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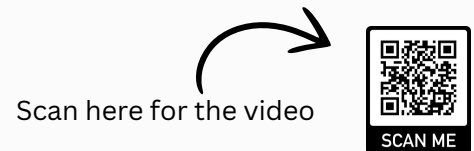


## Analyze the Tone of Lou Gehrig's "Luckiest Man" Speech



Lou Gehrig delivered a great speech on Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day at Yankee Stadium on July 4th, 1939. However, what made this speech memorable and powerful was the rhetorical situation in which it was given. **Let's look at the speaker, context, and audience of this speech, and do a quick analysis of its tone.**

### Background Information:



Scan here for the video

Lou Gehrig was known for being a strong and durable baseball player. He played 14 seasons, or 2130 consecutive games. No sick days, no off days, no nothing. His nickname was the iron horse because of his strength as a hitter and his durability as a player. With a .340 lifetime batting average, and 493 home runs, Gehrig was a living legend.

Gehrig's fairytale career turned to tragedy--however-- when he was diagnosed with ALS.. He was told he had a few years to live--that's it. He retired from baseball immediately.

His fate seemed unlucky and cruel. Gehrig went from being a famed athlete and cultural icon, to having a rare incurable disease. Oh, yeah--and he was given this news on his 36th birthday. The Yankees franchise, professional baseball, and fans across the country were stunned.

In response to this devastating news, The New York Yankees (the team Gehrig played for)--held Lou Gehrig appreciation day on July 4th, 1939. Gehrig's illness was already causing him to become weak. Whether or not he would speak on this day remained a mystery. Gehrig was shy, and had voiced to others that he did not want to speak. Finally, after some nudging--and after it looked like Gehrig wouldn't speak, and after the crowd began chanting his name, he stepped to the microphone located at home plate. With no paper or notes in his hand, he said this:

**“For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break.”**

Analysis: The use of “bad break” here seemed odd since it was clearly an understatement. Bad break is an expression used--perhaps--when a player sprains his ankle in the world series, or when a ball takes a bad hop--and the other team gets a lucky run. It is not an expression you would expect to use when you have recently learned that you have an incurable disease.

**“Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”**

Analysis: This line now sets the tone for the rest of the speech. The word luckiest is such a contrast to the situation that it is shocking. The more appropriate word to describe Gehrig’s situation is unlucky. His optimism and gratefulness is accentuated by the harrowing situation he finds himself in.

**“I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans.”**

Analysis: Now we have an obvious exaggeration by Gehrig. He was not always treated with kindness. By looking at the bright side--however--Gehrig continues with a grateful and optimistic tone.

**“When you look around, wouldn’t you consider it a privilege to associate yourself with such a fine looking men as they’re standing in uniform in this ballpark today? Sure, I’m lucky. Who wouldn’t consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert? Also, the builder of baseball’s greatest empire, Ed Barrow? To have spent six years with that wonderful little fellow, Miller Huggins? Then to have spent the next nine years with that outstanding leader, that smart student of psychology, the best manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? Sure, I’m lucky.”**

Analysis: Once again Gehrig continues with an optimistic and grateful tone. Let’s look at his word choices:

Privilege, lucky, honor, greatest, wonderful, outstanding, smart, best, lucky.

At this point it is obvious that Gehrig - in the face of adversity and tragedy - is choosing to remain grateful. The repetition of “sure, I’m lucky” illuminates his optimism. His strength and durability as a player - the characteristics that made him a legend on the field - now pale in comparison with his courage and mental strength he demonstrates off the field.

**“When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends you a gift - that’s something. When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in white coats remember you with trophies - that’s something. When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter - that’s something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so you can have an education and build your body - it’s a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed - that’s the finest I know.”**

Analysis: Gehrig now shifts his gratefulness and optimism away from baseball and towards his family. For the audience of this speech---fans at Yankee Stadium--this further humanizes Gehrig. This legend on the field has been supported by family, and Gehrig is grateful for this. This is demonstrated by this repetition of “that’s something”, and “it’s a blessing.”

**“So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I’ve got an awful lot to live for. Thank you.”**

Analysis: Gehrig’s last line finalizes his message that he is not gonna dwell on a “bad break” or his disease, but he is going to focus on the life he still has to live. In a sense, Gehrig’s situation is an example of what all humans must face - inevitable death. Gehrig’s optimism and gratefulness - though - serve as an inspiring example of courage and strength.

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**Response Questions:**

- **How does Gehrig balance gratitude and sadness in his speech?**
- **Which rhetorical appeal is the most powerful, and why?**

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## Possible Answer:

### 1. How does Gehrig balance gratitude and sadness in his speech?

Lou Gehrig balances gratitude and sadness by acknowledging his illness without letting it overshadow the positive aspects of his life. He begins the speech with a bold declaration of being "the luckiest man on the face of the earth," which immediately sets a tone of gratitude.

- **Gratitude:** Gehrig emphasizes the support he has received from his teammates, family, and fans, listing specific examples of kindness and generosity. By focusing on these blessings, he shifts the attention away from his tragic diagnosis and toward the joy and love in his life.
- **Sadness:** While he does not directly dwell on his ALS, the speech's context and his farewell to baseball carry an inherent sadness. His acknowledgment of his "bad break" is brief but poignant, subtly reminding the audience of his courage in the face of adversity.

This balance is achieved through a tone of humility and composure, where his gratitude outweighs the sorrow, leaving a lasting impression of resilience and positivity.

### 2. Which rhetorical appeal is the most powerful, and why?

Pathos is the most powerful rhetorical appeal in Gehrig's speech because it resonates deeply with the emotions of his audience.

- **Examples of Pathos:**
  - His declaration of being "the luckiest man on the face of the earth" creates a heartfelt and unexpected perspective, evoking admiration and empathy.
  - The mention of his supportive teammates, the loyalty of fans, and his loving family strikes an emotional chord.
  - His calm acknowledgment of his "bad break" contrasts with the typical reactions to adversity, amplifying the emotional impact.
- **Why It's Effective:** Gehrig's ability to convey vulnerability while maintaining a positive outlook inspires his audience. His humility and gratitude make the speech relatable and profoundly moving, ensuring that his message transcends the moment and becomes timeless.

While ethos (his credibility as a revered athlete) and logos (logical structure of his gratitude) are present, the emotional appeal of pathos is what makes this speech memorable and impactful.

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