LINGUISTIC POWER
AND PERSUASION

THOMAS HOLTGRAVES
BENJAMIN LASKY
Ball State University

This study examined the role of linguistic power in persuasion. Participants listened to a persuasive message conveyed in either a powerless style (frequent hedges, hesitations, and tag questions) or a powerful style (the absence of these features). In addition, the ability of participants to process the message and speaker gender were manipulated. Participants who heard the powerless version perceived the speaker and the arguments more negatively and were less in favor of the message proposal than were participants who heard the same message in a powerful style. These effects occurred regardless of whether participants were able to process the message deeply. There was also evidence that the effects of linguistic power on persuasion are mediated by its effects on perceptions of the speaker and the message arguments.

In general, powerless language refers to a cluster of linguistic features that includes (but is not limited to) hesitations (e.g., um . . .), hedges (e.g., I kinda think . . .), and tag questions (e.g., right?; . . . OK?); the absence of these features is referred to as powerful language.[1] A number of studies have examined the effects of this linguistic variable on impression formation. For the most part, it appears that a speaker who uses powerless language will be perceived as less assertive, competent, credible, authoritative, and in general evaluated less favorably than a speaker who uses powerful language (Bradac, Hemphill, & Tardy, 1981; Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978; Hosman & Wright, 1987; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979).

Given the rather clear and consistent effects of linguistic power on impression formation, it is surprising that relatively few studies have examined the impact of this variable on persuasion. The two published articles (of which we are aware) examining this issue report very mixed results. In one study, Gibbons, Busch, and Bradac (1991) manipulated linguistic power, message relevance, and argument strength. Although linguistic power had a significant effect on perceptions of the

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speaker's competence, it did not influence participants' acceptance of the advocated position. Instead, persuasion was affected only by argument strength and relevance. In a second study, Carli (1990) examined the impact of linguistic power (termed *tentative* vs. *assertive* language in her research) on persuasion within a gender differences framework. The effects of linguistic power on message agreement depended on the sex of both the speaker and the hearer. Specifically, she found a woman speaker to be more persuasive with men when she used tentative (i.e., powerless) rather than assertive (i.e., powerful) language, but to be more persuasive with women when assertive rather than tentative language was used. In contrast, the linguistic style (tentative vs. assertive) had no effect on issue agreement when the speaker was male (regardless of participant gender).

Despite the null and mixed results reported by Gibbons et al. (1991) and Carli (1990), we believe it would be premature to conclude that linguistic power has no (or only a gender-based) impact on persuasion, especially given the clear and consistent effects of this variable on impression formation. Accordingly, the major goal of this research was to provide another test of the effects of linguistic power on persuasion.

There were two additional, secondary goals in this research. First, although there are contradictory findings, several studies have indicated that women tend to use a more powerless style than men (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Fishman, 1978; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988). More important, Carli (1990; see also Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995) has demonstrated that the impact of linguistic power varies as a function of speaker and hearer gender. Because of the results of this previous research, we deemed it wise to examine the possible mediating role of speaker and participant gender in this research. Thus, male and female participants listened to the message of either a male or a female speaker.

Second, we manipulated participants' ability to process the message to examine *how* linguistic power might affect the persuasion process. One possibility in this regard is that linguistic power might serve as a peripheral cue and affect persuasion via peripheral (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b) or heuristic (Chaiken, 1980) processing. If this is the case, then linguistic power should have a relatively greater effect on persuasion when participants are distracted and hence are less able to process the message. However, in addition to serving as a peripheral cue, it is possible that linguistic power might be attended to and processed systematically and affect persuasion via central (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b) or systematic (Chaiken, 1980) processing. If this is the case, then linguistic power would affect persuasion regardless of participants' ability to process the message. Because of the ambiguity regarding the role of linguistic power in persuasion (see Gibbons et al., 1991), we did not have a clear hypothesis in this regard. Still, we deemed it important to examine whether ability to process the message would mediate the

effects of linguistic power on persuasion. In this study, we used a distractor manipulation (rather than manipulate message relevance as was done by Gibbons et al., 1991). Accordingly, in this study, some of the participants listened to the message while performing a concurrent task, a task that would hinder their ability to process the message deeply. Other participants did not perform this concurrent task as they listened to the message.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred ninety (94 men and 96 women) introductory psychology students at Ball State University participated for partial course credit.

DESIGN

Three variables were orthogonally manipulated. First, half of the participants heard the powerful language version of the message, and half heard the powerless version of the message. Second, half of the participants performed a concurrent task (counting the location of Xs on a screen) while listening to the message; the remainder did not perform this task. Third, half of the participants heard a message delivered by a female speaker, and half heard a message delivered by a male speaker. Male and female research participants were randomly assigned to one of the resulting eight conditions. Thus, the design was a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 (Linguistic Power × Distractor × Speaker Gender × Respondent Gender) completely crossed factorial design.

STIMULUS MATERIALS

A message (about 400 words in length) was written that advocated the implementation of comprehensive exams at Ohio University. The message was adopted from the strong argument version used by Gibbons et al. (1991) and Holtgraves and Bailey (1991), the latter being derived from the arguments provided in Petty and Cacioppo (1986b, pp. 54-59). The message was then altered to create the powerless version. This was accomplished by adding hedges, hesitations, and tag questions. In the powerless version, there were 12 hedges, 15 hesitation markers, and 9 tag questions. In all other respects the powerful and powerless versions were identical.[2] Audiotapes were made of one male and one female speaker, each reading one powerful and one powerless version of the message.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

The questionnaire consisted of 21 seven-point scales. First, the extent to which participants agreed with the issue (requiring comprehensive exams for graduation) was assessed with a four-item semantic differential (good-bad, favorable-unfavorable, foolish-wise, beneficial-harmful) and a single question asking the extent to which participants agreed with the proposal advocated in the message (from *very strongly disagree* to *very strongly agree*). Second, argument quality was assessed with four questions assessing the extent to which the message was sound, strong, logical, and well reasoned. Third, five questions assessed perceptions of the speaker in terms of intelligence, likability, competence, trustworthiness, and knowledgeability. Finally, to assess the adequacy of the linguistic power manipulation, participants rated (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) the extent to which the speaker stammered, added questions to the remarks, and used the terms *kinda* and *sorta*. To assess the distraction manipulation, participants indicated the extent to which they felt distracted while listening to the speaker. The remaining questions were filler items (e.g., attractiveness, humor, empathy, etc.). The first five questions on the questionnaire assessed issue agreement; the remaining questions were presented in a random order.

Participants were also given two sheets of lined paper and asked to list the thoughts that occurred to them as they had listened to the message. The time allotted for the completion of this task was $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. Participants were then instructed to indicate, for each of their listed thoughts, whether the thought was positive, negative, or irrelevant with regard to the message and speaker.

PROCEDURE

Participants were run in small groups of 2 to 10. The cover story was adopted from that used by Petty, Wells, and Brock (1976). Thus, participants were told that the purpose of the experiment was to examine the extent to which people can perform two tasks simultaneously. Participants in the distractor condition received a monitor recording form and were told that while they listened to a speech, they were to keep track of how many Xs appeared in each quadrant of the projector screen that was positioned at the front of the room. An X was flashed every 3 seconds. Participants in the no-distraction group were told that they were the control group and that they would simply listen to the speech.

After participants listened to the speech, they responded to the questionnaire and completed the thought-listing measure. Participants were then thanked for their participation and dismissed.

RESULTS

All dependent measures were analyzed with $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Linguistic Power × Distraction × Speaker Gender × Participant Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results for the dependent measures are summarized in Table 1.

MANIPULATION CHECK

Both the linguistic power and distractor manipulations were highly successful. Participants in the powerless version (relative to those in the powerful version) perceived the speaker as stammering more often (Ms = 6.2 vs. 2.4), $F(1, 174) = 356.5, p < .001$, adding more questions (Ms = 6.46 vs. 2.06), $F(1, 174 = 542.4, p < .001$, and using more hedges (Ms = 6.12 vs. 1.99), $F(1, 174) = 395.4, p < .001$.[3] Participants in the distraction condition reported feeling more distracted than did those in the no-distraction condition (Ms = 4.62 vs. 2.11), $F(1, 174) = 132.9, p < .001$.

MESSAGE AGREEMENT

The mean of the four semantic differential items and the one agreement question served as an overall measure of issue agreement (α = .94). The linguistic power manipulation had a reliable effect on this variable, $F(1, 172) = 8.28, p < .005$. Participants who heard the powerful language version were more in favor of the message recommendation than were those who heard the powerless language version (Ms = 5.19 vs. 4.62). This effect occurred in both the distraction condition (Ms = 5.30 vs. 4.73) and the no-distraction condition (Ms = 5.08 vs. 4.53), and the Linguistic Power × Distraction interaction was not significant, $F(1, 172) < 1$.

PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKER

An overall evaluation of the speaker was created based on the mean of responses to perceptions of the speaker's intelligence, likableness, competence, knowledgeability, and trustworthiness (α = .85).[4] Participants rated the speaker more favorably in the powerful language version ($M = 4.62$) than in the powerless language version ($M = 3.33$), $F(1, 172) = 107.99, p < .001$.[5] This effect occurred in both the distraction condition (Ms = 4.71 vs. 3.57) and the no-distraction condition (Ms = 4.53 vs. 3.11), and the Linguistic Power × Distraction manipulation was not significant, $F(1, 172) = 1.35, p > .10$.

Table 1
*Issue Agreement, Perceptions of Speaker and Arguments, and Cognitive Responses
as a Function of Linguistic Power and Distraction*

| | Linguistic Power | | | |
| | Powerful | | Powerless | |
	Distracted	Not Distracted	Distracted	Not Distracted
Issue agreement	5.30	5.08	4.73	4.53
Perceptions of				
Speaker	4.71	4.53	3.57	3.11
Arguments	5.09	5.10	4.02	3.72
Thoughts				
Positive	1.27	1.06	0.88	0.63
Negative	1.12	1.51	1.98	2.31
Total[a]	.04	−.16	−.22	−.42

Note. Scores for issue agreement and perceptions of speaker and arguments vary from
1 to 7.
a. Number of positive thoughts minus number of negative thoughts divided by total
number of thoughts.

PERCEPTIONS OF MESSAGE ARGUMENTS

An overall evaluation of the arguments was created by taking the
mean of participants' responses to questions concerning their percep-
tions of the extent to which the message was well reasoned, logical,
strong, and sound ($\alpha = .90$). The message was perceived as being of
higher quality in the powerful language version ($M = 5.09$) than in the
powerless language version ($M = 3.87$), $F(1, 172) = 48.58$, $p < .001$.
Again, this effect occurred in both the distraction condition (Ms = 5.09
vs. 4.02) and the no-distraction condition (Ms = 5.10 vs. 3.72), and the
Linguistic Power × Distraction manipulation was not significant,
$F(1, 172) < 1$.[6]

COGNITIVE RESPONSES

Linguistic power had a significant effect on the thoughts generated
by participants. Participants generated more positive thoughts (Ms =
1.09 vs. 0.85), $F(1, 174) = 6.37$, $p < .02$, and fewer negative thoughts
(Ms = 1.52 vs. 1.91), $F(1, 174) = 18.21$, $p < .01$, in the powerful version
than in the powerless version. In addition, overall thought favorability
(number of positive thoughts minus number of negative thoughts
divided by total number of thoughts) was higher in the powerful ver-
sion ($M = -.06$) than in the powerless version ($M = -.33$), $F(1, 174) =
15.64$, $p < .001$. These effects occurred regardless of the distraction con-
dition (see Table 1) and the Linguistic Power × Distraction interactions
were all nonsignificant, all Fs(1, 174) < 1.

MEDIATIONAL ANALYSES

We conducted several analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) as a means of assessing the extent to which the effects of linguistic power on persuasion were mediated by perceptions of the speaker and the arguments. In these analyses, the effects of linguistic power on message agreement were no longer significant when perceptions of the speaker, $F(1, 171) < 1$, and perceptions of the arguments, $F(1, 171) < 1$, were used as covariates. However, when attitude toward the proposal was used as a covariate, the effects of linguistic power on perceptions of the speaker, $F(1, 171) = 95.84$, $p < .001$, and perceptions of the arguments, $F(1, 171) = 38.06$, $p < .001$, remained significant. Thus, the effects of linguistic power on message agreement were mediated by perceptions of the speaker and arguments rather than the reverse (i.e., message agreement did not mediate the effects of linguistic power on perceptions of the speaker and the message arguments).

GENDER DIFFERENCES

In general, effects due to either speaker or participant gender did not occur in this research. There were no significant ($p > .10$) main effects for speaker gender and participant gender, and with the exception of a significant four-way interaction for perceptions of the argument (see Note 6), speaker gender and participant gender did not enter into any significant ($p > .05$) interactions.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine whether variability in linguistic power could affect persuasion. Previous research has demonstrated that this variable can have an effect on perceptions of a speaker (e.g., Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Erickson et al., 1978) and so it seemed reasonable that it would also have an impact on persuasion. Our results demonstrate that it does. Participants in this study were significantly more in favor of the message proposal when exposed to the powerful language version than when exposed to an identical message phrased with powerless language. This effect occurred regardless of speaker and participant gender, and regardless of whether participants were distracted as they listened to the message.

In terms of how linguistic power affects persuasion, our results suggest it is mediated primarily by perceptions of the speaker and message arguments. Regardless of distraction condition, the speaker and the message were perceived more negatively when the message was read in a powerless style than when it was not. These results are consistent with prior research demonstrating the impact of linguistic

power on impressions of a speaker and also with the results of Gibbons et al. (1991), who also found linguistic power to affect perceptions of a speaker in a persuasion context. Most important, when perceptions of the message and source were controlled, the impact of linguistic power on message acceptance disappeared. In other words, a powerless linguistic style resulted in the speaker and message being perceived negatively, and these negative perceptions lessened the likelihood of any attitude change occurring.

These results, then, are somewhat at odds with previous persuasion research indicating no effect of linguistic power on persuasion (Gibbons et al., 1991) or effects specific to certain speaker-hearer gender combinations (Carli, 1990). Likely reasons for these discrepancies are differences in the specific linguistic markers of powerless language and differences in the proportion of these markers. Carli's (1990) powerless style, for example, included disclaimers (which we did not use) but not hesitations (which we used). No doubt there are differences in the effects of different markers of linguistic power (see, e.g., Bradac & Mulac, 1984), and an important avenue for future research is to sort out and make sense of these differences.

Although Gibbons et al. (1991) used the same linguistic markers as the ones used here, it is likely (although we do not know for certain) that they used a smaller proportion of such markers. No doubt the *degree* of a speaker's linguistic power will affect how he or she is perceived and ultimately how persuasive he or she will be, and the difference between our findings and those of Gibbons et al. probably reflects this.

In addition, the present study differed from Gibbons et al. (1991) in several ways, which makes direct comparisons difficult. Most significant in this regard is message modality. Gibbons et al. used written messages that were read by participants; in the present study participants listened to audiotaped versions of the message. Hence, it may be the case that linguistic power is more salient when participants listen to, rather than read, a message. Moreover, when participants read a message, they can more carefully scrutinize the arguments (by rereading them) than when they listen to a message. The ability to scrutinize the message arguments when reading (rather than listening to) a message may dilute the effects of stylistic features such as linguistic power. Finally, in the present study we did not manipulate argument quality; only high-quality arguments were used. Whether linguistic power has the same effect regardless of argument quality remains to be seen.

The lack of gender effects in this research differs from Carli's (1990) results. However, our results are consistent with studies examining the impact of linguistic style on speaker perceptions. In these studies, linguistic power affects perceptions of male and female speakers in very similar ways (Erickson et al., 1978; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979).

However, we prefer not to draw any firm conclusions regarding the possible role of gender in mediating the impact of linguistic power on persuasion. Due to the complexity of our design, the cell sizes were relatively small and hence the power to detect a Speaker Gender × Participant Gender × Linguistic Power interaction was not great. We do believe that future research on the effect of linguistic power on persuasion should continue to examine the possible mediating role of gender.

Finally, the effects of linguistic power on message acceptance and perceptions of the speaker and arguments were remarkably similar for participants who were distracted as they heard the message and for participants who were not distracted and hence able to process the message more deeply. This suggests that linguistic power may affect persuasion via both peripheral/heuristic processing (when participants are distracted) and via central/systematic processing (when participants are not distracted). However, we hesitate to conclude that linguistic power will always influence persuasion via these two routes. For instance, it is possible that with a more subtle linguistic power manipulation, the effects might have occurred only when participants were not distracted. In addition, if the topic was one that was extremely relevant for participants (and for which they were fully able to process the message), then linguistic power might be relatively unimportant. In other words, the exact parameters regarding when and how linguistic power will affect persuasion remain to be uncovered.

What we can conclude from this study is that one feature of a speaker's language style—linguistic power—can play an important role in persuasion. This appears to be a relatively robust effect (occurring regardless of speaker and participant gender and whether participants were distracted) that is mediated primarily by perceptions of the speaker.

NOTES

1. There is some debate regarding which features of language (e.g., politeness) are part of a powerless style. Most researchers in this field, however, would agree that these three features (hedges, tags, hesitations) are clear markers of a powerless style.

2. Copies of the message are available from the first author.

3. Previous studies of linguistic power have typically checked the power manipulation with a global scale, assessing general perceptions of speaker power, authority, and so forth. We chose to check the manipulation with three relatively molecular scales.

4. Note that in the present study we examined global impressions of the speaker that included dimensions assessing both status/competence and solidarity/attractiveness.

5. The degrees of freedom for some analyses are smaller due to missing data from two participants.

6. There was also a significant four-way Linguistic Power × Distraction × Speaker Sex × Subject Sex interaction for this measure, $F(1, 172) = 7.02, p < .05$. This interaction re-

flects the significant effects of linguistic power on perceptions of argument quality in all conditions, except for male participants listening to a male speaker in the distraction condition and female participants listening to a male speaker in the no-distraction condition. Note, however, that the effect of linguistic power was in the same direction in all conditions.

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