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The Use of Written Transcripts in Powerful and Powerless Language Research

LARRY VINSON and CRAIG JOHNSON*

This study tested the salience of hesitations and hedges in a simulated student government situation. Subjects reported more hesitations in writing but noted more hedges on tape. Award amounts were significantly higher when powerless testimony was delivered orally rather than in writing. No similar effect was found for credibility ratings. Implications of these findings in light of the "hammer effect" are discussed.

In the past decade a number of researchers from communication and other fields have identified forms of speech that they have labeled as "powerful" or "powerless." These forms of speech get their labels from the impressions they generate for speakers. Powerful talk establishes perceptions of dominance for speakers while powerless speech creates impressions of tentativeness and submissiveness (Johnson, 1987). In general, the use of such powerless speech features as hesitation forms ("uh," "ah"), hedges ("I think," "I guess"), tag questions ("It's a nice day, isn't it?") and disclaimers ("Don't get me wrong, but") lowers the credibility and effectiveness of speakers (Erickson, Lind, Johnson & O'Barr, 1978; Conley, O'Barr & Lind, 1978; Lind & O'Barr, 1979; Bradley, 1981; Bradac & Mulac, 1984a; 1984b). Powerless speech is most detracting to speakers when they seek to be authoritative rather than sociable (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a).

Researchers examining the impact of powerful and powerless language have relied heavily on the use of written transcripts to investigate what is oral in nature (Erickson et al., 1978; Bradac, Hemphill & Tardy, 1981; O'Barr, 1982; Bradac & Mulac, 1984a). Powerless language investigators defend their decision to utilize written transcripts by noting that written and oral channels generate the same pattern of findings (O'Barr, 1982, p. 94). According to Bradac and Mulac (1984a), "Previous studies of powerful and powerless styles have consistently obtained virtually identical outcomes for judgments of communicator characteristics across written and spoken presentations" (p. 317).

While previous studies reveal that oral and written presentations generate the same pattern of findings, some doubt remains as to the relative salience of powerless language forms in the spoken vs. the written mode. For example, even though they contend that findings are constant across delivery channels, Bradac and Mulac (1984a) speculate that differences in

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perceived power between individual forms of talk may be smaller when such features are delivered orally. They note that confounding paralinguistic variables exist in speech and that receivers do not monitor speech as closely as they do the written word (p. 317). The question of whether or not powerless speech features are more salient in writing than in speaking takes on added significance in light of the "hammer effect" postulated by Bell, Zahn and Hopper (1984). Bell and associates argue that unrealistically high frequencies of powerless speech features account for significant findings in many studies. They claim that many researchers "hammer" subjects with large numbers of powerless speech forms in short transcripts. As a result, respondents give lower evaluations to powerless sources. These investigators suggest that powerless language forms are more apparent in written transcripts since both visual and paralinguistic distractions are eliminated (p. 35). If so, then the use of written transcripts heightens the "hammer effect" since the impact of powerless talk is magnified in writing.

The purpose of this study was to determine if powerless language features are more salient when written than when spoken. One method of investigating the impact of powerless speech features across presentation modes is to ask auditors to estimate how many powerless speech features they perceive when reading or hearing the same material. If powerless features are more salient when written, then readers should report the presence of greater amounts of such talk. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested:

Hypothesis 1: Readers will perceive more powerless language features than will listeners.

A second way to test the saliency of powerless language features is to compare response to the speaker and message between delivery channels. If powerless language is more salient in writing, then the powerless written condition might generate significantly lower evaluations than the powerless spoken condition and have significantly less persuasive impact. However, as noted earlier, previous data indicates that the pattern of effects is the same across channels (Erickson et al., 1978; O'Barr, 1982; Bradac & Mulac, 1984a). Because an argument could be developed for both positions, a research question was deemed most appropriate:

Question 1: Will the oral version of a powerless message generate significantly higher credibility ratings and award amounts than the written version?

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

Ninety college students and 90 high school students from the Midwest served as subjects. Eighty-seven were female and 93 were male.

Stimulus materials were centered around a simulated budget allocation case used in prior research (Johnson & Vinson, 1987). In this case, a representative of a student organization called the Negotiation Club

delivers testimony before the Student Senate. Subjects were asked to serve as student senators and to determine an allocation for the Negotiation Club from the Student Senate budget. Testimony was delivered in either a powerful (straightforward) or powerless manner in writing or on tape. The powerless version contained hesitation forms ("uh," "um," "well," "you know") and hedges ("I think," "I guess"). The frequency of powerless speech features (1 for every 3.6 seconds of testimony) approximated that employed by Erickson and associates (1978) in their initial investigation of powerless and powerful speech styles. Transcripts for the spoken and written presentations were identical. No information on paralinguistic features was contained in the written version and hesitation forms were set off with commas ("We as an organization are, uh, willing to get involved in disputes here on campus"). Two female speakers recorded the oral testimony. When pretests for the previous study (Johnson & Vinson, 1987) revealed no important differences in response to the speakers based on paralinguistic variables, only one witness was employed in that investigation and in this one.

Measurement

Witness credibility was measured through the use of competence and character items from the McCroskey credibility instrument (1981) and dynamism items from the Berlo, Lemert and Mertz credibility scale (1969). In addition, subjects were asked to make an allocation for the Negotiation Club on a range of \$0 to \$5,000 and to estimate how many of each powerless feature they had heard or read in the testimony on a scale from 0 to 100.

Data Analysis and Design

The experiment was a 2 (powerful and powerless testimony) x 2 (oral and written channel) factorial design. The reliability of credibility factors was measured through the computation of alpha scores. Hypotheses were tested through analyses of variance and Newman Keuls tests (alpha .05). Power, set at .80 with a .35 effect size, required a per cell N of 20 (Cohen, 1977).

RESULTS

Reliability Scores

Preliminary analyses generated the following alpha scores: (a) competence (.92), (b) character (.74), and (c) dynamism (.90). The mean scores of items comprising each dimension were averaged and used as dependent variables in subsequent analyses.

Manipulation Check

To check the effect of the power manipulation, main effects for each dependent measure were generated. As expected, the powerful speaker received higher competence ($F(1,178) = 276, p < .0001$), character

($F(1,178) = 109, p < .0001$) and dynamism ratings ($F(1,178) = 148, p < .0001$) than the powerless witness (see Table 1). In addition, the straightforward source received higher award amounts in response to her testimony ($F(1,178) = 69, p < .0001$). The pattern of results was the same for speech style on both channels. However, spoken testimony generated higher competence ($F(1,174) = 10.9, p < .001$) and character ($F(1,174) = 9.3, p < .003$) evaluations than the written testimony (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Main Effects

	Oral		Written		Powerful		Powerless		Eta ²
	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	
Award	1850	(1442)	1590	(1612)	*2555	(1496)	963	(1107)	27.7%
Competence	*5.49	(2.42)	4.67	(2.31)	*7.03	(1.20)	3.32	(1.77)	62.0%
Character	*6.04	(1.48)	5.47	(1.46)	*6.72	(1.02)	4.89	(1.33)	40.0%
Dynamism	4.37	(2.16)	4.23	(2.14)	*5.81	(1.77)	2.92	(1.40)	45.4%
Hesitations	*22.80	(23.2)	29.12	(24.8)	*8.02	(8.83)	42.1	(22.0)	51.6%
Hedges	*24.68	(23.4)	21.6	(16.3)	*12.6	(15.5)	32.8	(19.5)	25.3%

*significant main effects

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. While readers perceived more hesitations ($F(2,172) = 4.0, p < .05$), listeners noted more hedges ($F(2,173) = 5.5, p < .01$) (see Tables 1 & 2). Hesitation forms were more salient in writing but hedges garnered more attention when presented orally.

Research Question

The research question focused on whether or not the powerless oral presentation would generate significantly higher credibility ratings and award amounts than the powerless written presentation. No substantive differences in credibility ratings for the powerless source were noted across delivery modes. However, a significant channel by speech style interaction effect was noted for the award dependent measure (see Table 2). That is, award amounts were significantly higher when powerless testimony was delivered orally rather than in writing ($F(2,173) = 6.4, p < .01$). In this instance, the powerless witness was less effective in writing than when speaking. A regression analysis was done to determine if hesitations or hedges accounted for the greatest amount of variance in subject response to the powerless source. Of the two forms, hesitations were the most significant (see Table 3).¹ Since hesitation forms were the most damaging powerless feature and more hesitations were noted in writing, this may account for the lower award amounts in the powerless written treatment.

TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations and Contrasts for Significant Interactions

	Written (1)		Oral (2)		Written (3)		Oral (4)		Contrasts
	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	
Award	271.2	(16.51)	241.5	(13.46)	61.1	(6.88)	130.9	(13.30)	$2 = 1 > 4 > 3$
Hesitations	8.32	(9.27)	7.76	(8.51)	47.2	(19.1)	37.2	(23.7)	$2 = 1 < 4 < 3$
Hedges	14.3	(16.6)	11.1	(14.5)	27.9	(13.3)	37.6	(23.2)	$2 = 1 < 3 < 4$

TABLE 3

*Regression Equations for Hesitations and Hedges
on the Dependent Measures*

	Hesitations				Hedges			
	F(df)	p	r ²	B	F(df)	p	r ²	B
Award	50(1,180)	.00001	.23.84	-.48	NIE*			
Competence	149(1,180)	.00001	.45.41	-.67	NIE*			
Character	100(1,180)	.00001	.37.08	-.60	NIE*			
Dynamism	93(1,180)	.00001	.34.09	-.58	51(2,179)	.00001	.23	-.18

*NIE = failed to enter equation

DISCUSSION

The results of this study raise some interesting issues regarding the relative effects of oral vs. written powerless messages. On the one hand, subjects noted more hesitations in writing and hesitation forms, in turn, had the greatest negative impact on evaluations of the powerless witness. On the other hand, fewer hedges were noted in writing. It may be that different forms of powerless talk are processed in different ways. Some forms may be more salient in writing, others more salient in speech. Thus, the molecular approach (Bradac & Mulac, 1984a) should be followed when studying across channel effects. Individual forms of powerless language should be tested separately to measure salience between delivery modes.

Some support was found in this investigation for the argument that the use of written transcripts heightens the “hammer effect” described by Bell et al. (1984). Higher subject awareness of written hesitations suggests that the use of transcripts increases the “hammer effect.” However, lower awareness of written hedges may contradict this notion. The only significant difference in response to the powerless witness between delivery modes emerged on the award outcome variable. Placing powerless speech in the written transcript reduced the persuasiveness, but not the credibility, of the witness. Apparently, the presence of high numbers of

hesitations (the most damaging powerless feature in this study) in either writing or speaking is enough to generate negative impressions. Future research should determine the attributional consequences of using more moderate (and perhaps more typical) levels of hesitations and other powerless language forms across delivery channels.

NOTES

1. Differences in the number of hedges (26) and hesitations (40) used in the transcript for this study make direct power comparisons between the two impossible. However, these results suggest that hesitations are less powerful than hedges as Bradac and Mulac (1984) contend. Hosman and Wright (1987), on the other hand, suggest that interactions between hedges and hesitations forms produce effects that "raise some uncertainty" (p. 183) about the language hierarchy proposed by Bradac and Mulac.

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