

1987

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't": Status, Powerful Speech, and Evaluations of Female Witnesses

Craig E. Johnson

George Fox University, cjohnson@georgefox.edu

Larry Vinson

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

 Part of the [Business Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Craig E. and Vinson, Larry, "'Damned if you do, damned if you don't': Status, Powerful Speech, and Evaluations of Female Witnesses" (1987). *Faculty Publications School of Business*. Paper 45.

<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfsb/45>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications School of Business by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolf@georgefox.edu.

"DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T?": STATUS, POWERFUL SPEECH, AND EVALUATIONS OF FEMALE WITNESSES

Craig Johnson
Larry Vinson

The expression, "damned if you do, damned if you don't," may describe the predicament of many female communicators. If women maintain their typical speech styles, they are seen as passive and inconsequential. Yet, they may be negatively evaluated if they adopt the more assertive forms of talk associated with men.¹ Moreover, discrimination against women may be too great to overcome through the use of commanding talk. Robert Hopper, for example, contends that the language of powerful people is perceived as powerful because these actors are powerful. If this is the case, changes in communication patterns will not raise the standing of women or other disadvantaged groups.²

Those with a more optimistic view of the position of female sources argue that women can benefit from the adoption of powerful talk. To support their stance, they note that sources of both sexes who speak in a straightforward manner and avoid the use of such powerless language forms as hedges ("I think," "I guess"), hesitation forms ("uh," "ah"), and deictic phrases ("over here," "over there") have been found to be more credible and persuasive than those who use these features.³ These findings, along with evidence that powerful speech types male and female users as dominant and effective, suggest that females are not caught in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" bind.⁴ Instead, women can benefit from using powerful talk.

The question of whether or not the adoption of powerful speech can serve as an effective rhetorical strategy for female sources takes on added significance in dispute-resolution processes. Both the

legal context and related processes like arbitration cases and legislative hearings (quasi-legal settings) center on witnesses who offer testimony in order to secure financial and other awards.⁵ The success of witnesses rests on their ability to establish credibility and to convince third-party arbitrators to accept their messages. Male witnesses apparently enjoy a decided advantage over female witnesses in reaching their goals in these situations. Americans favor the characteristics traditionally associated with males⁶ and give higher credibility ratings to men.⁷ In the courtroom, lawyers consider women to be nonassertive witnesses who deserve extra courtesy and other considerations.⁸ One trial practice manual goes so far as to suggest that female witnesses are like children, prone to exaggerations and fabrications.⁹

Not only are female witnesses at a disadvantage, but their position is further weakened if they happen to be of low status. Listeners and readers, for example, consistently assign higher credibility ratings to higher status sources.¹⁰ In the legal system, lower class persons are more likely to be arrested, to come to trial, to be found guilty, and to receive harsh punishment.¹¹ If the use of powerful speech can help female, low-status witnesses increase their credibility and make them more persuasive, then they would be able to compete on a more equitable basis in the legal system and in related settings. In addition, the use of powerful talk may make these sources more memorable. Listeners may retain more testimony when it is delivered in a powerful manner. However, a relationship between powerful/powerless talk and information retention has not yet been established.

Reactions to female witnesses speaking in a powerful fashion may vary with

Dr. Johnson and Dr. Vinson are Assistant Professors at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

the sex of auditors. Female listeners may be more generous than male listeners in their evaluations of powerfully speaking female witnesses. Prior research reveals that the favorable impressions generated by speaking in a powerful manner occasionally are magnified when evaluators are of the same sex as the source. For example, Erickson and associates found that female subjects gave higher credibility ratings to a powerfully speaking female witness, while males gave higher ratings to a male witness using powerful talk.¹² In a similar fashion, Bradac and Mulac reported that males gave higher empathy scores to a male counselor than to a female counselor when both used a high-power speech style.¹³

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine if the use of powerful talk can benefit female witnesses, particularly those of low status, or if these sources are locked into a disadvantaged position. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were investigated:

- Q1: Do males and females differ in their evaluations of female witnesses using powerful and powerless talk?
- Q2: Does the use of powerful speech raise the credibility ratings of low-status female witnesses and make them more persuasive?
- Q3: Does the use of powerful speech raise the credibility ratings of low-status female witnesses and make them more persuasive? Conversely, does the use of powerless speech lower the credibility of high-status female witnesses and make them less persuasive?
- Q4: If powerful speech increases the effectiveness of low-status witnesses, can the use of such talk completely overcome the initial disadvantage that results from low status? Or will a high-status, powerfully speaking witness be more credible and persuasive than a low-status, powerfully speaking witness?
- Q5: Do the listeners retain more of a female witness's testimony if it is delivered in a powerful manner?

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 164 undergraduates (66 males and 98 females) enrolled in communication courses at a midwestern university. Pretests were conducted with undergraduate subjects from a western university.

Independent Variables

Context. The stimulus materials for this project were constructed around a simulated budget-allocation case. Students were asked to act as members of the Student Senate, the student governing board on campus. They were told that one of their major responsibilities as student senators was the allocation of monies generated from student activities fees to student organizations applying for aid. One of the organizations seeking funding was the Negotiation Club. Subjects were instructed to listen to a tape of a representative of this organization as she answered questions from the president of the Student Senate and then to determine how much the Negotiation Club should receive from the Student Senate's budget.

Employing a technique used in previous investigations of status and credibility, status was manipulated though the use of a written introduction for the speaker on the tape.¹⁴ In the low-status introduction, the representative was described as a student; in the high-status introduction, she was described as a professor knowledgeable in negotiation and bargaining. To determine if the introductions created the desired status differential, a pretest using Likert scale items was conducted (i.e., "This person is respected by others," "Other people believe this person is significant"). The mean status rating for the high-status introduction was significantly higher than that of the low-status introduction ($t(46) = 14.90, p < .001$).

Powerful/powerless talk. Two testimony conditions were constructed. In the high-power version of the tape, the representative answered questions in a straightforward manner. Such straightfor-

ward or generic speech has generated high power and dominance ratings for speakers in previous investigations.¹⁵ In the powerless version of the tape, the following powerless speech elements were added:

1. Hedges/Qualifiers: Expressions like "kinda," "I think," and "I guess" qualify statements in such a way as to detract from their certainty. Hedges generate perceptions of powerlessness for speakers¹⁶ and have been linked to low-status sources both in the courtroom and in the employment interview.¹⁷

2. Hesitation forms: Hesitation forms ("uh," "ah," "well," "um") have been identified as components of a powerless style of speaking,¹⁸ and their use makes speakers appear powerless and ineffective.¹⁹

3. You knows: "You know" has been treated as a hesitation form or as a separate powerless speech feature when it is used for emphasis or to track topics.²⁰ For example: "You know, I can tell you. It depends on who you're managing . . . helps them with a lot of paperwork, you know."²¹

The first example below is taken from the powerful (straightforward) version of the tape. The second is a sample of the condition of powerless forms of talk.²²

Interviewer: Do you have funds available from other sources?

Representative: Right now, we have no funding except for member dues. This source of funding is about exhausted. We have talked to some businesses off campus about help. So far we have not received any.

Interviewer: How many members belong to your organization?

Representative: Uh, at present, I think about 35 members belong. I believe we hope to, uh, increase our number to around 100 as more people hear about us. You know, one of the difficulties we have had is that we are a new organization on campus and I guess not too many people know what we do.

Once the treatment conditions were developed, a pretest was used to determine if the straightforward testimony

generated significantly higher power ratings than did the powerless testimony. Subjects listened to either the high- or low-power version of the tape and then responded to Likert scale items (i.e., "This speaker is in control of the situation," "This speaker is in control of self"). The mean power score for the witness in the powerless condition was significantly lower than the power score for the same witness under the powerful condition ($t(42) = 12.85, p < .001$). To control for the influence of paralinguistic variables, two female speakers recorded the testimony versions. When additional pretests revealed no important differences in subject responses between speakers, only one witness was employed in the final study.

Dependent Variables

Three dependent measures were employed. To measure persuasive effectiveness, subjects were asked to determine an allocation for the Negotiation Club on a range of \$0 to \$5,000. Competence and character items from the McCroskey credibility instrument and dynamism items from the Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz credibility scale were used to measure witness credibility.²³ A series of 13 true-false and multiple-choice questions tested short-term retention of the information presented in the testimony.

Procedure

Following random assignment to treatment conditions, subjects read the speaker introduction and then listened to the testimony. After the tape was completed, subjects recorded the financial award they thought the Negotiation Club should receive from the Student Senate and filled out the credibility instrument and answered the information retention questions.

Data Analysis and Design

Data were analyzed using the following SPSSX statistical programs: Reliability, ANOVA, and One-way.²⁴ The reliability of credibility factors was measured through

the computation of alpha scores. Research questions were answered through analyses of variance and Scheffe's range tests (alpha .05). The experiment was a 2 (sex of respondent) \times 2 (high and low status) \times 2 (powerful and powerless testimony) design.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Reliability Scores. Alpha scores were computed for each dimension of credibility: (a) competence (informed-uninformed, bright-stupid, intelligent-unintelligent, trained-untrained, competent-incompetent) .82; (b) character (honest-dishonest, high character-low character, trustworthy-untrustworthy, virtuous-sinful) .69; and (c) dynamism (forceful-forceless, bold-timid, energetic-tired) .88.

Status Effects. Two status main effects were noted. The high-status witness received significantly higher awards than the low-status witness ($F(1,163)=3.9$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2 .016$) and higher competence ratings as well ($F(1,163)=5.7$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2 .032$). In addition, a two-way interaction between status and speech style for the competence dependent variable was noted ($F(1,163)=5.7$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2 .086$) (see Question 4 for discussion of this interaction effect).

Research Questions

Question 1. Analyses of variance revealed no significant main or interaction effects for sex of respondent. Scheffe's range tests confirmed that male and female subjects did not differ in their evaluations of the female witness or in their response to her testimony. Because no variations in response were noted between males and females, data were collapsed, producing a 2 (status) \times 2 (speech style) factorial design.

Questions 2, 3. Four 2 \times 2 ANOVAs were used to determine the relative influence of powerful talk and status on evaluations of female witnesses. The speech style independent variable produced significant main effects for award ($F(1,163)=43.5$, $p<.0001$, $\eta^2 .20$); competence ($F(1,163)=9.9$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 .05$); character ($F(1,163)=17.3$, $p<.0001$, $\eta^2 .096$); and dynamism ($F(1,163)=110.9$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 .40$). Regardless of initial status, the powerfully speaking female witness was perceived as significantly more credible and persuasive than the powerless witness (see Table 1). The use of powerful talk resulted in higher credibility ratings and awards for the low-status witness. However, when the high-status witness spoke in a powerless

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Main Effects

	Powerful		Powerless		High Status		Low Status	
	(\bar{X})	(SD)	(\bar{X})	(SD)	(\bar{X})	(SD)	(\bar{X})	(SD)
Award	*** 2550	(1539)	1191	(1121)	*2084	(1121)	1668	(1418)
Competence	*** 7.08	(1.14)	4.73	(.98)	**6.17	(1.74)	5.66	(1.37)
Character	*** 6.72	(1.20)	5.60	(.93)	6.28	(1.30)	6.04	(1.12)
Dynamism	*** 5.62	(1.64)	3.13	(1.36)	4.44	(2.04)	4.32	(1.88)
Retention	9.55	(1.91)	9.13	(1.93)	9.32	(2.04)	9.36	(1.81)

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .0001$

manner, she received significantly lower awards and credibility evaluations.

Question 4. Research question 4 asked if the effect of powerful and powerless talk would overcome any initial disadvantage brought about by low status. The answer to this question is a qualified "yes." Mean contrasts revealed that for the dependent variables of award, character, and dynamism, the high-power, high-status and high-power, low-status mean scores were significantly above those of the low-power cells and statistically equivalent to one another (see Table 2). The high-status, powerfully speaking witness was no more credible or persuasive than the low-status witness who also spoke in a powerful manner. Further, the high-status witness was no more effective than the low-status witness when both used powerless language. Thus, for the award, character, and dynamism variables, any status

effect was negated by speech style. However, on the competence dimension of credibility, a significant interaction effect emerged. Mean contrasts revealed that the high-power, high-status witness received significantly higher ratings than the high-power, low-status witness (see Table 2). When rendering decisions about the expertise of the witness, subjects considered both initial status and type of speech. On this dimension, then, powerful talk did not completely overcome any disadvantage caused by low social standing.

Question 5. A 2x2 ANOVA was employed to determine if auditors retained more information when it was presented in a powerful manner. No significant main or interaction effects were noted for this dependent variable (see Table 2). The type of speech and/or the initial status of the female witness had no discernible effect on information retention.

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Main Effects

	Powerful		Powerless		Mean Contrasts
	High Status	Low Status	High Status	Low Status	
	(\bar{X}) (SD)	(\bar{X}) (SD)	(\bar{X}) (SD)	(\bar{X}) (SD)	
Award	2500 (1535)	2221 (1489)	1280 (1153)	1102 (1095)	1 = 2 > 3 = 4
Competence	7.48 (1.17)	6.69 (.98)	4.86 (1.14)	4.60 (.77)	1 > 2 > 3 = 4
Character	6.96 (1.22)	6.47 (1.16)	5.61 (1.01)	5.59 (.87)	1 = 2 > 3 = 4
Dynamism	5.62 (1.79)	5.62 (1.50)	3.28 (1.54)	2.99 (1.16)	1 = 2 > 3 = 4
Retention	9.71 (2.07)	9.41 (1.75)	8.95 (1.97)	9.36 (1.90)	1 = 2 = 3 = 4

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the use of powerful talk can be an effective rhetorical strategy for female communicators who want to generate more favorable impressions and become more persuasive. These findings refute the

argument that female speakers are caught in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" communication bind and suffer negative evaluations if they adopt an assertive communication style. The use of straightforward talk did not reduce the effectiveness of the witness. In fact, subjects of both sexes awarded her higher

credibility ratings and financial awards when she spoke in a forceful manner. Male and female respondents were uniformly positive in their evaluations of the powerfully speaking source. Changes in communication patterns can generate more favorable impressions for women. In the quasi-legal context, at least, females would do well to adopt the speech patterns traditionally associated with males.

When a female source faces the added burden of low social standing, the use of powerful talk appears to be even more beneficial. With the exception of competence, the powerfully speaking, low-status witness and the powerfully speaking, high-status witness were equal in credibility and persuasiveness. While these results offer encouragement to low-status female communicators, they are sobering to high-status sources. The high-status witness, who was at an initial advantage in this study, received significantly lower credibility ratings and financial awards when speaking in a powerless manner. This suggests that high-status sources must avoid the use of powerless speech if they want to maintain their effectiveness. A speaker, instructor, politician, or salesperson who has high initial credibility due to profession, income, or knowledge can dissipate these initial positive impressions by the use of such speech features as hedges/qualifiers, hesitation forms, and "you knows." Prudent communicators of any status should avoid the use of powerless speech features until more data can be gathered.

The conclusions of this investigation open a number of avenues for future research. Actual budget hearings and trials should be examined to see if similar results emerge in real-life settings. Additional contexts and roles should be researched as well to determine if powerful talk can benefit disadvantaged sources in other situations. This investigation adds additional support to the notion that powerful female speakers fare better in formal settings—in situations (like the courtroom or budget hearing) where roles are clearly defined and norms and expectations are well established.²⁵ Powerful speech, however, might not be as advantageous when used among friends engaging in informal conversation.

In the future, more attention should be given to how to train female speakers to

talk in a powerful fashion. There is evidence to indicate that speakers can be trained to avoid powerless language.²⁶ However, no systematic evaluation of training methods has been undertaken. The results of such a study would be useful to assertiveness trainers and instructors who want to teach their students to speak in a powerful manner.

Failure to find a relationship between powerful/powerless talk and information retention also should stimulate further study. Listeners retained the same amount of information when the female witness used powerful or powerless talk. In this instance, information retention was not correlated with the higher credibility ratings and financial awards that were generated by powerful speech. This finding is puzzling, since auditors appear to work harder when listening to a powerless speaker. The speech patterns of powerless sources are filled with tentative language and extraneous words that could cause some listeners to lose interest.

There are a number of possible explanations for failure to find a link between speech type and amount of information remembered. For example, judgments of credibility and persuasiveness may be made independently of what is learned, or the extra effort required to listen to a powerless speaker may generate more, not less, concentration on a speaker's message and lead to greater retention. Whatever the tentative explanation, more research needs to be done in order to determine the relationship (or lack of relationship) between powerful and powerless talk and information retention. A powerfully speaking female witness is more credible and persuasive whatever her initial status. Whether her testimony is more memorable as well remains to be seen.

Notes

¹Robin Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," *Language in Society*, 2 (1973), 45-79.

²Robert Hopper, "Power Is as Power Speaks: Linguistic Sex Differences Revisited," in *Communication, Language and Gender*, ed. Larry Larmer and Mary Kenny Badami (Madison: University of Wisconsin Extension Press, 1982), pp. 162-70.

³Bonnie Erickson, E. Allan Lind, Bruce Johnson, and William O'Barr, "Speech Style and Impression Formation in a Court Setting: The Effects of 'Powerful' and 'Powerless' Speech," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14 (1978), 266-79; J. Conley, William O'Barr, and E. Allan Lind, "The Power of Language: Presentational Style in the Courtroom," *Duke Law Journal*, (1978), 1375-99; E. Allan Lind and William O'Barr, "The Social Significance of Speech in the Courtroom," in *Language and Social Psychology*, ed. H. Giles and R. St. Clair (College Park: University of Maryland Press, 1979), pp. 66-87; and William O'Barr, *Linguistic Evidence: Language, Power and Strategy in the Courtroom* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

⁴James Bradac and Anthony Mulac, "A Molecular View of Powerful and Powerless Speech Styles: Attributional Consequences of Specific Language Features and Communicator Intentions," *Communication Monographs*, 51 (1984), 307-19.

⁵Brenda Danet, "Language in the Legal Process," *Law and Society Review*, 14 (1980), 445-564.

⁶John McKee and A. C. Sheriffs, "The Differential Evaluation of Males and Females," *Journal of Personality*, 25 (1957), 356-71; Caroline MacBrayer, "Differences in Perceptions of the Opposite Sex by Males and Females," *Journal of Social Psychology*, 52 (1960), 309-14; I. K. Broverman, S. R. Vogel, D. M. Broverman, F. E. Carlson, and P. S. Rosenkrantz, "Sex-Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal," *Journal of Social Issues*, 28 (1972), 59-78; and Marlaine Lockheed and Katherine Patterson Hall, "Conceptualizing Sex as a Status Characteristic: Applications to Leadership Training Strategies," *Journal of Social Issues*, 32 (1976), 111-24.

⁷Gerald R. Miller and Michael McReynolds, "Male Chauvinism and Source Competence: A Research Note," *Speech Monographs*, 40 (1973), 154-55.

⁸Lind and O'Barr, pp. 78-79; and Robert E. Keeton, *Trial Tactics and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), pp. 148-150.

⁹F. Lee Bailey and Henry B. Rothblatt, *Successful Techniques for Criminal Trials* (Rochester, N.Y.: Lawyers Cooperative, 1971), p. 207.

¹⁰L.S. Harms, "Listener Judgments of Status Cues in Speech," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 47 (1961), 164-68; H. W. Simon, N. Berkowitz, and J. R. Moyer, "Similarity, Credibility, and Attitude Change: A Review and Theory," *Psychological Bulletin*, 73 (1970), 1-16; J. D. Moe, "Listener Judgments of Status Cues in Speech: A Replication and Extension," *Speech Monographs*, 39 (1972), 144-47; and Allyn E. Lawrence, "Effects of Status and Gender of Author and Sex of Reader on Evaluations of Author Credibility," (Diss. University of Arizona), *Dissertation Abstracts*, 41 (1981), 3507A.

¹¹W. J. Chambliss, *Crime and the Legal Process* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969), p. 86; C. Werthman and I. Piliavin, "Gang Members and the Police," in *The Police: Six Sociological Essays*, ed. D. J. Bordua (New York: John Wiley, 1966), p. 56; I. Piliavin and S. Briar, "Police Encounters with Juveniles," *American Journal of Sociology*, 70 (1964), 206-14; A. J. Lyzotte, "Extra-legal Factors in Chicago's Criminal Courts: Testing the Conflict Model of Criminal Justice," *Social Problems*, 25 (1978), 564-80; and Ruth Wodak-Engel, "Determination of Guilt: Discourse in the Courtroom," in *Language and Power*, ed. Cheris Kramarae, Muriel Schulz, and William O'Barr (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1984), pp. 89-100.

¹²Erickson, p. 274.

¹³James Bradac and Anthony Mulac, "Attributional Consequences of Powerful and Powerless Speech Styles in a Crisis-Intervention Context," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 3 (1984), 1-19.

¹⁴See, for example, Elliot Aronson and Burton W. Golden, "The Effect of Relevant and Irrelevant Aspects of Communicator Credibility on Opinion Change," *Journal of Personality*, 30 (1962), 135-46; B. S. Greenberg and Gerald R. Miller, "The Effects of Low-Credibility Sources on Message Acceptance," *Speech Monographs*, 33 (1966), 127-36; and J. Mills and J. Harvey, "Opinion Change as a Function of When the Information About the Communicator is Received and Whether He is Attractive or Expert," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 21 (1972), 52-55.

¹⁵James Bradac, Michael Hemphill, and Charles Tardy, "Language Style on Trial: Effects of 'Powerful' and 'Power-

less' Speech Upon Judgments of Victims and Villains," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 45 (1981), 327-41; Bradac and Mulac, "Molecular View of Speech Styles," p. 313; and Katherine Warfel, "Gender Schemas and Perceptions of Speech Style," *Communication Monographs*, 51 (1984), 253-67.

¹⁶ Bradac and Mulac, "Molecular View of Speech Styles," p. 313; and Warfel, pp. 261, 263.

¹⁷ William O'Barr and B. K. Atkins, "'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Language?'" in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 93-110; and Sandra Ragan, "A Conversational Analysis and Alignment Talk in Job Interviews," in *Communication Yearbook 7*, ed. Robert Bostrom (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1983), pp. 502-16.

¹⁸ Erickson, p. 267.

¹⁹ Bradac and Mulac, "Molecular View of Speech Styles," p. 313.

²⁰ Erickson, p. 267; and Ragan, p. 509.

²¹ Ragan, p. 509.

²² In the powerless version of the tape, one powerless speech feature was used for every 3.6 seconds of testimony. Although information on the relative frequency of powerless talk in the powerless conditions of most other studies is not available, the frequency of powerless speech features in this study is comparable to that used by Erickson and associates (one powerless speech feature for every four seconds of testimony).

²³ James McCroskey and T.J. Young, "Ethos and Credibility: The Construct and Its Measurement After Three Decades," *Central States Speech Journal*, 32 (1981), 24-34; and David Berlo, James Lemert, and Robert Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 33 (1969), 563-76.

²⁴ M. J. Norusis, *SPSSX Introductory Statistics Guide* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

²⁵ Bradac and Mulac, "Crisis-Intervention Context," p. 15.

²⁶ O'Barr, p. 114.