Faculty Publications School of Business   School of Business

1987

An Introduction to Powerful and Powerless Talk in the Classroom

Craig E. Johnson
George Fox University, cjohnson@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfsb

Part of the Business Commons

AN INTRODUCTION TO POWERFUL AND POWERLESS TALK IN THE CLASSROOM

Craig E. Johnson
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

In recent years, powerful and powerless forms of talk have attracted the attention of a number of investigators. Researchers studying the impact of language in the courtroom, for example, have identified powerful and powerless language styles and have linked the powerful style to higher witness credibility ratings (Erickson, Lind, Johnson & O'Barr, 1978; Conley, O'Barr & Lind, 1978; Lind & O'Barr, 1979; O'Barr, 1982). Communication scholars report that speakers benefit from using powerful speech in such settings as the job interview (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a), the small group (Bradley, 1981), and the crisis intervention context (Bradac & Mulac, 1984b).

The evidence cited above suggests that the powerful/powerless speech construct should be included in the syllabi of such subjects as public speaking, persuasion and interpersonal communication. Yet, information on powerful and powerless talk is not readily available to speech communication students and instructors. Few persuasion or public speaking texts, for example, offer material on powerful and powerless speech. This essay is a two-part introduction to powerful and powerless talk for instructors who want to incorporate this construct into their curricula. Part one consists of a brief summary of powerful/powerless talk literature. Part two offers guidelines for introducing these research findings into the classroom.

POWERFUL AND POWERLESS TALK: AN OVERVIEW

WHAT MAKES SPEECH POWERFUL OR POWERLESS?

Early investigators treated powerful talk as a standard language variety. Culturally preferred speech patterns are called "standard languages" or "prestige dialects" (Ryan, 1979) and these dialects are spoken by the highest socioeconomic groups in society (Giles & Powesland, 1975, p. 15). The notion that powerful speech acts as a standard language and powerless speech as a nonstandard language variety was supported by research conducted in North Carolina courtrooms (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980). Lakoff (1973; 1975) had hypothesized that women use many language features which reflect their powerless position in American society. However, O'Barr and associates concluded that speech styles were status related, not sex related. Low status witnesses of both sexes made more use of speech high in such features as hedges, intensifiers, deictic phrases and hesitation forms (a "powerless style"), while high status witnesses (physicians and other professionals) employed a "powerful style" which avoided the use of these forms (Erickson et al., 1978; O'Barr & Atkins, 1980).

Later researchers found that defining powerful and powerless talk as standard or nonstandard language varieties was misleading, however, since not all of the original

elements of the powerless speech style acted in a powerless manner. Polite forms ("please" and "thank you") and intensifiers ("so" or "very"), for example, were part of O'Barr and associates' powerless speech style. Yet, both intensifiers and polite forms have been found to act in a powerful fashion (Wright & Hosman, 1983; Bradac & Mulac, 1984a). Moreover, powerful and powerless speech establish and maintain power differentials in addition to reflecting social realities (O'Barr, 1984). Speakers can be typed as powerful or powerless solely on the basis of their language choices (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a). Thus, powerful and powerless forms of talk are more accurately defined in terms of the impressions they create for speakers. Powerful talk generates high power and dominance ratings for users. Powerless talk, on the other hand, is tentative, uncertain speech which characterizes speakers as powerless and submissive. Most researchers have operationalized powerful speech as straightforward talk and have devoted their attention to defining the types and influence of powerless speech (Erickson et al., 1978; Bradac, Hemphill & Tardy, 1981; Warfel, 1984). For this reason, more powerless forms of talk have been identified than powerful speech features. Prior research reveals that the following features type communicators as powerless:

Hedges/Qualifiers
Hedges are such expressions as "kinda," "I think," and "I guess" that qualify statements in such a way as to detract from their certainty and thus weaken their impact. Such features cast speakers as low in power (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a; Warfel, 1984) and have been linked to low status sources both in court (Erickson et al., 1978) and in the employment interview (Ragan, 1983).

Hesitation forms
Hesitation forms ("uh," "ah," "well," "um") were part of the original powerless style of speaking identified by O'Barr and associates (Erickson et al., 1978). These forms have been noted as markers of uncertainty. (Siegman & Pope, 1965) and their use makes speakers appear powerless and ineffective (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a).

You knows
Originally defined as a hesitation form (Erickson et al., 1978), this expression can be treated as a separate powerless feature when it is used for emphasis or to track topics. For example: "You know, I can tell you. It depends on who you're managing . . . helps them with a lot of paperwork, you know" (Ragan, 1983, p. 509). Like hesitation forms, "you knows" contribute to perceptions of powerlessness (Johnson, 1985).

Tag questions
The use of tag questions is a manifestation of uncertainty because the question tag makes a declarative statement much less forceful. For example, "Sure is cold in here, isn't it?" carries much less impact than "It sure is cold in here." Tag questions are seen as nonassertive (Siegler & Siegler, 1976; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979; Berryman & Wilcox, 1980) and type users as powerless (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a).

Deictic phrases
"Over here" and "over there" are examples of deictic phrases as in: "That woman over there looks like a teacher of mine. That man looks like a teacher too" (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a, p. 310). The use of these phrases has been linked to low status sources

in court (Erickson et al., 1978) and these expressions are rated as powerless language devices (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a).

Disclaimers

Disclaimers are defined as "introductory expressions that excuse, explain, or request understanding or forbearance" (Eakins & Eakins, 1978, p. 45). Of the five types of disclaimers identified by Hewitt & Stokes (1975), two have been investigated in powerless language research. These are hedging ("Don't get me wrong, but") and cognitive disclaimers ("I know this sounds crazy, but"). Both of these disclaimer forms indicate uncertainty and lack of commitment to a position. The use of such forms reduces perceptions of dominance (Warfel, 1984) and influence (Bradley, 1981).

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF USING POWERLESS SPEECH?

Based on studies conducted to date, the following generalizations can be made about the consequences of using powerless talk:

1. The use of powerless speech lowers the credibility of sources.

Powerless speakers have received lower credibility ratings in simulated trials (Erickson et al., 1978; Conley et al., 1978; Lind & O'Barr, 1979; O'Barr, 1982), budget hearings (Johnson, 1985), small groups (Bradley, 1981) and counseling sessions (Bradac & Mulac, 1984b). Research into the use of hesitation forms ("uh" and "ah") as a subcategory of nonfluencies suggests that public speakers are also seen as less competent and dynamic when they use powerless talk (Miller & Hewgill, 1964; Sereno & Hawkins, 1967).

2. Powerless speakers appear less attractive.

Like perceptions of credibility, evaluations of attractiveness are also lowered by the use of powerless language. In the courtroom, witnesses using powerless speech are seen as less attractive than powerful speakers (Erickson et al., 1978; O'Barr, 1982; Bradac, Hemphill & Tardy, 1981). In the crisis intervention context, both counselors and clients appear more attractive, as well as higher in socioeconomic status and internality, when using unreciprocated powerful (straightforward) speech (Bradac & Mulac, 1984b).

3. Powerless speakers may be less persuasive.

Due to the unfavorable impressions they generate, powerless speakers may be less likely to convince others to accept their messages. Some student juries have been less generous to both plaintiffs (Erickson et al., 1978) and witnesses (Johnson, 1985) speaking in a powerless fashion. However, in other instances no link between speech style and damage awards or blameworthiness has been noted (Bradac et al., 1981; Wright & Hosman, 1983). More studies might have revealed a relationship between powerful and powerless talk and message acceptance had researchers not inadvertently included both powerful and powerless elements in their powerless message versions (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a). Thus, current research suggests, but does not yet substantiate, a correlation between speech style and persuasiveness.

4. There is no clearly established relationship between communicator sex and perceptions of powerless speakers.

Although the relationship between sex of speaker, style of speech and impression formation has been of continuing interest to investigators, results have been inconsistent. In prior research, a few, minor sex-style interactions have been noted

(Erickson et al., 1978). In addition, some specific forms of powerless talk like hedges (Wright & Hosman, 1983) and tag questions and disclaimers (Bradley, 1981) appear to be more damaging to the credibility of females. However, no correlation between powerful and powerless speech and perceptions of masculinity and femininity has been established (Erickson et al., 1978; Bradac et al., 1981).

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are designed to introduce students to the powerful/powerless forms of talk construct. These procedures have four objectives:

1. To build student awareness of the existence of powerful and powerless types of speech.
2. To demonstrate the potential impact of powerless talk on the evaluations of sources.
3. To help students determine when the use of a powerful or powerless style is most effective.
4. To help students eliminate powerless speech features from their speech patterns when they determine that such a strategy will help them achieve their goals.

DEMONSTRATION TAPE

I have found that an effective way to introduce the concept of powerful and powerless speech is through the use of a demonstration tape. After listening to samples of both types of talk, students from a wide variety of lower and upper division courses have been able to identify the forms and influence of powerless speech. I use recorded samples of a simulated budget hearing adapted from earlier research. In this hearing, a representative of a student organization testifies before a student activities board in order to secure funding for her organization. In the powerful condition the speaker testifies in a straightforward manner. In the powerless condition, the witness delivers the same testimony while using hesitation forms, qualifiers/hedges and you knows. Consult Erickson et al. (1978), O'Barr (1982) or O'Barr & Atkins (1980) for examples of powerful and powerless testimony using the trial setting.

Before the tape begins, I ask students to form an impression of the speaker based on each of the samples and to note any differences in speaker behavior between the two segments. After the excerpts have been played, students then respond to the speaker based on three dimensions of credibility: competence (How knowledgable did the speaker seem in each version of the tape?), trustworthiness (How much did you trust the speaker in each sample?), and dynamism (How assertive/confident did the speaker appear in each excerpt?). I also ask how much money students would be likely to give the organization if they were members of the activities board and heard the representative speak in either the powerful or powerless version of the tape. In addition, students identify speech features which contributed to their negative evaluation of the speaker in the powerless condition.

Once the class has listed the forms of speech that characterize the powerless tape, I then introduce the concept of powerful/powerless talk. This introduction includes a summary of the material found in the first part of this essay—the definition of powerful/powerless talk, the specific forms of powerless speech, and the consequences of using powerless language. Since they have already discovered the influence of powerless talk for themselves, students have little difficulty understanding how the use of such speech can detract from source credibility.

DISCUSSION

Review of the literature should not end consideration of powerful and powerless talk. Students can be encouraged to develop their own hypotheses related to powerful and powerless speech. In addition, they should consider the implications of the construct for their own behaviors. The following questions can serve as a discussion guide:

1. What other forms could be called "powerless" that are not currently on the list of "powerless" features? (Side particles and accounts, for example, also appear to be powerless speech forms (Ragan, 1983), though the impact of these forms remains to be tested. Side particles are generally idiosyncratic and refer to other messages as in "You mentioned" or "Quite frankly." Accounts are used to excuse or justify damaging past acts (Scott & Lyman, 1968)).
2. Can you identify public figures who use or avoid powerless talk? What impact does powerful/powerless speech have on their credibility?
3. Is powerful speech an effective strategy for every situation? If not, when should powerless speech be used instead? (There may be occasions when a powerless approach is more effective. For example, a dominant source may want to show friendliness by sounding powerless. Also, a speaker who is threatened by physical assault may want to appear harmless by talking in a powerless manner (Bradac & Mulac, 1984b)).
4. In what situations do you use the most powerless talk? Why?
5. How can we learn to talk more powerfully?

PERFORMANCE

The class session can conclude with a discussion of the questions listed above. However, I want students to be able to eliminate powerless features from their performances when they decide that this is an appropriate strategy. The fact that lawyers have been able to train clients to avoid powerless speech (O'Barr, 1982) suggests that powerless talk can be removed from speaker repertoires. In the classroom, I use one of two strategies to train students to speak forcefully. In the first option, students pair off and talk for three to five minutes. The goal of participants is to speak without using powerless features while monitoring their own speech patterns and the patterns of their partners. Through this process, students begin to recognize the extent of their powerlessness. They can then continue to monitor their performances in other settings and solicit feedback about their powerless talk from roommates and friends. In the second option, I have students record the type and number of powerless features used by actors in a simulated job interview. Class members could also be asked to identify powerless speech in speeches and small group discussions. This strategy is based on the premise that students can improve their own performances by rating the performances of others (Sorenson & Pickett, 1986).

CONCLUSION

Research into powerful and powerless talk continues. Additional forms may be added to or eliminated from the list of powerless speech features and the impact of such talk will be examined in new settings. Yet, speech communication instructors do not have to wait until more research is completed before applying powerful/ powerless talk findings in the classroom. Based on current knowledge, communica-

tion educators can build student awareness of powerless forms of talk and, when appropriate, can train students to speak in a more powerful manner.

REFERENCES

Berryman, C. L., & Wilcox, J. R. (1980). Attitudes toward male and female speech: Experiments on the effects of sex-typical language. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 44*, 50–59.

Bradac, J., Hemphill, M., & Tardy, C. (1981). Language style on trial: Effects of "powerful" and "powerless" speech upon judgments of victims and villains. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 45*, 327–341.

Bradac, J., & Mulac, A. (1984a). A molecular view of powerful and powerless speech styles: Attributional consequences of specific language features and communicator intentions. *Communication Monographs, 51*, 307–319.

Bradac, J., & Mulac, A. (1984b). Attributional consequences of powerful and powerless speech styles in a crisis-intervention context. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 3*, 1–19.

Bradley, P. H. (1981). The folk-linguistics of women's speech: An empirical examination. *Communication Monographs, 48*, 73–90.

Conley, J., O'Barr, W., & Lind, E. A. (1978). The power of language: Presentational styles in the courtroom. *Duke Law Journal*, 1375–1399.

Eakins, B. W., & Eakins, R. G. (1978). *Sex differences in human communication*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Erickson, B., Lind, E., Johnson, A., & O'Barr, W. (1978). Speech style and impression formation in a court setting: The effects of "powerful" and "powerless" speech. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 14*, 266–279.

Giles, H., & Powesland, P. F. (1975). *Speech style and social evaluation*. London: Academic Press.

Hewitt, J. P., & Stokes, R. (1975). Disclaimers. *American Sociological Review, 40*, 1–11.

Johnson, C. (1985). Powerful and powerless forms of talk, status, credibility and financial awards (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Denver). *Dissertation Abstracts International*. In publication.

Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society, 2*, 45–79.

Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper and Row.

Lind, E. A., & O'Barr, W. (1979). The social significance of speech in the courtroom. In H. Giles & R. St. Clair (Eds.), *Language and social psychology* (pp. 66–87). College Park, MD: University of Maryland Press.

Miller, G. R., & Hewgill, M. A. (1964). The effects of variations in nonfluency on audience ratings of source credibility. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 50*, 36–44.

Newcombe, N., & Arnkoff, D. B. (1979). Effects of speech style and sex of speaker on person perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*, 1293–1303.

O'Barr, W. M. (1982). *Linguistic evidence: Language, power, and strategy in the courtroom*. New York: Academic Press.

O'Barr, W. M. (1984). Asking the right questions about language and power. In C. Kramarae, M. Schulz & W. O'Barr (Eds.), *Language and power* (pp. 260–280). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

O'Barr, W., & Atkins, B. (1980). "Women's language" or "powerless language?" In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker & N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (pp. 93–110). New York: Praeger.

Ragan, S. L. (1983). A conversational analysis of aligment talk in job interviews. In R. Bostrom (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 7* (pp. 502–516). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Ryan, E. B. (1979). Why do low prestige language varieties exist? In H. Giles & R. St. Clair (Eds.), *Language and social psychology* (pp. 145–157). College Park, MD: University of Maryland Press.

Scott, M., & Lyman, S. (1968). Accounts. *American Sociological Review, 22*, 46–62.

Sereno, K., & Hawkins, G. (1967). The effects of variations in speakers' nonfluency upon audience ratings of attitude toward the speech topic and speakers' credibility. *Speech Monographs, 34*, 58–64.

Siegler, D., & Siegler, R. (1976). Stereotypes of males' and females' speech. *Psychological Reports, 39*, 167–170.

Siegman, A., & Pope, B. (1965). Effects of question specificity and anxiety-producing messages on verbal fluency in the initial interview. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2*, 522–530.

Sorenson, R., & Pickett, T. (1986). A test of two teaching strategies designed to improve interview effectiveness: Rating behavior and videotaped feedback. *Communication Education, 35*, 13–22.

Warfel, K. (1984). Gender schemas and perceptions of speech style. *Communication Monographs, 51*, 253–267.

Wright, J., & Hosman, L. (1983). Language style and sex bias in the courtroom: The effects of male and female use of hedges and intensifiers in impression formation. *Southern Speech Communication Journal, 48*, 137–152.