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The Psychology of Manipulation: The Impact of Language Power on Perceived Credibility

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Abstract- ***This study examined the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal manipulation, specifically focusing on how the "power" of linguistic style influences an individual's perceived credibility. Undergraduate students (N=51) were presented with transcripts of a legal testimony where the independent variable—the "powerfulness" of the speaker's language—was manipulated. One group received a "powerless" version containing hedge words (e.g., "sort of"), intensifiers (e.g., "very"), and fillers (e.g., "you know"), while the other group received a "powerful" version devoid of these markers. We predicted that participants would rate the powerful speaker as significantly more credible than the powerless speaker. Results indicated a strong correlation between linguistic style and perceived authority, consistent with previous findings that social manipulation often operates through subtle, covert cues that bypass strategic reasoning (Franke & van Rooij, 2015). This suggests that credibility is frequently a byproduct of linguistic style rather than factual accuracy.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Many factors influence how humans perceive and respond to one another in social environments: physical appearance, shared interests, and even psychological disorders. To some extent, individuals can control the social factors that determine their influence. However, what about the subtle, internal cues that affect how others judge our truthfulness? Can a person increase their perceived authority simply by altering their speech patterns?

One theory that prompted research on how social interaction affects human behaviour was the "balance theory" (Heider, 1946, 1958). This theory suggests that people are motivated to change their preferences or attitudes to restore "cognitive balance" within a social triad (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013). For example, our preferences for objects often shift to match those of people we like and differ from those we dislike (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013). This form of social manipulation has been tracked in the brain, where activation in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) correlates with discrepancies between one's own preference and a social ideal (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013).

Beyond cognitive balance, manipulation is defined as a covert form of social influence aimed at altering perceptions through deceptive or coercive strategies (Braiker, 2004). Successful manipulation often exploits cognitive weaknesses, such as limited strategic reasoning or susceptibility to cognitive biases (Franke & van Rooij, 2015). Early research into interpersonal tactics identified six primary types: charm, silent treatment, coercion, reason, regression, and debasement (Buss et al., 1987). While "reason" is often viewed as the most ethical tactic, "charm" is frequently used for behavioural elicitation, while "coercion" and "silent treatment" are used for termination (Buss et al., 1987).

Recent literature has specifically highlighted the role of language as a manipulative tool. In legal settings, for example, researchers have found that lawyers can manipulate juror perceptions of witness credibility by adjusting the "powerfulness" of linguistic style. "Powerless" speech is characterised by hedge words (e.g., "kind of"), intensifiers ("really"), and inquisitive intonations at the end of declarative sentences.

Conversely, "powerful" speech avoids these features. Studies show that jurors consistently rate powerful speakers as more credible, even when the speech style is actually more reflective of social status (e.g., education or employment) than actual truthfulness.

Therefore, the current study helps us understand how the manipulation of linguistic style affects the perceived credibility of an individual. Specifically, it

was predicted that a speaker using powerful language would be judged as more credible and authoritative than a speaker using powerless language.

II. METHOD

Participants

Participants included 51 undergraduate-student volunteers (32 females, 19 males). The mean college grade point average (GPA) was 3.19. Potential participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions to ensure demographically equivalent groups.

Materials

Credibility was measured using a 14-point scale where participants rated a speaker's perceived truthfulness, authority, and confidence. The stimulus materials consisted of two versions of a recorded testimony. The "Powerless Condition" included 15 hedge words (e.g., "I think," "sort of"), 10 intensifiers (e.g., "very," "really"), and frequent filler words ("you know"). The "Powerful Condition" used the same factual content but removed all hedges, intensifiers, and fillers.

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were told they were participating in a study on "auditory memory." This deception was used to ensure they did not consciously monitor for manipulation tactics (Franke & van Rooij, 2015). By framing it as a memory test, the researchers ensured that participants' judgments of the speaker were subconscious, where true manipulation operates. After listening to their assigned recording, participants completed the credibility scale. Finally, they were debriefed on the experiment's true nature.

Results

The results supported the initial hypothesis. Participants in the Powerful Condition rated the speaker significantly higher on the credibility scale ($M = 11.4$) than those in the Powerless Condition ($M = 6.2$). This confirms that linguistic style serves as a potent tool for social manipulation by influencing the listener's subconscious perception of authority.

III. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine the psychological impact of linguistic manipulation on perceived credibility. Specifically, it was hypothesised that speakers utilising a "powerful" linguistic style—characterised by the absence of hedges, fillers, and intensifiers—would be perceived as significantly more credible than those utilising a "powerless" style. The results provided strong empirical support for this hypothesis, revealing a substantial gap in credibility ratings between the two experimental conditions. These findings align with the theoretical frameworks of social influence and the "balance theory" proposed by Heider (1946, 1958), suggesting that individuals subconsciously adjust their perceptions of authority based on subtle linguistic cues (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013).

The significant disparity in credibility scores (11.4 for powerful versus 6.2 for powerless) suggests that the "how" of communication is often more influential than the "what." Although the factual content of the testimony remained identical across both conditions, the presence of powerless linguistic markers served as a "cognitive noise" that undermined the speaker’s perceived competence and trustworthiness. This supports the notion that manipulation often operates via covert strategies that exploit the listener's reliance on "fluency heuristics"—the mental shortcut where smooth delivery is equated with factual accuracy (Franke & van Rooij, 2015).

Interestingly, the use of intensifiers (e.g., "very," "really"), which are intended to strengthen a statement, appeared to have the opposite effect in the powerless condition. This phenomenon suggests that when a speaker over-emphasises their points while simultaneously using hedges (e.g., "I think," "sort of"), the listener perceives a sense of desperation or uncertainty. This results in what Buss et al. (1987) might categorise as a failed "charm" or "reason" tactic, where the manipulative intent becomes transparent and loses its efficacy.

The implications of these results are particularly salient in the legal field. If a juror’s perception of a witness is more influenced by the presence of "um" or "I guess" than by the actual evidence presented,

the integrity of the judicial process is at risk. Powerful speech is often a reflection of social status and education rather than honesty. Consequently, the legal system may inadvertently favour those with higher social standing or those who have been coached to eliminate powerless markers, regardless of their actual veracity.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the dmPFC activation observed in neuroscientific studies of social manipulation (Izuma & Adolphs, 2013). When a listener hears powerless language, there may be a "discrepancy" detected between the speaker's role (e.g., a witness providing testimony) and their delivery, leading to lower credibility ratings as a means of maintaining cognitive balance.

Despite the clear results, this study is not without limitations. The use of a "memory test" deception, while effective in preventing participants from consciously analysing the manipulation, may have led some participants to focus more on factual recall than on their emotional or psychological response to the speaker. Future research should consider using fMRI technology to monitor brain activity in real-time as participants listen to various linguistic styles, providing a clearer link between linguistic manipulation and neural processing.

Additionally, the participant pool was limited to undergraduate students with a relatively high mean GPA. While this demonstrated that even cognitively high-functioning individuals are susceptible to linguistic manipulation, it does not account for how these effects might vary across different age groups or professional backgrounds (e.g., experienced judges vs. lay jurors).

In conclusion, the psychology of manipulation is deeply rooted in the subtle power of language. By removing hedges and hesitations, an individual can covertly project authority and gain credibility, regardless of the truth of their claims. As social beings, we are highly tuned to these linguistic signals, often at the expense of our own logical reasoning. Understanding these mechanisms is the first step in inoculating ourselves against the persuasive and often deceptive tactics utilised in both professional and interpersonal interactions.

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