



Maximizing the persuasiveness of a salesperson: An exploratory study of the effects of nonverbal immediacy and language power on the extent of persuasion



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effects of a salesperson's use of language power and nonverbal immediacy on the persuasiveness of the salesperson. A high level of language power and a high level of nonverbal immediacy were hypothesized to singularly and jointly increase a salesperson's level of persuasiveness. A sample of 211 undergraduate students voluntarily completed an online survey, which displayed a video clip of a sales presentation. Each participant randomly viewed one of four video clips, which differed in terms of the salesperson's levels of language power (powerful vs. powerless) and nonverbal immediacy (high vs. low). A three-way ANOVA indicated that language power had a significant main effect on persuasion in the expected direction, and also revealed a significant interaction between nonverbal immediacy and participant biological sex. However, there were no main effects for nonverbal immediacy and participant biological sex, and no interaction effect was found between language power and nonverbal immediacy. Subsequent data analysis revealed that the perceived power of the speaker mediated the relationship between language power and the extent of persuasion. We conclude the article with a discussion of the implications of our findings for both researchers and practitioners.

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Cómo maximizar la capacidad de persuasión de un vendedor: estudio exploratorio de los efectos de la cercanía no verbal y el poder del lenguaje en el grado de persuasión

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga los efectos de la utilización por parte de los vendedores del poder del lenguaje y de la cercanía no verbal en la persuasión del vendedor. Se postula que un grado elevado de poder del lenguaje y de cercanía no verbal aumentarán tanto individualmente como conjuntamente el nivel de persuasión del vendedor. Una muestra compuesta por 211 estudiantes universitarios cumplimentó voluntariamente una encuesta online que mostraba un video de una presentación de ventas. Cada participante vio al azar

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uno de los cuatro videos, que se diferenciaban en el grado de poder del lenguaje (poderoso vs. incapaz) y de cercanía (elevada vs. baja) no verbal del vendedor. Un ANOVA de tres factores indicaba que el poder del lenguaje tenía un efecto principal significativo en la persuasión en la dirección esperada, así como una interacción significativa entre la proximidad no verbal y el sexo biológico de los participantes. No obstante, no había efectos principales para la cercanía no verbal o el sexo biológico de los participantes ni se encontró interacción entre el poder del lenguaje y la proximidad no verbal. Un análisis de datos posterior reveló que el poder percibido del hablante mediatizaba la relación entre el poder del lenguaje y el grado de persuasión. El artículo finaliza con un debate sobre las implicaciones de los resultados para investigadores y los profesionales.

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Since ancient times, scholars have sought to uncover rhetorical strategies for enhancing the persuasiveness of a speaker (e.g., Aristotle, 350 BC/1960). Contemporary researchers have studied a range of linguistic features thought to impact the persuasiveness of a speaker in a variety of rhetorical situations, including sales presentations. For example, Boozer, Wyld, and Grant (1991) suggested that a salesperson's use of metaphors can increase the persuasiveness of the salesperson. Other researchers have studied the level of language power produced by the "speaker's use of specific linguistic and paralinguistic features" (Ng & Bradac, 1993, p. 190), and the extent of nonverbal immediacy displayed by the speaker (Mehrabian, 1969).

The present study investigated the effects of a salesperson's use of language power and nonverbal immediacy on the persuasiveness of the salesperson. We first review research on the individual effects of language power and nonverbal immediacy on a range of social variables. Next, we present our model, which posits that language power and nonverbal immediacy have both independent and joint effects on the extent of persuasion. We then subject our causal model of persuasion to an empirical test, and examine the possible mediating role of perceived salesperson power as an explanatory mechanism for the effects obtained. We also explore the influence of participant biological sex on the extent of persuasion. After reporting the results of our statistical analyses, we discuss the implications of our findings for researchers and practitioners.

Theory and Research

Organizational scholars have long sought to understand the relationship between discourse and social power. One perspective holds that this relationship is reciprocal in nature (e.g., Hardy & Phillips, 2004; Marshak & Grant, 2008). Hardy and Phillips (2004) described such circularity in the following way: "discourse shapes relations of power while relations of power shape who influences discourse over time and in what way" (p. 299). Much research has been devoted to understanding how the use of various linguistic styles influences perceptions of social power (e.g., Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Conley, O'Barr, & Lind, 1978; Lakoff, 1975).

Language Power

A range of linguistic styles have been examined in terms of the power concept. For example, Lakoff (1975) identified certain linguistic markers that characterize women's language, and that are associated with low social power. These linguistic markers include hedges, intensifiers, tag questions, hypercorrect grammar, polite forms, empty adjectives (e.g., "sweet," "adorable," "awesome"), and more expansive vocabulary items (e.g., a wider range of colors). Similarly, Conley et al. (1978) defined a powerless speech style as one that includes words and phrases that convey uncertainty. According to Conley et al., these linguistic markers include the use of (a) hedges (e.g., "somewhat"), (b) verbal fillers (e.g., "like"),

(c) vocal hesitations (e.g., "um"), (d) polite forms (e.g., "sir"), (e) intensifiers (e.g., "really"), and (f) rising intonation in declarative sentences. In contrast, Conley et al. defined a powerful speech style as one that lacks these markers.

Language Power and Impression Formation. The discovery of powerless and powerful speaking styles led to a stream of research on how variation in a speaker's language power influences audience members' impressions of the speaker. For example, Conley et al. (1978) found that witnesses who used a powerful language style were perceived as more trustworthy, convincing, intelligent, and competent than witnesses who used a powerless style. Bradac and Mulac (1984) investigated the effects of specific power-related linguistic markers on perceived speaker effectiveness, perceived power, and on "judgments of likelihood of fulfilling perceived intentions" (p. 309). They found that the use of intensifiers and deictic messages heightened a speaker's perceived effectiveness and power. However, they noted that the use of hedges and tags diminished a speaker's perceived effectiveness and power, and that the use of hesitations conveyed the lowest levels of speaker effectiveness and power. In addition, Bradac and Mulac (1984) discovered that listeners attributed certain motives to a speaker's use of certain speech styles. They found that the use of polite forms was perceived as an attempt to appear sociable, whereas the use of powerful language was viewed as an attempt to appear authoritative. In contrast, they reported that hedges, tag questions, and hesitations were not found to convey any particular motives.

More recent studies have also found that a speaker's language power influences audience members' impressions of the speaker. Take, for example, a study by Gibbons, Busch, and Bradac (1991). They examined the effects of low- and high-power language styles on the persuasiveness of a message, and on impression formation. According to Gibbons et al. (1991), a low power language style is characterized by the presence of hedges, tag questions, and vocal hesitations, whereas a high power style is distinguished by the absence of these linguistic markers. In their study, respondents were asked to read a transcript advocating for the implementation of comprehensive exams. The various transcripts included combinations of weak and strong arguments, as well as high and low power styles. Afterwards, the participants were instructed to evaluate the speaker. Gibbons et al. discovered that argument strength had no significant effect on the perception of a speaker's competence, but the speaker's power style did have a significant effect. In addition, they found that power style had no significant effect on the persuasiveness of a message, but argument strength did have a significant effect.

The effects of varied levels of language power have also been studied in the classroom. For example, Haleta (1996) examined the impact of teacher use of powerful vs. powerless speech on student impression formation and uncertainty reduction. Based on the results of previous research, and grounded in uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), Haleta predicted that teachers who used powerless speech would be perceived less

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