

Charisma as Rhetoric: The Invisible Grammar of Magnetic Public Speakers

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Abstract

Charisma, often regarded as an innate or mysterious gift, can also be understood as a rhetorical construct, a set of intentional communicative strategies that inspire trust, stir emotion, and command attention. Rather than presenting it as an unteachable talent, this paper argues that charisma is a replicable skill grounded in classical rhetorical theory, performance studies, and contemporary communication practices. Using the public speaking styles of Jacinda Ardern, Malala Yousafzai, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as case studies, it explores the “invisible grammar” of magnetic communication, where language, vocal variation, gesture, narrative design, and emotional intelligence intersect. By uncovering these rhetorical patterns, the study demonstrates that charisma is not accidental but cultivable through deliberate practice.

Keywords - Charisma, Rhetoric, Public Speaking, Persuasion, Communication Strategy

Introduction

Charisma has long drawn the attention of philosophers, sociologists, and communication scholars. Aristotle's discussion of *ethos* highlighted credibility as a persuasive force (**Aristotle**), while Max Weber later described charisma as an extraordinary quality attributed to certain individuals (**Weber**). Though their perspectives differ, both underscore the same central puzzle: why do some speakers captivate audiences while others are quickly forgotten? This paper argues that charisma in public speaking is not an ineffable gift or mystical trait but a skill that can be learned, practiced, and reproduced, shaped by what I call the "invisible grammar" of magnetic speakers.

The "invisible grammar" refers to a subtle architecture of verbal and nonverbal patterns - rhythmic speech, measured pauses, tonal variation, narrative framing, and strategic vulnerability that together create emotional resonance and a sense of authenticity (**Smith 42; Brown 88**). Just as grammatical rules shape coherence in language, this rhetorical code structures human connection in public address. Audiences may not consciously recognize these techniques, yet they respond to them instinctively, often mistaking their effect for natural charm (**Cuddy 15**). The goal of this research is to decode these patterns and situate them within both classical rhetorical theory and contemporary leadership communication.

Historically, charisma has been studied through two dominant lenses. The first is the classical rhetorical lens, in which persuasion emerges from a speaker's *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* remains foundational, offering a tripartite framework that explains how credibility, emotional engagement, and logical reasoning interact (**Aristotle 55**). The second is sociological and psychological, represented by Weber and later by scholars such as Conger and Kanungo, who define charisma as a relational phenomenon shaped by followers' perceptions and socio-political contexts (**Weber 241; Conger and Kanungo 15**). While both approaches

illuminate important aspects of the phenomenon, neither fully explains how specific rhetorical techniques generate the perception of personal magnetism.

Modern leadership studies attempt to bridge this gap. Daniel Goleman's research on Emotional Intelligence (EI) shows that leaders who cultivate self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills often inspire loyalty and action, qualities that parallel and reinforce charismatic rhetoric (**Goleman 87**). Similarly, John C. Maxwell emphasizes that leadership is fundamentally about influence, a view that aligns with the idea of charisma as persuasive power in action (**Maxwell 12**). Yet while EI and leadership studies focus on traits, public speaking research tends to isolate techniques. The "invisible grammar" framework proposed here seeks to integrate both, presenting a more holistic model.

The significance of this research lies in its dual applicability: it speaks equally to rhetorical scholars and to practitioners of public communication. In an era when speeches can circulate globally within hours, charisma is no longer optional; it is a competitive advantage. Whether in political campaigns, corporate presentations, activist rallies, or TED-style talks, the ability to command attention, sustain interest, and inspire action functions as a strategic asset (**Jamieson 44**).

By analyzing the speeches of Jacinda Ardern, Malala Yousafzai, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, this paper demonstrates that charisma is not an accidental product of personality but the outcome of identifiable, repeatable choices. Through rhetorical analysis, supported by leadership and communication theory, it argues that the "invisible grammar" is both teachable and adaptable, enabling charisma to serve authentic leadership rather than manipulation (**Adichie; Ardern; Yousafzai**).

Literature Review

The study of charisma in public speaking lies at a multidisciplinary crossroads, drawing on classical rhetoric, leadership theory, communication psychology, and performance studies.

Each field offers distinctive insights into what makes a speaker appear “magnetic,” yet few attempts have been made to integrate these perspectives into a single rhetorical framework. This literature review traces the conceptual development of charisma and identifies the mechanisms that contribute to its “invisible grammar.”

2.1 Classical Rhetorical Foundations

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* provides a foundational model for persuasive communication. His triad of ethos, pathos, and logos establishes a framework for analyzing charisma: ethos reflects the speaker’s credibility, pathos appeals to the emotions of the audience, and logos addresses the reasoning and evidence within an argument (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1356a). While Aristotle did not employ the modern term “charisma,” his emphasis on ethos anticipates current understandings of the concept by showing how audiences respond not only to the message but also to the speaker’s perceived character.

Cicero extended this classical foundation in *De Oratore*, where he defined eloquence as the interplay of wisdom, style, and delivery. His attention to actio - voice modulation, gesture, and facial expression underscored that delivery could be as influential as content in capturing an audience’s attention (Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.56). These insights foreshadow modern claims that charisma often resides in performance choices that operate beneath conscious awareness.

2.2 Weber’s Sociological Conception of Charisma

The modern understanding of “charisma” is largely indebted to Max Weber, who described it as a quality that sets individuals apart and leads others to treat them as extraordinary (Weber 241). For Weber, charisma is not intrinsic but relational; it exists only when followers recognize and affirm it. Such recognition often arises in moments of crisis or social transformation, when audiences look for a figure capable of embodying collective hopes.

Later critics, including Shils and Eisenstadt, argued that charisma need not emerge only in times of upheaval. Instead, it can develop in stable contexts when leaders inspire through vision, empathy, and consistent engagement (**Shils 125; Eisenstadt 66**). Applied to public speaking, this perspective suggests that charisma can be cultivated and sustained outside of high-stakes moments, provided speakers maintain the trust and admiration of their audiences.

2.3 Conger and Kanungo's Charismatic Leadership Theory (CLT)

Building on Weber, Conger and Kanungo proposed Charismatic Leadership Theory (CLT), shifting the emphasis from mystical traits to observable behaviors (**Conger and Kanungo 1998, 34**). They identify three core components:

1. **Envisioning** – crafting and articulating a compelling vision rooted in shared values.
2. **Empowering** – instilling confidence in followers by affirming their capacity to achieve that vision.
3. **Energizing** – demonstrating enthusiasm and passion that mobilize collective action.

When applied to public speaking, these components map onto rhetorical strategies: vivid, future-oriented narratives (envisioning), inclusive and affirming language (empowering), and tonal or rhythmic variation that conveys passion (energizing). Conger and Kanungo's model underscores that charisma is not innate but the product of deliberate communicative acts, many of which align with what I describe as the "invisible grammar."

2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Charismatic Communication

Daniel Goleman's framework of Emotional Intelligence (EI) positions leadership effectiveness within five competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (**Goleman 1995, 43**). Each connects directly to charisma. Self-awareness enables speakers to present verbal and nonverbal cues with authenticity; self-regulation helps them maintain composure under pressure; motivation sustains conviction and energy; empathy

allows adaptation to audience needs; and social skill fosters rapport through storytelling, humor, and measured vulnerability.

Jacinda Ardern's public responses after the Christchurch mosque attacks exemplify these principles. Her calm yet deeply empathetic delivery highlighted self-regulation and empathy, reinforcing perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness. In this way, emotional intelligence amplifies her charismatic appeal and demonstrates how EI-based competencies can translate into communicative power (**Ardern 2019**).

2.5 Maxwell's Principle of Influence

John C. Maxwell argues that leadership is fundamentally about influence, a principle that extends directly to public speaking (**Maxwell 12**). Within this context, influence becomes the operative dimension of charisma, not an abstract aura but the observable capacity to shift beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Such influence is achieved when speakers combine credibility, relatability, and inspiration, qualities cultivated through the "invisible grammar" of rhetoric.

Maxwell further emphasizes servant leadership, in which influence grows through service to others rather than through self-promotion. This perspective aligns with research indicating that authentic charisma, unlike manipulative charm, depends on a genuine consistency between the speaker's values and their public persona (**Brown and Treviño 117; Maxwell 28**).

2.6 Dowis's Lessons from Great Speeches

Richard Dowis, in *The Lost Art of the Great Speech*, distills lessons from influential orations and identifies three recurring traits: clarity of purpose, emotional resonance, and rhythmic delivery (**Dowis 2000, 56**). He highlights rhetorical devices such as anaphora, parallelism, and storytelling as techniques that engage audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels.

A well-known illustration is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" address, in which repeated phrases created rhythm and reinforced vision (**King 1963**). This repetition was not simply decorative; it functioned as part of charisma's "invisible grammar," where rhythm and predictability generate emotional momentum and collective identification.

2.7 Integrating Theories: Toward the Invisible Grammar Framework

When viewed collectively, these perspectives reveal that charisma emerges from the convergence of several interdependent elements: credibility, emotional connection, compelling vision, and performance craft. Credibility corresponds to Aristotle's *ethos* and resonates with Maxwell's insistence on influence as the foundation of leadership (**Aristotle 1356a; Maxwell 12**). Emotional connection reflects *pathos* and finds support in Goleman's emphasis on empathy as well as Conger and Kanungo's principle of empowering followers (**Goleman 87; Conger and Kanungo 42**). Vision and logical structure align with *logos*, evident in the Charismatic Leadership Theory's focus on envisioning and in Dowis's insistence on clarity of purpose (**Dowis 56**). Finally, performance craft recalls Cicero's *actio* and encompasses rhythmic devices, strategic silence, and other delivery patterns that sustain audience engagement (**Cicero 3.56**). Together, these dimensions constitute what I describe as the "invisible grammar" of charisma, an integrated system that unites content choices with delivery techniques.

The interdisciplinary study of charisma demonstrates both its richness and its fragmentation. Classical rhetoric, beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Cicero's *De Oratore*, established the scaffolding by which credibility, emotion, logic, and delivery explain persuasive force. Weber later reframed charisma as a socially validated quality that emerges in contexts of change, while Conger and Kanungo translated this into observable behaviors such as envisioning, empathizing, and energizing action (**Weber 241; Conger and Kanungo 1998, 34**). Emotional intelligence theory, particularly Goleman's model, links charisma to self-

awareness, empathy, and social skill, highlighting how leaders achieve authentic resonance (**Goleman 95**). Maxwell's principle that leadership is rooted in influence reinforces charisma's interpersonal nature, while Dowis's practical guidance on clarity, rhythm, and rhetorical devices illustrates how speeches achieve memorability (**Maxwell 28; Dowis 2000, 102**).

Recent empirical studies support this synthesis. Antonakis et al. demonstrate that charisma can be taught through techniques such as storytelling, vocal variety, and strategic vulnerability, while Gallo emphasizes its relevance in contemporary business and media communication (**Antonakis et al. 2011, 375; Gallo 2014, 22**). Yet much of the scholarship isolates verbal and nonverbal factors or overlooks the ethical dimension, leaving charisma's structural coherence underdefined. The framework of "invisible grammar" proposed here seeks to fill this gap, positioning charisma as a patterned interplay of rhetorical structure, narrative resonance, emotional calibration, and embodied delivery. By identifying these mechanics, charisma becomes not only visible but also teachable, ensuring its application can remain both effective and ethical.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the next step is to examine how charisma manifests in practice. While Aristotle, Weber, Conger, Goleman, and others provide conceptual blueprints, the true test lies in application: how speakers transform ethos, emotional intelligence, and narrative resonance into audience impact. The following analysis turns to contemporary and historical case studies, tracing the specific verbal, nonverbal, and structural choices through which rhetorical theory becomes lived charisma.

Analysis And Discussion: Charisma In Practice

Jacinda Ardern: Empathy and Authority in Balance

New Zealand's former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern gained international recognition for her calm yet compassionate communication style, particularly after the Christchurch mosque attacks in March 2019. Her televised address demonstrated mastery of both ethos and

pathos as she expressed solidarity with Muslim communities through inclusive language, most memorably the phrase “They are us,” while simultaneously maintaining the authority expected of a national leader. This balance of empathy and credibility positioned her not merely as a political figure but as a moral voice, one capable of guiding a nation through grief while reinforcing social cohesion.

Ardern’s delivery further strengthened this perception. Her measured pacing, steady tone, and deliberate pauses conveyed composure without emotional detachment, while her choice to wear a black headscarf when meeting victims’ families served as a powerful nonverbal symbol of cultural respect. These gestures reinforced her words and embodied McCroskey and Richmond’s triad of competence, character, and caring. By integrating symbolic action with verbal clarity, Ardern demonstrated that charisma is not an innate aura but a carefully calibrated interplay of rhetorical and performative choices that resonate across diverse audiences.

Rhetorically, her speech relied on devices that created both rhythm and emotional momentum. The use of parallelism “We were not chosen for this act of violence... We were chosen because we exemplify diversity, kindness, compassion” provided not only a sense of cadence but also a reinforcement of collective identity. Her calm yet resolute body language ensured that the emotional weight of the message did not collapse into performative sentimentality. Instead, it exemplified charisma as a balance between emotional resonance and clear leadership, where verbal precision, symbolic gestures, and embodied delivery merged into a unified communicative act.

Malala Yousafzai: Moral Conviction and Simplicity of Expression

Malala Yousafzai’s speeches, particularly her 2013 UN Youth Assembly address, demonstrate how clarity and moral courage can serve as persuasive forces in public communication. Her language remains accessible and free of jargon, yet she strategically

employs parallel structures such as “One child, one teacher, one book, one pen...” to build rhythm and memorability. This anaphoric repetition transforms her message into a chant-like refrain, easy to recall, quote, and circulate. In doing so, Malala illustrates how rhetorical simplicity, when paired with moral conviction, can achieve global resonance.

Her delivery complements this clarity. Malala speaks with a steady cadence, her voice firm without becoming combative. Central to her ethos is the integration of personal narrative into public advocacy: the account of surviving an assassination attempt is not foregrounded as a spectacle but woven into her broader appeal for universal access to education. This blending of biography with principle establishes credibility rooted in lived experience, allowing her audience to view her not merely as an activist but as an embodiment of the cause she champions.

Equally significant are her nonverbal cues. Malala’s modest posture, calm facial expressions, and restrained gestures communicate sincerity and humility. Rather than diminishing her presence, this restraint enhances it by underscoring her moral authority. The rhetorical lesson here is that charisma is not confined to exuberant display; it can emerge just as powerfully from understatement, where quiet conviction and controlled delivery produce an enduring sense of authenticity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Storytelling as Persuasion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrates how narrative itself can serve as a primary vehicle of charisma. In her widely viewed talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, she begins with personal anecdotes that draw listeners into her childhood experiences before seamlessly expanding those narratives into broader cultural and political reflections. This progression allows audiences to enter through the immediacy of her lived experiences and then move outward toward more complex insights on identity and representation. Her storytelling is rich

in imagery such as “the smell of mangoes in the air” that activates sensory engagement and situates abstract ideas within tangible experience.

Adichie’s delivery style reinforces this narrative strategy. She employs tonal variety, shifting between playful irony and serious reflection, which creates a conversational intimacy and keeps her audience attentive. Her deliberate pauses provide cognitive space for listeners to absorb ideas, while her pacing allows her rhetorical pivots, from humour to critique, to land with greater force. By oscillating between the personal and the political, Adichie demonstrates how emotional resonance and intellectual depth can reinforce one another.

The core of her charisma lies in the balance between authenticity and precision. Her delivery feels unforced and conversational, yet beneath the ease lies careful rhetorical design. Humour functions as an entry point, disarming the audience and lowering barriers of defensiveness, before she redirects attention toward challenging ingrained stereotypes. In this way, Adichie exemplifies how storytelling operates as both a connective and persuasive force, grounding charisma in the invisible grammar of narrative structure.

The Invisible Grammar in Action

From these case studies, five recurring rhetorical patterns emerge as the scaffolding of charismatic communication:

1. **Repetition and Rhythm** – Structured repetition generates momentum and aids memorability. Malala Yousafzai’s refrain, “*One child, one teacher, one book, one pen...*”, and Jacinda Ardern’s inclusive phrasing (“*They are us*”) both demonstrate how rhythm transforms language into a collective chant, embedding the message in public consciousness.
2. **Narrative Arc** – Storytelling provides coherence, emotional anchoring, and relatability. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s integration of personal anecdotes with

cultural critique exemplifies how narrative functions as both connective tissue and persuasive strategy.

3. **Strategic Silence** – Pauses are not absences but deliberate tools of emphasis. Arden’s measured silences and Adichie’s reflective pacing allow audiences to process, resonate, and respond internally, demonstrating that silence itself can be rhetorical.
4. **Embodied Ethos** – Non-verbal cues extend and reinforce verbal meaning. Arden’s choice to wear a headscarf, Malala’s modest posture, and Adichie’s expressive yet controlled hand movements all translate credibility and care into embodied rhetoric, fulfilling McCroskey and Richmond’s triad of competence, character, and caring.
5. **Audience Adaptation** – Charismatic speakers calibrate tone, content, and delivery to cultural and situational contexts. Each of these figures adjusts their rhetoric to bridge diverse audiences, whether by adopting inclusive language, restraining theatricality, or employing humour to disarm.

Together, these strategies illustrate charisma not as mystical force but as an orchestration of rhetorical choices. They align with Aristotle’s appeals, ethos, pathos, and logos, while also resonating with modern performance principles of presence, authenticity, and adaptability. The “grammar” of charisma thus lies in the sequencing, balance, and contextual sensitivity of these patterns: never overused, always audience-oriented, and unfailingly purposeful.

Conclusion

Charisma, often mythologised as an innate gift, emerges through these cases as a structured rhetorical performance in which verbal precision, narrative craft, and embodied presence converge to produce magnetic communication. The examples of Jacinda Arden, Malala Yousafzai, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reveal that charisma is not an ineffable quality but a learnable grammar that blends ethos, pathos, and performance. Recognising charisma as rhetoric reframes public speaking pedagogy: instead of imitating personalities,

speakers can master techniques that foster authentic connection, credibility, and influence. This perspective democratizes charisma, positioning it not as the property of a chosen few but as a communicative competence that can be cultivated through deliberate practice, reflective self-awareness, and ethical responsibility, ensuring that influence is exercised with both authenticity and purpose.

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