

Charisma perception from text and speech

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Abstract

Charisma, the ability to attract and retain followers without benefit of formal authority, is more difficult to define than to identify. While we each seem able to identify charismatic individuals – and *non*-charismatic individuals – it is not clear what it is about an individual that influences our judgment. This paper describes the results of experiments designed to discover potential correlates of such judgments, in *what* speakers say and the *way* that they say it. We present results of two parallel experiments in which subjective judgments of charisma in spoken and in transcribed American political speech were analyzed with respect to the acoustic and prosodic (where applicable) and lexico-syntactic characteristics of the speech being assessed. While we find that there is considerable disagreement among subjects on how the speakers of each token are ranked, we also find that subjects appear to share a functional definition of charisma, in terms of other personal characteristics we asked them to rank speakers by. We also find certain acoustic, prosodic, and lexico-syntactic characteristics that correlate significantly with perceptions of charisma. Finally, by comparing the responses to spoken vs. transcribed stimuli, we attempt to distinguish between the contributions of “what is said” and “how it is said” with respect to charisma judgments. © 2008 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Charismatic individuals have been defined as those who command authority by virtue of their personal qualities rather than by formal institutional or military power (Weber, 1947). How they acquire authority, however, is a question of considerable discussion. While some see charisma arising primarily from the faith of a leader’s *listener-followers* (Marcus, 1967), others believe that it arises from particular individual’s *gift of grace* and an *inspiring message*, and triggered by an *important crisis* (Boss, 1976). However, all who study charisma concur in believing that charismatic leaders share a particular ability to communicate. Leaders widely believed to be charismatic, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Fidel Castro, Adolf Hitler, and Pope John Paul II, are also particularly noted for their oratorical abilities.

In this paper, we investigate the language-based aspects of charisma. In particular we are interested in identifying aspects of *what* speakers say and *how* they say it as potential correlates of others’ judgments of their charisma, or lack thereof. We describe two perception experiments designed to identify possible acoustic, prosodic, and lexico-syntactic characteristics of charisma, one using spoken data and the other using transcribed and written materials from the same speakers. We correlate subjects’ judgments of this material with lexico-syntactic and acoustic and prosodic features of the assessed speech and with lexico-syntactic characteristics of the text tokens. Finally, we compare judgments from text transcriptions alone to judgments made from speech, to distinguish the contributions of how something is said from what is said in subject judgments of charisma.

Our motivation for this study is two-fold: on a scientific level, we are interested in determining whether speakers who are judged charismatic share certain acoustic and prosodic characteristics, and how these interact with lexical content and syntactic form. While communicative talent

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has been widely assumed in the literature on charisma to contribute to the charismatic appeal of an individual, there is no theoretical framework on the role that the form and content of charismatic individual's speech or writings plays in overall charisma judgments. However, most of the specific features we have tested derive from claims or speculations in the literature about different characteristics of charismatic speech.

From a technological point of view, we believe that such research has potential applications in speech synthesis and speech understanding: first, a better understanding of the acoustic and prosodic characteristics of charisma in human speech could support the generation of more 'charismatic' synthetic speech for applications intended to be persuasive and compelling, such as commercial and political advertisements or telephone solicitations. Second, such an understanding might support the automatic identification of 'charismatic' speakers, who in turn are likely to be successful in attracting a political, military, or religious following. Finally, knowledge of how charismatic individuals speak has the potential to support the creation of online training systems that help individuals to become more charismatic speakers themselves.

In Section 2, we discuss previous research on charisma, particularly with respect to charismatic language, in the sociology, rhetoric, and natural language processing literature. In Section 3, we describe an online experiment we conducted to elicit subject judgments of charisma and other personal attributes of speakers of tokens of public speech. Section 4 describes a parallel experiment in which similar judgments were elicited from subjects based on transcripts of the spoken tokens described in 3. We conclude in Section 5 and describe future research in Section 6.

2. Related research

In this investigation into the spoken and lexico-syntactic aspects of charismatic speech, we were guided in the design of our experiments and in many of our initial experimental hypotheses by the previous work of sociologists and rhetoricians. Following Weber's (1947) discussion of CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY as a legitimate source of leadership, social scientists have worked toward defining what exactly charisma is. Marcus (1967) argued that faith in the leader was necessary to charisma citing Adolph Hitler as an example. "[T]he 'true-believing' Nazi had implicit faith that under the Fuhrer's leadership Germany could master the destiny of history..." (p. 237). Boss (1976) identified a set of 'essential aspects of charisma' which he felt were directly related to the rhetoric employed by a potential leader. These nine aspects included "(1) the 'gift of grace' ...; (2) the concept of the 'leader-communicator'; (3) the 'inspiring message'; (4) the 'idoltrous follower'; (5) a shared history; (6) high status; (7) the concept of 'mission'; (8) an important crisis; and (9) successful ... results" (p. 301). Most relevant to our study is (3), the 'inspiring message', although what makes a message 'inspirational' – either in form or in

content – is little discussed. More recently, Bird (1993) has explored the role of charisma in the propagation of NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS (NRMs), more popularly known as 'cults', finding that NRM leadership "has almost wholly assumed a personal charismatic form".

A number of authors have examined the role of communicative skills in defining a charismatic or persuasive leader in more depth. For example, Hamilton and Stewart (1993) propose an information processing model of persuasion. They describe an experiment in which subjects were presented with a set of messages based on a template concerning the dangers of excessive exercise (p. 239) and asked to evaluate the dynamism, competence and trust of the speaker of the message. The experimenters manipulated the language intensity of the message by including 'high', 'moderate' or 'low' intensity lexical items within a template text. 'High' intensity words contain more emotional content and/or are more specific than 'low' intensity words. The experimenters, using a causal modeling program, observed that when subjects perceived a message as more intense they found the source of the message to be more dynamic. Sources perceived as highly dynamic were also perceived as highly competent, and competent speakers were perceived as more trustworthy. They proceed to describe this interaction between dynamism, competence and trust as 'the *charisma sequence*'.

Touati (1993) examines charisma in the context of French political speech, comparing the prosody of politicians before and after an election. He claims that this comparison captures the transition "when persuasion (when a politician aims to gain votes) gives [way] to objective pathos (when a politician comments [on] his political victory or defeat)" (p. 168). He finds that pre-electoral, 'persuasive' speech is characterized by an increased pitch range and variation of pitch register compared to post-electoral speech. Thus, particular prosodic features are associated with attempts to project charisma. We include these among the prosodic features we test in our perception studies.

Persuasive speech has also been described in terms of its rhetorical structure and the coherence of its arguments (e.g. Cohen, 1987). It is very likely that the ability to persuade may be an important attribute of those identified as charismatic. However, theoretical research on charisma claims that charismatic leaders have something more – the ability to develop an 'intimate relationship' with listeners or readers, involving trust and 'an inspiring message' in addition to a persuasive argument (Boss, 1976). While there has been relatively little experimental or quantitative work in this area, Tuppen (1974) reports an interesting experiment on a related topic, attempting to quantify communicator credibility. In this experiment, subjects were asked to read short character sketches of 10 communicators, and rate each of them in a terms of 64 personal attributes, 28 using bipolar adjective scales (e.g. Honest–Dishonest, Bold–Timid) and 36 using seven-point Likert scales (e.g. "I can trust the judgment of the speaker", "I should like to have the speaker as a personal friend"). Subject ratings were

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