



## Speech imagery and perceptions of charisma: The mediating role of positive affect

Loren J. Naidoo <sup>a,\*</sup>, Robert G. Lord <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Psychology Department, Box B8-215, Baruch College, City University of New York, 55 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

<sup>b</sup> The University of Akron, Akron, OH, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effects of imagery in a leader's speech on listeners' perceptions of the leader's charisma. A former US president's inaugural address was rewritten to create low and high imagery versions, and audio recordings of the two speeches were made. Participants were randomly assigned to high or low speech imagery conditions. After listening to the speech, they provided ratings on various summary leadership measures. The high imagery speech resulted in higher ratings of charisma than the low imagery speech. This effect was partially mediated by state positive affect (having controlled for trait affect levels). High imagery led to increased charisma ratings partially through increasing listeners' state positive affect relative to their trait affect baseline level. Implications for theory are addressed.

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Rhetoric is an important method by which leaders convey their message to their followers. The role of rhetoric in leadership processes has been investigated in a number of contexts, including how the use of metaphor (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005) and imagery (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001) impact ratings of charisma, how US presidential expressions of optimism about the economy influence actual economic performance (Wood, Owens, & Durham, 2005), and how the rhetorical construction of CEOs' speeches is related to their attitudes and strategies toward internationalization (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997). Rhetorical devices may be essential to charismatic leadership, where the emotional and motivational effects of leaders' speeches are paramount (Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). Rhetoric and the articulation of a vision tend to play a larger role in determining charisma perceptions when leader and followers have little contact with each other (Shamir, 1995).

Imagery is one important rhetorical device. It is defined as content that elicits sensory experiences such as mental images in listeners. Imagery is theorized to elicit strong emotional reactions and high levels of attention, comprehension, and memory elaboration. Thus, followers may be more influenced by and more likely to act on a leader's message when it is high rather than low in imagery. Prior evidence suggests that speech imagery and perceptions of leader charisma are positively correlated (Emrich et al., 2001).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of imagery in a leader's speech on listeners' perceptions of charisma. Although this relationship has been demonstrated in a correlational study (Emrich et al., 2001), we are not aware of any research which has manipulated speech imagery to determine its causal relationship with charisma perceptions. In addition, though potential mediators have been theorized, we are aware of no work that empirically demonstrates a mediating process. Both of these issues have important implications for leadership practice and research. Our goal is to fill these gaps in the literature.

We begin by reviewing what the current leadership literature reveals about how charismatic leaders convey their visions to followers. We focus on imagery as an important component of charismatic rhetoric, and propose that affect is a key mediator of the relationship between speech imagery and perceptions of leader charisma. Finally, we present the results of our experiment and discuss the importance of our findings for leadership theory and practice.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 646 312 3834; fax: +1 646 312 3781.

E-mail address: [loren\\_naidoo@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:loren_naidoo@baruch.cuny.edu) (L.J. Naidoo).

## 1. Charismatic leadership

Charismatic leaders have been characterized as people who are able to exert a “profound influence on followers by the strength of their personal abilities” (House & Baetz, 1979, p.399). Reviews of many studies show that charismatic leadership can significantly influence follower performance, satisfaction, and attitudes (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), while meta-analytic data indicate a significant effect for charismatic leadership style on leader effectiveness (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Charismatic leadership is also closely linked to the occurrence of a crisis. Indeed, experimental studies have shown that individuals tend to have more favorable perceptions of leaders when they operate in crisis conditions (Emrich, 1999; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999), and that crisis conditions foster the emergence of charismatic leaders who are then rated as more effective by followers (Pillai, 1996). However, the exact causal nature of the relationship between crisis and charisma is uncertain and involves many contributing factors (cf. Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Pillai, Kohles, & Bligh, 2006).

Much recent research has focused on the perceptual processes that affect followers' evaluations of leader charisma. For example, Conger & Kanungo (1987) argued that charisma is founded not solely on the leader's personal qualities but on the interplay between the leader's attributes and followers' perceptions, needs, beliefs, and values. Gardner & Avolio (1998) suggested that leader and followers jointly construct the leader's charismatic image through impression management and impression formation processes. These studies illustrate a growing recognition of the importance of “followership” in leadership processes (Hollander, 1992; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Lord & Brown, 2004; Meindl, 1995). In the following sections we discuss several important components of this joint impression formation process.

### 1.1. Vision creation

The creation of a vision, an idealized goal for organizational success, is an essential first step for effective charismatic leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The greater the discrepancy between the leader's vision and the status quo, the more likely followers will attribute charisma to the leader, provided the degree of discrepancy remains within followers' latitude of acceptance (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). For leaders to effectively communicate their vision, they must carefully craft the *content* of their message and deliver it effectively. Although prior research has established the importance of delivery factors (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Holladay & Coombs, 1994; Howell & Frost, 1989), our focus is on message content.

### 1.2. Vision content

Vision content refers to the leader's message and how that message is organized. Content research has examined differential effects of vision messages reflecting imagery-based (primary process) content versus concept-based (secondary process) content (Emrich et al., 2001). Primary and secondary process content have been contrasted as unconscious versus conscious by Freud (1900); and as irrational, perceptual, concrete, and emotional versus logical, analytical, abstract, and subject to reason by Martindale, Covelio, & West (1986). In simple terms, imagery-based content (e.g., “I have a *dream*”) tends to evoke emotional responses from listeners, whereas concept-based content (e.g., “I have an *idea*”) tends to evoke cognitive responses from listeners (Emrich et al., 2001). Or, in Metcalfe & Mischel's (1999) framework, they awaken in listeners “hot” and “cold” system responses, respectively.

### 1.3. Imagery and charisma

Emrich et al. (2001) investigated the relationship between US presidents' speech imagery and their charisma and greatness. They used Martindale's (1975) Regressive Imagery Dictionary, which contains image-based words derived from the writings of Freud (1900) and others, to assess the degree of imagery in various presidents' inaugural addresses and other key speeches. The Toronto Word Pool (Friendly, Franklin, Hoffman, & Rubin, 1982), a database of ratings of imagery and concreteness for over 1000 words, was used to validate the Martindale dictionary. Words common to both sources were examined. Martindale's image-based words received higher imagery and lower concreteness ratings compared to concept-based words in the Toronto Word Pool.

Emrich et al. related the degree of speech imagery for each president to archival ratings of presidential charisma (Simonton, 1988). These archival ratings were based on student ratings of personality sketches of presidents constructed by Simonton from numerous presidential reference works. They found significant positive relationships between the degree of speech imagery and ratings of presidential charisma. They also found some support for the relationship between imagery and presidential greatness as well. These findings are consistent with prior research which points to a positive relationship between presidents' skillful use of imagery and their ability to persuade followers to enact their visions (Maranell, 1970; Murray & Blessing, 1983, 1994; Smith, Brinkley, Splaine, & Medford, 2000). Based on their research, we predict that this relationship will hold true for individuals' perceptions of a leader's charisma based on listening to a novel leadership speech (as compared with rating constructed personality sketches).

**H1.** High speech imagery will result in followers rating the leader as higher in (a) charisma and (b) general leadership impressions compared to low speech imagery.

Emrich et al. (2001) speculated that imagery affects perceptions of charisma through four key intervening processes – attention, comprehension, emotions, and memory. However, they were unable to test these ideas due to the archival nature of their

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