

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

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates persuasive language strategies employed in children-oriented debate discourse by analyzing the *Smash Boom Best* episode “Forts vs. Puzzles”. The episode was selected because it features a structured debate between two adult speakers evaluated by a child judge, providing a rich context for examining audience-oriented persuasive discourse. This study aims to identify persuasive strategies and explain their pragmatic functions. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed using spoken utterances manually transcribed from the podcast episode published on the official Brains On! YouTube channel. The data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis using Leech's pragmatic framework and Aristotelian rhetoric. The findings reveal that pathos is the dominant persuasive strategy often realized through improvisational narrative and humor supported by logos, audience adaptation, and opponent-weakening strategies. These findings demonstrate how rhetorical appeals and pragmatic adaptation work together to engage child audiences, contributing to the understanding of persuasive discourse in children's digital audio media.

Keywords: *Children-Oriented Discourse; Persuasive Language; Pragmatics.*

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INTRODUCTION

Persuasive language plays a fundamental role in human communication because it enables speakers to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of others through discourse. In spoken interaction, persuasive effectiveness depends not only on the content of an argument but also on the linguistic strategies used to organize, frame, and adapt messages to the audience (Alaei & Ghaemi, 2018; Barajas et al., 2022). From a pragmatic perspective, persuasion extends beyond grammatical structures and functions as a communicative process through which speakers achieve specific rhetorical purposes. As Leech (1983) argues, pragmatics examines how language is used in context to accomplish communicative goals and influence the psychological responses of listeners. In discourse, persuasion is realized not only through explicit arguments but also through subtle linguistic choices, including evaluative language, narrative framing, humor, and emotional appeals that shape audience interpretation. Since meaning is constructed through the interaction between speakers, listeners, and the communicative context, persuasive discourse cannot be fully understood without considering the social and situational factors in which it occurs.

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 (Barajas et al., 2022; Widiastutik et al., 2021).

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 (Friginal & Ho, 2025; Putri & Marlina, 2022). 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. This study aims to identify persuasive strategies and explain their pragmatic functions. 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

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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 employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine persuasive language strategies in naturally occurring spoken discourse. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to interpret persuasive language within its communicative context rather than to measure variables statistically (Creswell, 2022).

The data source consisted of the audio recording and spoken discourse from the *Smash Boom Best* podcast episode entitled “*Forts vs. Puzzles*”, produced by Brains On! Universe and publicly available on its official YouTube channel. The episode has a duration of 36 minutes and 53 seconds and was purposively selected because it presents a structured debate between two adult speakers, who attempt to persuade a child judge through argumentative discourse. This interaction provides a rich context for examining how persuasive language is strategically adapted to young audiences.

The subjects of this study were the spoken utterances produced by the two main debaters, Joy Dolo (representing Forts) and Comrade Tripp (representing Puzzles), together with the evaluative responses of Petra, an elementary school student from St. Paul, Minnesota, who served as the judge. These participants represent a distinctive communicative context in which adult speakers employed various persuasive and rhetorical strategies tailored to a younger audience, while Petra's responses reflected how persuasive messages were interpreted and evaluated from a child's perspective. The analysis was guided by Leech's pragmatic framework and Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos).

Data collection was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher accessed the selected podcast episode from the official YouTube channel. Second, the episode was manually transcribed verbatim while repeatedly checking the original audio. Third, the completed transcript was verified through repeated listening to ensure the accuracy of wording, punctuation, and speaker attribution. Finally, the verified transcript was read several times to identify utterances that met the inclusion criteria and to organize them according to the analytical categories (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis involved four stages: (1) data reduction by selecting utterances that explicitly or implicitly contained persuasive strategies; (2) categorization based on the predetermined pragmatic and rhetorical framework; (3) interpretation of the communicative functions and persuasive purposes of each identified strategy within the debate context; and (4) conclusion drawing by identifying recurring patterns across the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing the original audio recording, the manually verified transcript, and the researcher's analytical notes throughout the coding and interpretation processes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Persuasive Strategies across Debate Rounds

Debate Round	Communicative Purpose	Persuasive Strategy
Declaration of Greatness	Introducing and strengthening the main claim while attracting the audience's interest	Pathos and Logos
Rebuttal	Challenging and weakening the opponent's arguments	Opponent Weakening
Micro Round	Maintaining audience engagement through humor and wordplay	Pathos (Humor)



A Pragmatic Analysis of Persuasive Language in Children-Oriented Discourse: The Case of Smash Boom Best Podcast	Sneak Attack	Reinforcing persuasion through imaginative storytelling and emotional narration	Pathos (Narrative)
Final Six	Delivering a memorable and concise closing argument	Logos	

Table 1 presents an overview of the dominant persuasive strategies identified across the debate rounds; the table summarizes the primary communicative purpose of each debate segment and the persuasive strategy that was most prominently employed. This overview serves as a guide for the detailed qualitative analysis presented in the following sections.

Pathos Strategy: Building Emotional Closeness with the Audience

Among the persuasive strategies identified, pathos emerged as the most dominant rhetorical appeal throughout the debate. It appeared most prominently during the Declaration of Greatness round, where the debaters introduced their main arguments through imaginative storytelling and emotionally engaging language. In the opening of the Declaration of Greatness segment, the context shows Joy Dolo attempting to immediately capture the child judge's imagination by treating the debate topic not as an abstract concept, but as a physical, magical space that the audience can enter. To build an immediate connection and spark curiosity, she uses the following interactive introduction: *Excerpt 1: "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.

Directly continuing this imaginative narrative, Joy expands the description of her fort. The context here is an appeal to a child's love for play, fun, and unlimited indulgence, where she lists features that are objectively impossible but highly desirable to a kid: *Excerpt 2: "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 side, Comrade Tripp also relies on emotional narration in his Declaration of Greatness. However, the context is completely opposite: instead of inviting the audience to a magical space, he intentionally evokes a deep sense of boredom and rainy-day misery that every child experiences, positioning puzzles as the ultimate savior of a ruined day: *Excerpt 3: "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: *Excerpt 4: "They could be a home away from home, but very close to home. A place where you can carve out the space you need."* By phrasing it this way, Joy 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

The logos strategy was also predominantly employed during the Declaration of Greatness round, where both speakers attempted to strengthen their initial claims through historical facts, scientific evidence, and logical explanations. In his Declaration of Greatness, Comrade Tripp sets



a context of intellectual authority. He realizes that to counter the magical appeal of forts, he must prove that puzzles have a rich, real-world history that contributes to human education. He introduces the historical origin of jigsaw puzzles as a teaching tool: *Excerpt 5: "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 argument through factual evidence.

Immediately following this historical context, Comrade Tripp shifts into a modern scientific context to appeal to the judge's logic, demonstrating how puzzles physically improve the brain: *Excerpt 6: "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 a visual analogy "connects the puzzle pieces in your head", represents a strategic fusion of logos with language adaptation for a young audience.

Likewise, during her Declaration of Greatness, Joy Dolo shifts from her imaginary palace to a historical and geographical context. She needs to prove that forts are not just blankets under a table, but massive, legendary structures built across world history: *Excerpt 7: "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, historical places 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). Interestingly, the application of logos here is packaged through a simplification of scientific and factual concepts that remain substantially accurate. Adjusting the complexity of language to the cognitive capacity of the recipient constitutes an intelligent communication strategy, as seen when Comrade Tripp uses the simple puzzle analogy to describe brain plasticity. An effective use of logos does not necessarily entail complexity; rather, it demands targeted reasoning accessible to the target audience. 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 opponent-weakening strategy was primarily found during the Rebuttal round, where each debater directly challenged the opposing arguments through contradiction, irony, and humorous criticism. Opening the rebuttal round, the context is highly competitive yet playful. Comrade Tripp he uses a concession-refutation technique to deflate her momentum: *Excerpt 8: "That was an incredible declaration, but not that incredible. Forts – they have lots of cool things. But eventually, all those cool things will have to go back to where they belong... Imagination – 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*.

In response, Joy Dolo employs a similar strategy during her rebuttal round. The context here is her attempt to reframe the puzzle experience usually praised for being calm and educational into an agonizing, tedious chore that no child would willingly endure: *Excerpt 9: "Listen, 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? A puzzle just doesn't do anything for my imagination. The picture is already there."* 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 and emotive diction are dominant persuasive tools in oral discourse. This strategy of weakening the opponent packaged through humor maintains the audience's sympathy toward the debater while eroding the opponent's stance. Lingtersa et al. (2025) confirm 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.

Sneak Attack Round: Reinforcing Persuasion through Imaginative Storytelling

The Sneak Attack round presents a distinctive context in the debate because it relies entirely on improvisation and spontaneous creativity under rigid constraints. From a pragmatic standpoint, this round functions as a pure application of the pathos strategy through emotional narration, designed to make the young judge feel cozy, sleepy, or emotionally moved while being entertained by the performative vocal delivery. Joy Dolo utilizes this impromptu storytelling context to reinforce the psychological concept of safety and sanctuary that she established in the earlier rounds. She frames her narrative around relatable childhood anxieties before introducing the fort as the ultimate emotional solution: *Excerpt 10: "Once upon a time, there was a girl who was so worried about everything in life. She was worried about school, and her friends, and her parents. But then she found a pillow. And the pillow found another pillow. And the pillow found another pillow. And those pillows formed a fort. And she felt safety inside of her fort."* Joy's baseline narrative relies heavily on the repetition of phrases "And the pillow found another pillow" which creates a rhythmic, soothing cadence appropriate for a bedtime story. The core of her persuasive message lies in the emotional transition from anxiety "worried about school... friends... parents" to absolute security "felt safety inside of her fort". By matching this comforting narrative arc with a playful, escalating falsetto voice, Joy successfully fulfills the prompt's structural constraints while directly targeting the affective domain of the child audience.

In contrast, Comrade Tripp approaches the impromptu storytelling context by weaving a poignant metaphor about identity and belonging. Instead of focusing on external security like a fort, he uses a singular puzzle piece to explore the inner emotional landscape of a child: *Excerpt 11: "Once upon a time, in the land of Puzzletopia, there was a small puzzle piece. Every person and puzzle in Puzzletopia was a puzzle piece. And their life goal was to find the pieces that they fit in together. But there was one puzzle piece that had no other puzzle pieces that fit into it. So it was alone and it was me. I was that puzzle piece. But then the puzzle piece, the lone puzzle piece, looked in a mirror. And he connected it to himself. He was fine alone. And that's OK. Be independent. Be yourself."* The context of this speech shifts from a standard fairy tale structure to an empowering moral fable. Tripp uses the imagery of the puzzle to convey a sophisticated psychological message about self-acceptance and emotional independence "He was fine alone... Be independent, Be yourself". Even though the story ends with a highly individualized and touching lesson, the interaction between the deep emotional moral and the increasingly ridiculous, squeaky high-pitched delivery creates an ironic contrast that keeps the discourse highly engaging and memorable for the young evaluator. This spontaneous utilization of pathos demonstrates that under the pressure of a structured debate format, adult speakers instinctively prioritize narrative depth and emotional resonance over logical evidence when trying to sustain the interest of a young listener.

Language Adaptation for Children's Audiences

Language adaptation was evident across several debate rounds, modifying structural complexity to align with children's everyday experiences. A highly creative form of audience adaptation occurs during the Micro Round segment. To deliver a harsh critique of puzzles without sounding like a mean or boring adult, Joy Dolo creatively shifts the context by adopting the fictional persona of her cat, Princess Caroline. Children naturally connect with animal characters, making this an optimal vehicle for her argument: *Excerpt 12: "Hello. I'm Joy's very real, somewhat ornery cat, Princess Caroline. Meow... Oh, no. It's in a puzzle feeder. I'll have to figure out how to unlock it, then hit a button... Why must everything be so indirect, puzzles?"* 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.

Earlier, in his *Declaration of Greatness*, Comrade Tripp also adapted his explanation by referring to children's everyday toys: *Excerpt 13: "The popularity of puzzles is not at all puzzling. Some of the first toys we play with when we're young are puzzles – fitting square-shaped blocks into square-shaped holes, nesting cups that fit inside each other, stacking donut-shaped rings by size."* 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.

The Evaluative Function of the Child Jury and Its Implications

Following the Declaration of Greatness round, the child judge, Petra, evaluated the debaters' performances before awarding points. Her comments provide insight into which persuasive strategies were most effective for a young audience: *Excerpt 14: "I loved everything that was in the fort, how there were so many things. And I, kind of, want to live in the fort now. You made me want to live there."* Demonstrates the strong impact of Joy's emotional appeal, indicating that imaginative and immersive language successfully generated emotional engagement. Ultimately, after the Final Six round, Petra declared Joy Dolo the winner, suggesting that the memorable closing statement: *Excerpt 15: "Fort beautiful for spacious skies"* Created a more lasting persuasive effect than longer factual arguments. These findings indicate that, in child-oriented debates, creativity, emotional resonance, and memorable language are as influential as logical reasoning.

Furthermore, Petra's responses highlight children's capacity to critically evaluate competing arguments, suggesting that debate podcasts can serve as valuable pedagogical tools for developing argumentative literacy, critical thinking, analytical listening, and evidence-based decision-making through authentic and engaging spoken interactions. 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.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated persuasive language strategies employed in the Smash Boom Best episode Forts vs. Puzzles and found that pathos was the dominant persuasive strategy, supported by logos, opponent-weakening strategies, and audience adaptation to effectively engage child listeners. In contrast, explicit ethos appeals were not prominently identified because the speakers relied primarily on emotional engagement, simplified logical reasoning, and audience-centered communication rather than establishing personal credibility or authority. These findings demonstrate that persuasive discourse in children's debate podcasts depends not only on rhetorical appeals but also on pragmatic adaptation to the cognitive and experiential characteristics of young audiences. Theoretically, this study extends previous research by integrating Leech's pragmatic framework with Aristotelian rhetoric in the analysis of children-oriented spoken discourse. Practically, the findings provide insights for educators and children's content creators in designing persuasive and educational communication that is engaging, accessible, and developmentally appropriate. Future research is recommended to examine a broader range of podcast episodes, incorporate multimodal features such as intonation, pauses, and speech rate, and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding of persuasive language across diverse communicative contexts.

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