing to a broader understanding of rhetorical practices in educational audio media and children's argumentative communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Persuasive language is a fundamental aspect of human communication because it enables speakers to influence beliefs, attitudes, and responses through discourse. In spoken interaction, persuasion is not determined solely by the informational content of an argument, but also by the linguistic strategies through which ideas are organized, framed, and adapted to the audience. From a pragmatic perspective, persuasion is not merely about structural syntax, but rather a functional communication process. As Leech, (1983) posits pragmatics deals with how language is functionally used to achieve specific rhetorical goals and influence the hearer's psychological state. In discourse studies, persuasion involves not only explicit argumentation but also subtle language choices such as evaluative expressions, narrative framing, humor, and emotional appeals that shape audience interpretation. Discourse cannot be separated from its social context, since meaning is constructed through the interaction between speakers, listeners, and communicative situations.

The role of audience becomes particularly significant in communication addressed to children. Unlike adults, children process persuasive discourse through developmental, emotional, and experiential frameworks that influence how arguments are understood and evaluated. Studies suggest that children tend to respond more strongly to concrete examples,

imaginative scenarios, and emotionally meaningful narratives than to abstract reasoning. In the context of children-oriented discourse, this pragmatic process closely intersects with what Bell, (1984) defines as "audience design," where speakers meticulously tailor their linguistic choices to match the cognitive and experiential attributes of their young listeners. Barajas et al., (2022) found that children aged six to twelve are able to use language strategically to influence others and negotiate perspectives, indicating that persuasion develops alongside social cognition and theory of mind. This suggests that children are not merely passive recipients of discourse but active interpreters who can evaluate speakers' intentions and compare competing arguments.

The expansion of digital media has created new communicative spaces in which children participate not only as audiences but also as evaluators of discourse. One such space is the debate-based podcast, which combines entertainment with structured argumentation. *Smash Boom Best*, produced by American Public Media through Brains On! Universe, illustrates this format by presenting debates between two speakers who defend opposing ideas, while a child serves as the judge who decides which side is more convincing. This format creates an interactional environment in which adult speakers deliberately adjust their language to persuade younger listeners. As a spoken digital medium, podcasts preserve authentic discourse features such as spontaneity, turn-taking, and expressive delivery. Since meaning is conveyed entirely through speech, podcasts offer a valuable corpus for analyzing how persuasive language is performed in naturally occurring interaction.

Persuasive discourse has been widely examined in political speeches, institutional debates, classroom interaction, and written argumentation. A widely used framework in such studies is the rhetorical model proposed by Aristotle, which conceptualizes persuasion through three appeals: pathos, logos, and ethos. These concepts remain relevant in contemporary pragmatic analysis because they explain how persuasion operates beyond information transfer. Previous studies show that persuasive effectiveness often depends on the interaction between emotional narratives, factual support, and speaker positioning. Patahuddin, (2021) examined persuasive strategies in formal debate competitions, while Khotimah & Kusuma, (2024) analyzed rhetorical patterns in political debate discourse. Both studies demonstrate that persuasion is shaped by strategic linguistic choices, but they primarily focus on adult-centered contexts and formal communicative settings.

Research on podcasts has also increased in language-related studies, particularly in educational contexts. Podcasts are commonly examined as pedagogical tools that support listening comprehension, speaking practice, and language exposure. Ramirez, (2024) argues that podcasts provide authentic spoken input that can enhance learner engagement with language. However, existing studies generally approach podcasts as instructional media rather than as discourse data. As a consequence, the rhetorical and pragmatic features of podcasts, especially in child-oriented formats, remain underexplored. This is significant because children's podcasts often contain spontaneous persuasive interactions that reflect how language is modified for young audiences. In debate-based podcasts, speakers must not only construct convincing arguments but also present them in ways that are understandable, relatable, and entertaining for children.

Although persuasive discourse has been extensively studied across political, educational, and institutional domains, limited attention has been given to persuasive strategies in children-oriented digital spoken media. Existing studies on podcasts mainly focus on pedagogical applications, while few investigate how persuasive arguments are constructed and adapted for children in debate-based interaction. This gap is important because children increasingly engage with digital audio content that exposes them to argumentative discourse, yet the linguistic mechanisms through which persuasion is tailored to child audiences remain insufficiently examined. Children's debate podcasts therefore represent a distinctive discourse setting where persuasion intersects with audience adaptation, entertainment, and educational interaction.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing persuasive language strategies in the *Smash Boom Best* episode "Forts vs. Puzzles", uploaded on 17 May 2025 on the official Brains On!

YouTube channel. The study investigates three aspects: the persuasive strategies employed by the speakers, the linguistic realizations of those strategies, and their pragmatic functions in influencing the child judge. The analysis adopts an integrated framework of Geoffrey Leech's functional pragmatics and Aristotelian rhetoric, focusing on pathos, logos, and ethos, while also considering audience adaptation as a central communicative principle. By examining a children's debate podcast as spoken discourse data, this study contributes to applied linguistics in three ways: it expands rhetorical and pragmatic analysis into child-oriented audio media, provides insight into how persuasive discourse is adapted for young listeners, and contributes to understanding children's exposure to argumentative literacy in contemporary digital environments.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This design was chosen for its appropriateness in examining linguistic phenomena in depth, contextually, and interpretively without involving variable manipulation or statistical hypothesis testing. This approach allows researchers to describe, classify, and interpret persuasive language strategies as they arise naturally in debate speech, thereby ensuring that pragmatic meanings and functions behind each utterance can be understood holistically (Creswell, 2022). The data source for this study consists of audio recordings and spoken transcripts from an episode of the *Smash Boom Best* podcast entitled "*Forts vs. Puzzles*", which is produced by Brains On! Universe and uploaded publicly on their official YouTube channel. This episode was chosen purposively because it presents a structured debate format involving adult speakers as argumentative models and a child as an active judge, making the persuasive interactions linguistically rich and relevant to the research focus (Creswell, 2023).

The subjects of this study were the oral speeches produced by the two main debaters, namely Joy Dolo (defending Forts) and Comrade Tripp (defending Puzzles), as well as the evaluative responses of Petra, an elementary school child from St. Paul, Minnesota, who served as the judge. These subjects were chosen because they represent a unique communicative context: the adult debaters delivered arguments using a variety of rhetorical tools tailored to a younger audience, while Petra's responses reflected the acceptance and evaluation of persuasion from a child's perspective.

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, playing the role of planner, data collector, analyzer, and interpreter of meaning, as is standard in qualitative research. As supporting instruments, analytical guides based on Geoffrey Leech's functional pragmatics and the Aristotelian rhetorical framework (ethos, pathos, logos) were utilized to classify the taxonomy of persuasive language strategies derived from recent linguistic literature. The analyzed speech transcripts were obtained through a manual transcription process and re-verified against the original audio to ensure data accuracy.

Data collection was carried out through several systematic stages. First, the researcher downloaded and transcribed the full episode of "*Forts vs. Puzzles*" from the official *Smash Boom Best* YouTube channel. Second, the transcript was verified by carefully re-listening to the audio to ensure that no speech was omitted or mis recorded. Third, the transcript text was read repeatedly (repeated reading) to gain a thorough understanding before the coding process began. Fourth, speech segments containing persuasive content were identified and categorized as units of analysis. All procedures were implemented systematically to ensure data reliability (credibility) in accordance with qualitative research standards (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach through the following steps: (1) data reduction, which involved selecting and focusing on speech segments that explicitly or implicitly contained persuasive strategies; (2) categorization, which grouped data into strategic categories based on the predetermined pragmatic-rhetorical framework; (3) interpretation, which unraveled the pragmatic functions of each strategy within the debate context; and (4) conclusion drawing based on patterns that consistently emerged from the

data. To strengthen the validity of the findings, source triangulation was conducted between the audio recordings, written transcripts, and the researcher's analytical notes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

These results appeared consistently throughout the debate and demonstrated how persuasive discourse was shaped not only by rhetorical appeals but also by audience-oriented communication strategies. This supports the view that persuasive communication is influenced by audience awareness, language choice, and contextual delivery.

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of persuasive strategies identified based on the debate round. The results showed that the pathos strategy dominated almost the entire round, followed by logos in the Declaration of Greatness round, while opponent weakness was most prominent in the rebuttal and Micro Round segments.

Table 1. Distribution of Persuasive Language Strategies per Debate Round

Round	Dominant Strategy	Speech Examples
Declaration of Greatness	Pathos, Logos	"It's raining outside and also in your heart."
Rebuttal	Opponent's Weakness	"That was incredible, but not that incredible."
Micro Round	Pathos, Humor	"Fort is one letter away from fart."
Sneak Attack	Pathos, Narrative	"She felt safety inside of her fort."
Final Six	Simple Logos	"Put pieces in and peace out."

The diversity of strategies identified in this debate episode reflects the complexity of persuasive language as a communication system that is layered and mutually supportive. This indicates that persuasive strategies in the context of an audio debate cannot be understood partially, but need to be studied as an entire linguistic ecosystem, in which word choice, sentence structure, and timing of delivery determine the overall effectiveness of the argument constructed.

Pathos Strategy: Building Emotional Closeness with the Audience

The pathos strategy is the most dominant and most consistent linguistic tool used by both debaters. Joy Dolo cleverly opens her argument with an immersive imagination technique that puts the listener directly inside the emotional scenario she creates: "*Oh, hey, friends. I was just heading inside my fort under the kitchen table. Want to check it out?*" This speech serves as a participatory invitation that builds a sense of community and curiosity in the children's audience. This kind of strategy is in line with the findings of Rofi'ah, (2025) that storytelling techniques and an emotional approach significantly increase the effectiveness of persuasion.

Further, Joy uses hyperbolic but delightful descriptions to reinforce the emotional appeal of her argument: "*I call it Joy's perfectly paradoxical palace, because it's way bigger on the inside than on the outside. It's like an endless hallway and a set of Russian nesting dolls had a baby. There's a pickleball court, trampoline, movie theater, herb garden, plus 7 bathrooms.*" Diction options such as "perfectly paradoxical palace" show the use of alliteration as a rhetorical tool that embellishes speech while strengthening the impression of free imagination. On the other hand, Comrade Tripp uses pathos through a dramatic depiction of a melancholy atmosphere: "*It's raining outside and also in your heart. You have nothing going on. Nothing to do except stare at the ceiling and breathe.*" The sentence "also in your heart" is an example of an emotional metaphor that serves to present a sense of empathy and solidarity toward an audience experiencing boredom. The use of this kind of emotive language aligns with the principle that emotional narratives increase the appeal of the message and encourage the audience to internalize the value conveyed (Rohar et al., 2026).

The strength of the pathos strategy in this data also lies in the ability of the debater to present a subjective experience that feels universal and can be understood by audiences of all ages. The combination of emotional narratives with concrete metaphors builds affective engagement that encourages real change in attitudes. In the episode "*Forts vs. Puzzles*", a

similar pattern works effectively: when Joy Dolo states that the fort is "a home away from home, but very close to home," she is not just conveying information, but presenting a psychological sensation of safety and comfort that directly touches the emotional layers of a children's audience that has an intrinsic need for a sense of security and personal space.

Logos Strategy: Building Arguments Based on Facts and Logic

Although these debates are packaged in an entertaining format, both debaters still insert empirical evidence as the foundation of their arguments. Comrade Tripp used historical and scientific data effectively: "One of the first people to break something solely with the intention of putting it back together was John Spilsbury. In the 1760s, he made some of the first jigsaw puzzles by pasting maps on wooden boards, then cutting them up into pieces." The mention of real historical figures and specific time periods serves to strengthen the credibility of the argument through factual evidence. He goes on to claim neurology: "Studies show that doing puzzles reinforces connections between cells in your brain called neurons. In other words, solving puzzles connects the puzzle pieces in your head." The use of scientific terminology such as *neurons*, which is then simplified through visual analogy ("connects the puzzle pieces in your head"), is a logos strategy combined with language adaptation for a children's audience.

Joy Dolo also applies logos by referring to real phenomena: "People have been building forts for thousands of years... like the Orsini Fortress in Italy... or the Mehrangarh Fort in India." The mention of real and historical place names lends factual legitimacy to Joy's claim that building fortifications is a practice tested throughout human history. This strategy is equivalent to using concrete facts as a persuasive support, as identified by Ferretti et al., (2025) in their study of persuasive strategies. Their research confirms that the use of factual evidence is one of the most frequently found persuasive strategies in structured debates.

Interestingly, the application of logos in children's debates is not present in the form of rigid statistical data as commonly found in formal academic debates, but is packaged through a simplification of scientific concepts that remain substantially accurate. The effectiveness of persuasive messages depends largely on how easily the message can be understood by the intended audience segment, and adjusting the level of language complexity to the cognitive capacity of the recipient constitutes an intelligent and planned communication strategy. In this context, Comrade Tripp's choice to explain neurological concepts through a simple puzzle analogy "solving puzzles connects the puzzle pieces in your head" provides clear evidence of this principle. An effective use of logos does not necessarily entail complexity; rather, it demands targeted reasoning that is accessible to the target audience's cognitive capacity (Barajas et al., 2022).

Opponent Weakening Strategy: Rebuttal and Disfigurement

The rebuttal segment presents an opponent weakening strategy carried out through several linguistic techniques, including direct contradictions, irony, and logic-based humor. Comrade Tripp opened his rebuttals with a structured contradiction: "That was an incredible declaration, but not that incredible." This sentence is a classic example of concession-refutation that acknowledges the strength of the opponent before tearing it down. He then attacked Joy's logic by exposing the practical weakness of the imaginary argument: "7 imaginary bathrooms I have to use real bathrooms." This speech uses irony to show that imagination-based arguments have no real functional value, which is a humorously packaged form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Joy countered with an equal strategy, using subtle irony: "Puzzles are OK. Like, if you can't make a fort and there's nothing else to do, who wouldn't want to make a picture out of tiny shapes over the course of several long, excruciating hours?" The diction "excruciating hours" serves as a negative hyperbole that degrades the puzzle playing experience into a tiring and unpleasant activity. This strategy of attenuation through humor and irony is consistent with the findings of Widiastutik et al., (2021) that rhetorical techniques, including the use of emotive diction and repetition, are dominant persuasive tools in oral discourse.

This strategy of weakening the opponent packaged through humor has a dual function that is linguistically very strategic: on the one hand, it weakens the opponent's argument, and

on the other hand, it maintains the audience's sympathetic sense toward the debater. Lingtersa et al., (2025) confirm that the use of rhetoric and emotive diction increases the appeal of the message while shaping the perception of the audience, and that these strategies work most effectively when accompanied by criticism that feels light but logically piercing. This phenomenon is evident in the way Comrade Tripp conveys his criticism of forts through a ridiculous personal anecdote that even his small nephew could not stand tall in his fort, so that the criticism does not feel like a frontal attack, but rather as an acknowledgment of real experience that actually strengthens the sympathy of the audience while weakening the image of forts as a functional space.

Language Adaptation for Children's Audiences

One of the most prominent findings in the study was how persuasive strategies were linguistically tailored to the characteristics of children's audiences. Both debaters consistently use concrete analogies, popular culture references, verbal humor, and imaginary character narratives to bridge the gap between the argument and the child audience's understanding. Joy Dolo, for example, created a fictional narrator character in the form of a cat named Princess Caroline in the Micro Round segment, which was then used as a medium to convey an argument: "*Puzzles have literally never made anyone happy. Period. The end. Meow.*" The use of fictional characters is a persona adoption strategy that allows debaters to convey exaggerated claims without appearing unbelievable, because the audience understands that the speech is performative.

Comrade Tripp also uses an analogy that comes from the everyday experience of children: "*Some of the first toys we play with when we're young are puzzles, fitting square-shaped blocks into square-shaped holes.*" References to familiar children's toys function to build familiarity with the audience. This pattern of language adaptation is in line with the findings that adapting communicative content to the audience's lifestyle and experience is key to effective persuasion.

The linguistic adaptations made by the debaters in this episode reflect the basic principles of persuasive communication centered on the audience, not the speaker. Patahuddin, (2021) in his study on persuasive language on digital platforms, found that the adaptation of content to the lifestyle and proximity of the audience's daily life is a key variable that distinguishes effective persuasive communication from that which is merely informative. In the debate *Smash Boom Best*, this principle is manifested through the selection of references that are close to the world of children, ranging from childhood toys and fictional characters to daily routines like playing under the kitchen table, which indirectly create a sense of validation that children's experiences are real, important, and worth debating.

The Evaluative Function of the Child Jury and Its Implications

One of the unique dimensions in this data is the presence of Petra as a child judge whose evaluative responses are a reflection of the success of the persuasion strategy. Petra revealed that she was impressed by Joy's pathos strategy: "*You made me want to live there.*" This statement indicates that an immersive and imaginative approach manages to create strong emotional engagement. However, Petra's final decision to select the Forts based on the Final Six shows that the dense and aesthetically pleasing persuasive summary "Fort beautiful for spacious skies" is able to make a lasting impression longer than the previous lengthy argument. These findings confirm that in the context of children's debates, the beauty of language and creativity of expression play a role no less important than the density of facts. Petra's evaluative response as a child judge also opens up important implications for the development of argumentative literacy among the younger generation: children actually have more sophisticated evaluative capacities than is often assumed, and exposure to quality debate models through audio media can be an effective vehicle for critical literacy learning. Ade et al., (2025) conclude that an understanding of the importance of persuasive strategies in debate needs to be instilled early on so that individuals are able to not only build convincing arguments, but also evaluate the arguments of others critically and objectively. In this case,

the format of *Smash Boom Best* which places children as active judges is a persuasive learning model that has high pedagogical value because it simultaneously trains critical thinking skills, analytical listening, and the articulation of the reasons behind an assessment.

Limitations and Directions of Advanced Research

This research has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the data is sourced from only one podcast episode, so generalizing findings needs to be done with caution. Second, the analysis of the transcriptional text was carried out without considering prosodic elements such as intonation, tempo, and pause, which contribute to the persuasive effect of oral discourse. Follow-up research is recommended to use a broader corpus of multiple episodes while integrating multimodal analysis that considers phonetic and paralinguistic dimensions. In addition, a comparative study of persuasive strategies in English-speaking and Indonesian-speaking children's podcasts will open up richer insights into how cultural context influences the construction of persuasive argumentation at an early age (Saputra, 2024).

Beyond these methodological limitations, this research has not touched the comparative dimension across media and cultural contexts, which represents a promising research opportunity. Digital platforms such as podcasts and YouTube have distinctive communication characteristics, so an effective persuasive strategy on one platform may not work in the same way on another. Meanwhile, Ade et al., (2025) remind that audience resistance, differences in cultural backgrounds, and the dynamics of communication technology developments are real challenges that must be anticipated. Therefore, a follow-up study comparing persuasive language strategies in English-speaking children's podcasts such as *Smash Boom Best* with a similar debate format in an Indonesian-speaking context would make a substantial contribution to applied linguistics and educational content design.

CONCLUSIONS

This study identified four major persuasive language strategies used in the *Forts vs. Puzzles* episode of the *Smash Boom Best* podcast: pathos, logos, opponent weakness, and audience-based language adaptation. These strategies work together to create effective and engaging arguments, with emotional appeal emerging as the dominant persuasive approach for young audiences. The use of logical reasoning through historical facts and simplified scientific explanations also demonstrates that evidence-based arguments remain important in child-oriented debate formats. The findings contribute to applied linguistics by illustrating how persuasive strategies are realized in digital audio media and highlighting the pedagogical potential of debate podcasts for developing argumentative literacy. Future research should examine a larger corpus of podcast episodes to validate these findings and incorporate multimodal analysis, including intonation, pauses, and speech rate, for a more comprehensive understanding. Educators and content developers can apply these insights to design engaging argumentation learning materials, while comparative cross-cultural studies and improved rhetorical practices in children's podcasts are also encouraged.

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