

Speech and Persuasion

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Interpersonal behavior is dominated by the use of language. One of the most significant applications for language is persuasion. Persuasion is encountered regularly in both personal and professional relationships and can be as simple as convincing a friend to meet for lunch or as complex as an attorney conducting closing arguments or a politician electioneering. Proper use of language is essential in creating social arrangements that achieve goals. Many aspects of speech impact how a speaker is perceived, how persuasive he/she is and ultimately what goals he/she is able to accomplish. The following paragraphs cover briefly some of the characteristics of speech that have been shown to affect a speaker's perceived persona.

One of the most basic attempts at persuasion is the request. Requests are used to obtain goods, services, action or permission. Linguists characterize requests by their politeness or directness (Forgas, 1999). To achieve a desired result a request must have a balance of both politeness and directness that is relevant to the situation (Forgas, 1985), and display enough directness to demand action while retaining enough politeness to remain un-offensive. Requests conducted in a more direct than polite manner are generally more effective than requests conducted in a manner that allows politeness to dominate. The manner in which a request is conducted has been determined to be affected by transient mood. In an experiment that used mood induction films on respondents prior to eliciting requests, Joseph Forgas (1998) determined that "happy" respondents were more likely to conduct requests in a direct manner

than were sad respondents. Furthermore, “happy” respondents were more likely to engage in “risky” and unconventional requests. An explanation for this behavior may be that the unconventional requests likely require more cognitive processing which dysphoric respondents may not be willing to undertake. This research ultimately suggests that mood has an effect on persuasion; individuals who maintain a sense of wellbeing the majority of the time are more likely to be persuasive individuals. Because of the preference towards directness in society, dysphoric persons are less likely to be persuasive, and therefore may find themselves in a situation of chronic dysphoria due to lack of communicative efficacy (Forgas, 1999). Those who display excessive directness may also have a loss of communicative efficacy as they may be viewed by others as manipulative or cocky.

Strength of linguistic style contributes greatly to persuasion. Hesitations, disclaimers (ex. I may not be _____, but I _____), hedges (ex. sort of; kind of), politeness and (in certain circumstances) tag questions all are qualities of powerless language. Generally, use of a powerful linguistic style is more persuasive. The qualities of powerless language that detract most from persuasion are hedges and hesitations. This is likely due to an increase in cognitive processes that are irrelevant to the point being made by the speaker. Tag questions have been shown to add strength to linguistic style when they are questioning a point of low relevance (something not already flowing in the stream of thoughts), but detract from the style when simply beating a dead horse or making a moot point (Blankenship, 2005).

Those using a powerful style are more likely to be perceived as possessing greater competence and credibility than those who use a powerless style. Speech bearing the scars of powerless language can be enough to eliminate the persuasive effects of a strong argument (Blankenship, 2005). One exception to this rule is the case of a female speaking to a male, in which a powerless linguistic style has shown to be more persuasive (Carli, 1990). This may help to explain why women are at such a disadvantage in business and politics, as men hold an advantage in being able to persuade both genders with one linguistic style.

Emotional tone of voice has been shown to have an effect on persuasion in a few ways. The processing of lexically ambiguous words has been shown to be aided when the word is pronounced in a tone that is emotionally congruent to the meaning of the word (Nygaard, 2002). Reduced ambiguity keeps distractions to a minimum, thus adding to a positive view of the speaker. When making a statement, an increased tone gives the perception of an increase in politeness. Questions are particularly susceptible to being perceived in a manner that corresponds to the tone in which they were said. A positive tone shift produces an increase in perceived politeness. Similarly, a negative tone shift has the effect of an increased perception of directness. The intensity of the tone shift correlates to the intensity of the shift in perception (Laplante, 2003). It is clear how tone shifts effect requests because of the shift in politeness/directness, but they also affect the use of tag questions as an increase in tone would suggest a doubt or question, but a decrease in tone would imply an accusation or suggest a

belief one holds true by implying that both the audience and the speaker know the answer. Because of this, tag questions that possess a negative tone shift are more coercive (Snellings, 1985).

Pitch is another aspect of speech that has an impact on how a speaker is perceived. High pitched voices imply to an audience that the speaker is weak, nervous and dishonest (Thomas, 2002). Compared to those with lower pitched voices, a speaker with a high pitched voice is perceived as being less competent and less benevolent (Chattopadhyay, 2002). Low pitched male voices enjoy the most preference among listeners and have been found to be the most persuasive type of voice (Chattopadhyay, 2002; Whipple, 2002).

Speaking rate is another perceived indicator of benevolence and competence of a speaker. An increase in rate of speech positively correlates to an increase in perceived competence. Both high and low rates of speech give listeners the impression that the speaker is arrogant; a moderate speech rate implies benevolence (Thomas, 2002). Listeners take fast speech as a cue that what is being said will be difficult to process, therefore, some listeners tune out excessively fast speech (Chattopadhyay, 2002).

Careful attention given to word choice can have tremendous effects on how a person thinks about something. In a study conducted in 1974 by Loftus and Palmer a group of respondents were shown a film of an automobile accident and each respondent was asked one of several versions of the same question about the rate of speed that the car was traveling. The question: "About how fast were the cars going when they collided with each other?" was given several other

endings such as “bumped into each other” and “smashed into each other”. The respondents given the ending “smashed into each other” consistently reported a higher rate of speed.

Studying how speech affects persuasion has many applications. Businesses, governments and individuals all benefit from having a greater knowledge of how persuasion through speech works, not only for the purpose of being effective at persuasion of others but also to recognize when one is being persuaded and what mechanisms are in use to initiate that persuasion. Being aware of how persuasion works is vital to many professions. Businessmen, lecturers, sales persons, and every other person who works in a field where their job demands the selling of ideas must be aware of persuasion in order to perform sufficiently. Research in the area of speech persuasion is especially valuable to the advertising industry, social scientists, politicians and those in the legal profession. The advertising industry is based on persuasion, so not only is much of the research in this area beneficial to it, but much of it is conducted by it as well. Politicians and those in the legal profession spend much of their time convincing others of ideas or beliefs, and therefore communicating in a way that maximizes persuasion is essential. This area of research is particularly important to the social scientist. Studying society accurately requires experimental design that does not persuade the respondents to answer or perform in a way that could act as a threat to the validity of the results.

One concept that appears to be relevant to this topic is the idea that speech that causes unnecessary cognitive processing is likely to become less

persuasive. This is not surprising as additional processing would likely distract the listener and cause him/her to miss part of the message.

Although some aspects of what makes a speaker persuasive are rooted in biology (e.g. sex and pitch) others can be controlled. Overall, direct speech that is free from disclaimers, hedges and hesitations is most persuasive. Intonation plays an important role in persuasion in that it can have the effect of clarifying lexically ambiguous words and offer insight into the intended politeness or directness of questions and statements. Moderate speech rates are the most functional way of portraying a high level of both competence and benevolence. Finally, word choice has an important impact on how a listener perceives a situation and is ultimately persuaded.

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