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Explaining the Effects of Powerless Language Use on the Evaluative Listening Process: A Theory of Implicit Prototypes

Larry Vinson
McNeese State University

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

Michael Z. Hackman
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

Explaining the Effects of Powerless Language Use on the Evaluative Listening Process: A Theory of Implicit Prototypes*

Larry R. Vinson
McNeese State University
Department of Communication and Theatre
P. O. Box 90420
Lake Charles, LA 70609-0420

Craig Johnson
George Fox College

Michael Z. Hackman
University of Colorado-Colorado Springs

This study examined the effects of forewarning and discounting messages on the evaluational consequences of powerless language use. The specific forewarning message contained information on types of powerless language (including hesitations) and their effects. The general forewarning message excluded mention of hesitations. The discounting message cautioned against making trait attributions based on powerless language behaviors. In Experiment #1, listeners exposed to the specific and general forewarning messages gave lower competence ratings to the lecturer and were less likely to recommend that he be hired as an instructor. The discounting message did not moderate negative evaluations of the lecturer. In Experiment #2, a one week delay was inserted between the forewarning and discounting messages and the oral presentation. No significant differences were found between the activation conditions and the control condition. The results of this study suggest that the theory of implicit prototypes may explain how the evaluative listening process forms impressions of powerless and powerful sources.

Listening is often conceptualized in terms of two processes, an evaluative process and an information retention/recall process. Listening scholars have focused a lot of attention on retention/recall and

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comparatively less attention on the evaluational process (Witkin, 1990).

The goals of this paper are: (a) to discuss one theoretical position that may inform us on the evaluative listening process, Implicit Prototype theory, and (b) to test the utility of this theory for explaining the effects of powerless language use on outcomes of the evaluative listening process. To achieve these goals the authors will (a) briefly review research defining powerless language effects on evaluative listening outcomes, (b) discuss the application of Implicit Prototype theory to powerless language effects on evaluative listening outcomes, and (c) present two experiments designed to test the utility of Implicit Prototypes as a model for understanding powerless language effects on evaluative listening outcomes.

Those who study the powerful/powerless language construct report that using these language features affect evaluative listening (Johnson, Vinson, Hackman, & Hardin, 1989; Vinson & Johnson, 1990). For example, speakers who use hesitations ("uh," "um"), hedges ("I think," "I guess"), tag questions ("That sure is a beautiful house, isn't it?") and other forms of powerless talk are evaluated as less credible (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978; Bradac & Street, 1987; Johnson & Vinson, 1987), and less attractive (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a, 1984b) than sources who do not use powerless language. While researchers have established that powerless language use negatively impacts evaluational listening outcomes, they know little about how receivers use the powerless speech behaviors of sources in the evaluative listening process. This deficiency stems from the fact that research into language effects on evaluative listening lacks a strong theoretical base (Bradac & Street, 1987).

Implicit Prototype Theory may provide the theoretical foundations that language effects on listening research has lacked to this point. Implicit Prototype theory holds that in order to simplify information processing and social interaction, receivers sort other people into categories based on their similarities (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Lord & Foti, 1986; Cantor & Mischel, 1979). These person categories or schemas are organized around their most representative examples which are called "implicit prototype" (Rosch, 1975; Pavitt & Haight,

1986). A prototype consists of a series of related beliefs which identify a focal concept and the traits and behaviors which define it.

One characteristic of this process is that receivers use observed communicative behaviors to infer the presence of other not observed behaviors and traits. Pavitt and Haight (1986) suggest that if a communicator smiles frequently, receivers may associate "smiles a lot" with "laughs easily" and "include the latter behavior in the impression along with the former" (pp. 222-223). Both smiling and laughing, in turn, are linked with "being friendly." These researchers found a cluster of behaviors (listens well, appears relaxed and comfortable when speaking) and traits (open-minded, enthusiastic) associated with prototypes of low, average and high competence communicators.

Another finding about the behavior of prototypes is termed the priming effect. Prototypes activated in advance of a message (priming) exert influence over subsequent judgments (Srull & Wyer, 1979; Higgins, Rholes & Jones, 1977; Cohen, 1981). Observations and evaluations tend to conform to the activated prototype. Phillips (1984), for example, found that observers noticed more prototypical leader behaviors when they were told (forewarned) that they were watching group leaders.

Once activated, prototypes demonstrate a "persistence effect." Receivers still judge themselves and others based on information contained in the prototype even when they have been told that the basis for their judgments is false (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Ross, Lepper & Hubbard, 1975).

While a large body of evidence has shown that the evaluational process may be understood and its outcomes predicted through application of Implicit Prototype theory, the focus of this paper is the evaluative listening process as it applies to powerless language use. Is the theory of Implicit Prototypes useful and relevant for explaining powerless language effects on evaluative listening outcomes?

Research has shown that the effects of powerless language use are consistent with what one would expect from applying Implicit Prototype theory. Researchers have shown that powerless language use is a behavioral index of low communication competence

(Johnson et al., 1989; Vinson & Johnson, 1990). That is, powerless language use may be said to be a behavioral component of the low competence communicator prototype.

Further evidence of the applicability of Implicit Prototype theory was produced by Johnson and Vinson in a 1990 study. This research showed that receivers use observed communicative behaviors to infer the presence of other not observed behaviors and traits. Specifically, if either hedges or hesitation forms were placed in a transcript, listeners perceived that both were present. Johnson and Vinson (1990) explained that when a speaker uses one behavior associated with the less competent communicator, auditors apparently infer the related behaviors are present. They then incorporate these inferred behaviors into the impression they form of the speaker. Thus, the presence of either hesitation forms or hedges is enough to generate negative evaluations (Hosman & Wright, 1987).

Further evidence that the theory of Implicit Prototypes may be useful for explaining language effects in the evaluative listening process comes from the finding that there is no significant connection between the placement and frequency of powerless speech and impression formation. Johnson and Vinson (1990) found that a witness's use of powerless speech reduced credibility ratings and award amounts regardless of where such talk appeared during testimony. Witnesses who began their testimony in a powerless fashion were unable to overcome initial negative impressions through the subsequent use of powerful speech. Witnesses who started with straightforward speech only to end in a powerless manner were also seen as less credible than those who used powerful speech patterns throughout their testimony. In addition, once negative attributions had been made based on the witness's use of low or moderate numbers of powerless speech forms, adding additional powerless features generally did not detract further from the speaker's image. These findings are consistent with the suggestion that receivers hold an implicit prototype of a low competence communicator which is activated through the use of powerless speech. This prototype exercises strong influence over evaluations. Observers infer that the powerless language user is less credible even though only a small portion of the speaker's behavior is powerless in nature.

One way to test the utility of using Implicit Prototype theory to explain language effects in the evaluative listening process is to use the method called priming. Recall that priming means that a message source activates some component of the prototype immediately before another message is sent. The application of priming to powerless language effects produced three hypotheses. Each hypothesis is an opportunity to falsify or reject the utility of Implicit Prototype theory for explicating the effects of powerless language use on evaluative listening outcomes.

Hypotheses

Prototypes that have recently been activated are more accessible to listeners and therefore are more likely to be used in subsequent evaluations (Higgins & King, 1981). Forewarning (priming) participants by describing the types and effects of powerless language (including hesitations) should increase the probability that listeners will associate subsequent hesitant behaviors with the low competence communicator prototype. As a result, participants should make more negative inferences about a hesitant speaker's traits than they would if no advance warning were given prior to the powerless message.

H1: Participants exposed to a message which discusses hesitation use (referred to as a specific forewarning message) will rate a subsequent lecturer using hesitations as lower in quality and will recommend that the lecturer be hired less often than participants exposed to an unrelated (filler) message followed by the same lecture.

When one particular belief within a prototype is activated, the activation spreads along the associative network to other beliefs (Green & Geddes, 1988). As noted earlier, this spreading activation may have led receivers to infer that forms of powerless language were present even when they were not (Vinson & Johnson, 1990). When participants read a general message which describes powerless language other than hesitations, this should activate the related belief that a low competence communicator also uses hesitations. The spreading activation should make listeners more sensitive to hesitation use even when hesitations are not included in the forewarning discussion.

H2: Participants exposed to a message which excludes hesitations from the discussion of powerless language (referred to as a general forewarning message) will rate a subsequent lecturer using hesitations: (a) as lower in quality and will recommend that the lecturer be hired less often than participants exposed to a filler message, and (b) as being equal in quality and equally hireable as compared to participants exposed to a specific forewarning message.

Since listeners continue to make trait attributions based on discredited information (Anderson et al., 1980; Ross et al., 1975), the low competence communicator prototype should also demonstrate this persistence effect. Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) described elements of the powerless communicator style to jurors in a simulated trial and cautioned them against interpreting these behaviors as indicators of uncertainty or deceit. This discounting message had no effect on evaluations of witnesses. Jurors still rated the powerless witness as less convincing, believable, competent, intelligent and trustworthy. With the persistence of prototypes in mind, Hypothesis 3 predicts:

H3: Participants exposed to a paragraph explaining that the use of powerless language communicates nothing about the traits of the user (referred to as a discounting message) will rate a subsequent lecturer who uses hesitations: (a) as lower in quality and will recommend that the lecturer be hired less often than participants exposed to a filler message, and (b) as being equal in quality and equally hireable as compared to participants exposed to specific and general forewarning messages.

Method Study #1

Participants

One hundred and sixty students enrolled in speech and psychology courses at a medium-sized southern university and a small northwestern college participated in this experiment (74 male, 86 female; 32 per cell).

Stimulus Materials

Two sets of stimulus materials were used in this experiment. In part one of the experiment, the stimulus material centered around a written message discussing powerless language effects. The stimulus materials included (in this order): (a) an introduction briefly discussing the background of powerless language research, (b) a discounting statement was included or excluded, (c) discussions of the effects of using hedges, qualifiers, tag questions, and (d) a discussion of hesitations was either included or excluded (see Table 1). The control condition used a 600 word transcript discussing ways to cope with criticism. Transcripts ranged from 475 to 600 words in length.

Table 1. Discounting and Forewarning Messages

Discounting Message

It is very important that you understand that using powerless language does not mean that the user is any more unintelligent, incompetent, untrustworthy, or immoral than the person that does not use it. That is, the use of powerless language does not really tell us anything about the user. Rather, the research that you will be reading about subsequently tells us that the user of powerless talk is evaluated negatively by the receivers!

Forewarning on Hesitations

Hesitations take several forms. They are often referred to as vocalized pauses. They may take nonsemantic forms such as, "um," "ah," or "uh," or they may take semantic forms such as, "well" or "okay" at the start of a statement. These words add nothing to the meaning of the statement, rather they are merely another form of vocalized pause. For example, "Well, it's the best product on the market." Hesitations have been shown to create the impression of uncertainty and powerlessness and thus they decrease the effectiveness of a message.

For part two, the stimulus material consisted of one seven-minute taped lecture on the geological theory of global plates. The lecture was presented by an experienced male speaker. Three faculty members served as judges of the quality of the lecture. All agreed that the lecture sounded authentic, dynamic, and was vocally understandable. The lecture contained 16 hesitation forms (1.33% of total word content). This lecture was shown to significantly lower ratings of credibility and lecture listening scores (as compared to the same lecture containing no hesitations) (Johnson et al., 1989).

Experimental Design

These data were analyzed as a one factor design with five conditions. In part one of this research four treatment conditions and one control condition were operationalized: (1) no discounting message, general forewarning (powerless speech discussed but hesitations were not used), (2) no discounting message, specific forewarning (powerless speech discussed including hesitations), (3) discounting message, general forewarning (powerless speech discussed but hesitations were not used), (4) discounting message, specific forewarning (powerless speech discussed including hesitations), and (5) filler message. Immediately after exposure to one of these conditions participants listened to the seven-minute audiotaped lecture.

Experimental Variables

All five conditions were created in part one of this study. Discounting was operationalized on two levels: (a) a paragraph was included that explained that "the use of powerless language does not really tell us anything about the user. Rather, it tells us about the way people often evaluate the user"; or (b) no such explanation was included. Forewarning was operationalized on two levels: (a) specific forewarning included a brief description of hesitations, hedges, qualifiers, and tag questions; or (b) a general forewarning left out of the discussion of hesitations (see Table 1).

Dependent Variables

Ratings of instructor quality and recommendations to hire or not to hire served as dependent measures of the outcomes of the evalu-

ative listening process. Instructor quality was measured using an eleven-item instrument developed by Johnson, Vinson, Hackman, & Harden (1989) (see Table 2). Participants responded to each item using a 5 interval scale ranging from inferior to superior. Recommendations to hire or not to hire were measured by participant response to the question: Would your recommend that the University hire this teacher?

Table 2. Lecturer Quality Measure

Each item was rated using the following interval scale:

A. superior	D. below average
B. above average	E. inferior
C. average	

1. The teacher's enthusiasm for the subject matter was?
2. The teacher's ability to cover the material at an appropriate pace was?
3. The teacher's ability to explain complex material was?
4. The teacher's ability to speak audibly and clearly was?
5. The teacher's level of organization was?
6. The teacher's ability to capture my attention was?
7. The teacher's knowledge of the subject matter was?
8. The teacher's ability to communicate effectively was?
9. The teacher's level of preparation was?
10. The teacher's ability of present material in an interesting fashion was?
11. The teacher's ability compared with other faculty at this university (college) was?

Procedure

This experiment was conducted in two parts. In part one, written transcripts representing four treatment conditions and one control condition were randomly ordered and administered to intact classes. Participants were asked to read the transcripts and then to complete a test covering the material. This allowed us to discern if the inclusion

of hesitation information was remembered by the participants. As expected, participants exposed to the information on hesitations answered more of the questions on hesitations correctly on the test (F $(1,124) = 27$, $p < .02$). Immediately after completing this assignment participants were told that they had another separate task. They were asked to listen to a lecture and to evaluate the lecturer.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using the SPSS-X (1990) programs Factor (Maximum Likelihood Extraction and Varimax Rotation), Oneway ANOVA and Newman-Keuls range test, and Crosstabs. A demarcation of .05 was set for rejection of the null. Power, set at .95 with a moderate to large effect size (.35), required a per cell n of 31 (see Cohen, 1977, p. 384, u = 4).

Results

Data Preparation

The data were checked for accuracy of input using the SPSS-X program frequencies. The instrument used to measure teacher quality was factor analyzed. This allowed us to show the dimensionality of the instrument (reliability) and to compare the results with previous factor analysis of the same instrument (validity). The selection criteria of loading at least .5 on one factor while not loading more than .3 on any other factor was used. A two factor model, (60% of variance) was identified (see Table 3). Factor one, comprised of items 6, 8, 10, and 11, was named "ability to get and keep attention". Factor two, comprised of items 4, 7, and 9, was named "teacher competence." This represents the same factor structure found by Johnson, et al. (1989). Thus, it provides some evidence of the validity of the instrument. The items defining each dimension were averaged for each individual's score and used in subsequent analyses. The higher the score the more positive the evaluation.

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3

Taken as a whole, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 predicted that only one mean score would be significantly different. Specifically, the hypotheses predicted that those exposed to the filler essay would rate

Table 3. Factor Loadings for Quality Measure - Study #1

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
1	.47	.26
2	.09	.45
3	.31	.39
4	.08	* .54
5	.15	.48
6	* .89	-.02
7	-.16	* .68
8	* .74	.22
9	.11	* .74
10	* .90	-.02
11	* .74	.01

* Items used to define each dimension.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Competence and Interest

	Competence	Interest
No Discounting Message General Forewarning	**2.75(.54)	*2.79(.91)
No Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	*2.75(.79)	*3.20(.85)
Discounting Message General Forewarning	*2.67(.50)	*3.06(.86)
Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	*2.50(.74)	*2.94(1.06)
Filler	b3.50(.37)	*2.60(.68)

* Means in columns with common superscripts are not significantly different.

the speaker more positively than those exposed to any of the four treatment conditions. One way analyses of variance and subsequent Newman-Keuls range tests supported Hypotheses 1 through 3. While the data revealed no significant mean differences for ratings of gaining and maintaining interest, the expected mean differences were found for ratings of competence (F $(4,155)$ = 14, P < .0001). Newman-Keuls range tests showed that participants exposed to any combination of information about powerless language use (conditions 1 through 4) gave equivalent competence ratings to the lecturer using powerless language (power = .95). Further, participants exposed to the messages discussing powerless language use rated the hesitant lecturer as less competent as compared with participants in the control condition (see Table 4).

Recommendations to hire were analyzed by generating a Chi-square on a 5 (treatment conditions) by 2 (hire/do not hire) contingency table (χ^2 = 15.96, df 4, Cramer's V = .321). The results also supported hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. That is, in the four conditions discussing powerless language use, participants were more likely to recommend that the instructor not be hired while in the control condition participants were evenly split on this recommendation (see Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency of Recommendations to Hire

	Hire	No Hire
No Discounting Message General Forewarning	7	25
No Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	3	29
Discounting Message General Forewarning	7	25
Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	5	27
Filler	16	16

*χ^2 = 15.96, df 4, p < .0001.

Discussion

The results of Experiment #1 are consistent with the argument that the evaluative listening process may be understood through the theory of Implicit Prototypes. Auditors apparently use powerless behaviors to infer the existence of other powerless behaviors and to infer the traits of powerless speakers.

Specifically, these data are supportive of the arguments that:

1. Forewarning made receivers more sensitive to the use of hesitant speech. Listeners gave lower competence ratings to the instructor and were less likely to recommend that he be hired after they read a message on powerless language. No significant effects were found for ratings of the lecturer's ability to gain and maintain attention.

2. Competence ratings and overall evaluations of the lecturer were equivalent in the specific and general forewarning conditions. Those who read the general discussion of powerless language were just as critical of the hesitant instructor as those who read the specific forewarning which included information on hesitations. As predicted, the data are consistent with the prediction that, activation of part of the low competence communicator prototype led to activation of related beliefs. Receivers apparently inferred that powerless speakers, who were described as users of hedges and tag questions, also employ hesitations.

3. Warning participants not to use powerless language in their evaluational processes had no impact on subsequent trait evaluations. Competence and willingness to hire scores were equivalent in the discounting and specific and general forewarning conditions.

The negative effects of priming individuals through the use of forewarning have been shown to decrease when a delay is inserted between the activation of a prototype and the presentation of a message (Higgins et al., 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). This finding is used in Experiment #2 to further test the utility of Implicit Prototype theory in explaining language effects in the evaluative listening process. Specifically, if the forewarning and discounting messages were used seven days before the message on global plates one would predict that:

H1: No significant differences in evaluations or in recommendations to hire will be found.

Experiment #2

The same procedures were followed in Experiment #2 as in Experiment #1 except that seven days elapsed between the forewarning, discounting and filler messages and exposure to the oral presentation. One hundred seventy-five students from a western and southern university participated in the second experiment (120 female, 55 males).

Data Preparation

The data were checked for accuracy of input using the SPSS-X program frequencies. The instrument used to measure teacher quality was factor analyzed to determine its dimensionality. A two factor model (57% of variance) was identified using the .5-.3 criterion used in Study #1. Factor one, comprised of items 1, 6, 10, 11, was named "ability to get and keep attention." Factor two, comprised of items 4, 5, 6 and 9, was called "teacher competence" (see Table 6). This factor structure is very similar to the one found in Study #1 providing further evidence for its validity. The items defining each dimension were averaged for each individual's score and used in subsequent analyses. Higher scores mean more positive evaluations.

Table 6. Factors Loadings for Quality Measure - Study #2

Item	Interest	Authority
1	* .68	.31
2	.41	.43
3	.45	.46
4	.15	* .60
5	.30	* .64
6	* .85	.34
7	.29	* .56
8	.54	.63
9	.34	* .68
10	* .86	.31
11	* .73	.32

* Items used to define each dimension.

Results

As predicted, no significant differences were found between any of the treatment conditions (see Tables 7 and 8) power = .95. Those who read the specific and general forewarning messages and discounting message, followed by a one-week delay, were no more sensitive to the lecturer's use of powerless speech than participants who read the filler message. Gaining and maintaining interest ratings, competence evaluations and recommendation to hire scores were equivalent for all cells.

Discussion

The two experiments reported in this paper provided four opportunities to falsify the applicability of Implicit Prototype theory to the evaluative listening process. In Experiment #1 the three hypotheses were supported and in Experiment #2 the one research hypothesis was supported. While we do not contend that these results prove the utility of Implicit Prototype theory in explaining the evaluative listening process we do suggest that they support a call for a more

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations for Competence and Attention - Study #2

	Competence	Attention
No Discounting Message General Forewarning	3.6(.55)	2.8(.64)
No Discounting Message Special Forewarning	3.7(.56)	2.9(.67)
Discounting Message General Forewarning	3.8(.71)	3.0(.81)
Discounting Message Special Forewarning	3.8(.60)	2.9(.87)
Filler	3.9(.52)	3.3(.89)

Note: No significant mean differences in columns.

Table 8. Frequency of Recommendation to Hire - Study #2

	Hire	No Hire
No Discounting Message General Forewarning	21	14
No Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	24	11
Discounting Message General Forewarning	22	10
Discounting Message Specific Forewarning	19	14
Filler	26	9

Note: Nonsignificant Chi-Square.

extensive research focus into this area by scholars interested in the listening process.

In both Experiment #1 and Experiment #2 discounting messages had no significant influence on evaluations of the powerless speaker. Including a discounting message in a larger forewarning message did not moderate negative judgements about the powerless speaker's competence as an instructor. In fact, the lecturer received higher evaluations of competence after the activation effects of the forewarning/discounting messages had dissipated during the one week delay inserted in Experiment #2. This type of discounting appears very similar to advice often given in textbooks, lectures and training sessions. That advice is to "withhold evaluating the speaker." This advice assumes that the evaluational process is subject to conscious intervention. These data and the body of data on schema suggest that such advice is relatively worthless and theoretically misleading.

We want to suggest two directions for future research. First, an extensive effort is needed to test the utility of using Implicit Prototype theory to explain the evaluative listening process. We believe it is vital for the health and development of the evaluative listening area to ground our research in some theoretical perspective. Second, we would like to see some focus on the role of the educational process in creating these prototypes that are then used in the evaluative listening process. For example, does teaching students that communicators who use powerless language are evaluated as less competent create the prototype component that results in such evaluations? Put another way, does our teaching become a prescription or self-fulfilling prophecy?

Finally, we see a need to explore the relationships between the processes which produce the evaluative listening outcomes and those which produce the retention/recall outcomes. Such issues would ponder the relations between our memory systems and our sense making systems.

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