Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 61 (2015) 59–63

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Abstract language signals power, but also lack of action orientation

Mauricio Palmeira

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Abstract speech has been shown to be signal power.
- We show that concrete speech signals action orientation.
- Power and action orientation have positive impacts on perceptions of job suitability.
- Concrete speech increases suitability for entry level or operational positions.
- Concrete speech may be useful even for signaling ability for managerial positions.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 March 2015
Revised 20 July 2015
Accepted 21 July 2015
Available online 26 July 2015

Keywords:
Construal level
Action orientation
Social perceptions
Power perceptions

ABSTRACT

Powerful people tend to think more abstractly, and those who use abstract speech are perceived as more powerful. Given that appearing powerful may lead to actual power, those interested in achieving powerful positions may benefit from using abstract speech. In the current research, we propose that concrete speech may also have comparable benefits. Specifically, we argue that while abstract thinking is required to set big goals and make high level plans, concrete thinking is required to follow plans and achieve goals. Thus, whereas abstract speech signals the ability to think at a high level, concrete speech signals action orientation. Across four experiments, we find strong evidence for a link between concrete thinking and perceptions of action orientation. Importantly, we find that both power and action orientation are important predictors of preferences for leadership positions.

People enjoy feeling powerful. The feeling of power is a desirable state as it raises confidence, makes people more optimistic and increases subjective well-being (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Brinol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013). Being seen as powerful can elicit treatment from others that end up leading to actual power (Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985; Smith & Galinsky, 2010). Although it often takes real power to be able to act like a powerful person (e.g., exert influence, make important decisions on behalf of a group), there are subtle non-costly behaviors that observers also take as power signals (Ames, Bianchi, & Magee, 2010).

One particular behavior that has recently been shown to influence power perceptions is whether one uses abstract or concrete language (Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014). Research has established several links between abstract thinking and power. Feeling powerful leads to more abstract thinking (Smith & Trope, 2006) and thinking abstractly increases one's sense of power (Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2008). This link seems to be expected as individuals infer power on those who use more abstract language (Wakslak et al., 2014). Given that speaking in more abstract terms is relatively simple, this tactic has been suggested as an easy and effective tool for politicians and business people interested in conveying a powerful image (Wakslak et al., 2014).

Although the impact of abstract speech on perceptions of power has been demonstrated, it is not clear whether it would indeed have unequivocal positive consequences for those adopting it. In the current research, we propose that the positive impact on power perceptions can be compensated by a negative impact on perceptions of action orientation. If on the one hand, those who use abstract speech are considered more capable of seeing the bigger picture and more willing to make judgments (Wakslak et al., 2014); on the other hand, those who adopt a more concrete speech may be viewed as more practical and task-oriented. Thus, while abstract speech signals the ability to see the bigger picture, a concrete speech may signal the ability to get things done. In this sense, an abstract speaker is viewed as a thinker, whereas the concrete speaker is viewed as a doer.

The logic for this prediction comes from two streams of research: construal level (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003) and goal completion (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Webb & Sheeran, 2007). An abstract mindset is associated with representation of situations in terms of high level goals, or why actions are done.

E-mail address: mauricio.palmeira@monash.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.07.003
0022-1031/

Conversely, a concrete mindset is associated with low level processes, or how actions are performed (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Indeed, a well-established mindset manipulation asks participants to consider either why they would engage in an activity or how they would engage in an activity (Freitas et al., 2004). Thus, as one moves from abstract to concrete thinking, the focus is less on the big picture and the purpose of things, and more on the details and the mechanics of things. We reason that someone who is perceived as thinking about actions at a lower level will be viewed as more oriented toward engaging in action, implementing the task at hand and taking a very practical view of matters. In sum, we expect this person to be considered action-oriented.

The basis for this prediction can also be drawn from research on goal pursuit and completion (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Webb & Sheeran, 2007). This research has shown that forming implementation intentions, describing concrete actions to be performed when a situation arises, considerably increases completion rates (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997). In other words, using concrete language and making low level plans greatly increase the likelihood that an effective action will indeed occur. If individuals correctly have the intuition that this procedure increases goal attainment then it seems reasonable that they would view a concrete speaker as someone who is task-oriented, practical and more likely to accomplish goals.

In the current research, we examine the impact of abstract versus concrete speech on perceptions of action orientation and contrast it to the impact of power. We expect that while an abstract speech will increase perceptions of power, a concrete speech will increase perceptions of action orientation. As a result, instead of helping individuals interested in managing their images, speaking in an abstract manner may actually hurt them relative to speaking in a concrete way. In order to examine the consequences of type of speech, we test its impact on perceptions of suitability for different types of jobs.

We report four experiments in which participants considered individuals who used either abstract or concrete speech and rated them in terms of power, action orientation, knowledge and suitability for a job. Three of these studies are larger sample replications of studies reported in an earlier version of this article. At the request of reviewers, all studies were rerun to ensure proper statistical power. The information from these initial studies (averages and standard deviations) were used to calculate the necessary sample sizes to detect the hypothesized effects of language on social power and action orientation with a statistical power of .80 and an alpha of .05. Results consistently show that concrete speech is taken as a signal of action orientation and an important predictor of job suitability, even for jobs requiring leadership skills.

1. Experiment 1

In our first experiment, participants were told that two respondents from a previous study (referred to as respondents X and Y) were presented with three pictures and asked to provide a brief description of them. Participants from the actual experiment were provided with a description of the action followed by how respondent X described it and how respondent Y described it. Respondent X's descriptions were always more concrete than respondent Y's. Participants evaluated X and Y in terms of power, action orientation and knowledge.

Since we expect abstract speech to have opposite effects on power and action orientation, we also ask participants to indicate which person would be a better hire for a job in a company. This allows us to examine the relative impact of each aspect on a possible individual goal. In other words, if a person is trying to manage impressions through the use of language is it better to appear powerful or action-oriented?

1.1. Method

One-hundred and twenty participants (45 women; M_{age}: 34.56; SD = 10.93) from Mechanical Turk residing in the United States completed this study for a payment. The materials for this experiment were adapted from Wakslak et al.'s (2014) Experiment 2. All participants read the following descriptions of neutral pictures followed by descriptions ostensibly provided by two respondents. For picture 1 ("a girl filling out a personality test") respondent X wrote "she is answering questions", while respondent Y wrote "she is revealing what she is like". For picture 2 ("a girl washing clothes using a washing machine"), X wrote "she is putting clothes into the machine", while Y wrote "she is removing odors from clothes". For picture 3 ("a man skydiving"), X wrote "he is jumping out of an airplane", while Y wrote "he is demonstrating his daringness." Therefore, each "respondent" provided three descriptions. We used three descriptions per respondent rather than one to strengthen the manipulation and allow participants to feel more confident in their assessments.

Using seven-point scales (−3: Strongly disagree, 3: Strongly agree), participants rated respondents X and Y in terms of action orientation (able to get things done, practical, task-oriented; α = .92), power (dominant, powerful, in control; α = .92) and knowledge (knowledgeable, competent, intelligent; α = .91). In order to control for the possibility that considerations of action orientation affect perceptions of power and vice-versa, we counterbalanced the order in which participants made these ratings. Knowledge was always rated third. In the end, participants rated the descriptions of each respondent (1: Very concrete, 7: Very abstract) and indicated who would do better at a job in a company (−2: Definitely X, 2: Definitely Y).

1.2. Results

The manipulation was successful as descriptions provided by Participant Y were considered more abstract (M = 5.48, SD = 1.44) than those provided by Participant X (M = 2.09, SD = 1.44, $F(1, 119)$ = 207.25, $p < .001$).

As our interest is in relative assessments, for each measure, we subtracted X's ratings from Y's ratings. For each dependent variable, we ran a one-way ANOVA using order of measure as the only independent factor.

As predicted, the participant who used concrete language was considered more action-oriented than the participant who used more abstract language (M = −.99, SD = 1.84, $F(1, 118)$ = 33.59, $p < .001$, d = 1.06). Order of measures had no impact ($F(1, 118)$ = .89, p = .35). In contrast, an ANOVA on perceptions of power revealed an effect for order of measures ($F(1, 118)$ = 8.37, p = .005). When power was measured first, abstract speech led to higher perceptions of power (M = .80, SD = 2.05, $t(59)$ = 3.02, p = .004, d = .79), but when it was measured after action orientation, abstract language had no effect (M = −.16, SD = 1.55, $t(59)$ = −.80, p = .44). Finally, an ANOVA on perceptions of knowledge revealed a marginal effect for order of measures ($F(1, 118)$ = 3.56, p = .06). When participants rated action-orientation first, there was no effect on knowledge (M = .09, SD = 1.13, $t(59)$ = −.65, p = .52), but when they first rated power, an abstract speaker was considered more knowledgeable (M = .56, SD = 1.52, $t(59)$ = 2.83, p = .006, d = .74). Average perceptions for all studies are summarized in Table 1.

Overall there was no preference for one or the other person for a company job (M = .07, SD = 1.18, $t(119)$ = .62, p = .54). However, there was an effect for order of measures ($F(1, 118)$ = 4.16, p = .04, d = .38), such that preferences for the abstract person were higher when they first rated power (M = .28, SD = 1.18) than when they initially rated action orientation (M = −.15, SD = 1.15). We also ran a linear regression in order to examine the contributions of each aspect. Preferences for a respondent increased as his relative power increased (β = .37, $t(117)$ = 4.35, $p < .001$) and also as his relative action orientation increased (β = .33, $t(117)$ = 3.84, $p < .001$).