DIFFERENCES IN SPEECH PATTERNS PORTRAYED IN THE MEDIA

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**Literature Review**

Language use is one factor that can influence the persuasiveness of a message or credibility of a speaker. One area of language that has been previously studied is powerless speech and its impact on persuasion and credibility.

Powerless speech is the use of items such as hedges (kind of, sort of), intensifiers (so, very, really), and hesitations (uh, um). It is believed that messages do not include the use of these powerless forms of language are more powerful.

Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O’Bar (1983) presented the idea of how powerful and powerless speech may affect the attractiveness and credibility of a witness or lawyer. When participants evaluated testimony from court transcripts, researchers concluded that the style affected a viewer’s perceptions of how credible and attractive the speaker was and whether or not they agreed with the information communicated.

Other research suggests that women who speak tentatively influence men but not women. However, one study the researchers found is that if a woman spoke tentatively, they were perceived as less competent and knowledgeable than one that spoke assertively. However, this was not the same for men (Carli, 1990).

Both men and women who use a low number of hedges are perceived as being highly more credible than speakers use a high number (Wright & Hosman, 1983). The researchers also found that witnesses who used fewer hedges seemed more certain and, therefore, were liked more than those that used low levels of powerful speech.

Hosman and Silfand (1994) found that the absence of any component of powerless speech created the idea that a speaker has more control of self and control over others. Where as intensifiers increase control of the self and others while tag questions greatly lower the perceived levels of control.

**Purpose**

The objective was to look at how frequently powerless language is used in a media depiction of courtroom activities of male and female attorneys. To study powerless language, the use of hedges, hesitation, intensifiers, tag questions, and qualifiers used by both male and female attorneys were examined.

A content analysis of the show, Conviction, was done to observe the patterns of characters in the television series. The hypothesis was not supported. Male attorneys were observed using powerless speech more frequently, especially hesitations and intensifiers. However, there was not a significant statistical difference between the frequency that males and females used powerless speech forms when a Pearson’s chi-square was calculated.

**Question and Hypothesis**

Are male and female attorneys on television shows portrayed using different frequencies of powerless language? Are women more likely than men shown to use powerless speech patterns? Are male and female attorneys portrayed using different frequencies of powerless language? Are women more likely than men shown to use powerless speech patterns? Are male and female attorneys portrayed using different frequencies of powerless language? Are women more likely than men shown to use powerless speech patterns?

**Methods**

**Data Set**

The show Conviction, about attorneys who work for a large district attorney’s office, was used for the study. The show only aired in 2006 and consisted of 13 episodes involving criminal cases. The show has seven main characters (five male and three female) that are attorneys in the office.

**Materials and Procedure**

A content analysis of a television show with attorneys was conducted to determine the frequency with which attorneys used powerless language. Every episode was watched and scenes in the courtroom were reviewed twice to enable the researcher to identify all forms of powerless language utilized. When a character used powerless language it was identified and then coded.

**Coding**

The powerless language identified in this study were defined as a result of previous research that examined the use of powerful and powerless speech (Erickson, R. E., Lind, E. A., Johnson, B. C., O’Bare, W. M., 1978). Two different types of powerless speech that were identified:

- hedges: kind of, sort of
- intensifiers: so, very
- hesitations: uh, um
- qualifiers: I think, I feel
- tag questions: is that correct?, would you agree?

**Analysis**

Pearson’s chi square test was used to test for differences.

**Results**

The results of the content analyses are in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hedges</th>
<th>Intensifiers</th>
<th>Hesitations</th>
<th>Qualifiers</th>
<th>Tag Questions</th>
<th>Row Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (66.7%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Totals</td>
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<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (66.7%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hypothesis was not supported. Male attorneys were observed using powerless speech more frequently, especially hesitations and intensifiers. However, there was not a significant statistical difference between the frequency that males and females used powerless speech forms when a Pearson’s chi-square was calculated.

The following significant statistical differences were found as a result of individual post hoc’s:

- female vs. male characters’ use of intensifiers and tag questions: x²(1, N = 25) = 3.994, p < .05
- female vs. male characters’ use of hesitations and tag questions: x²(1, N = 25) = 7.269, p < .05

**Discussion**

Carli (1990) found that women typically use more forms of powerless speech. However, in the examination of Conviction, different results were found that present the idea that male attorneys engage in the use of powerless speech more often than the female attorneys. Results may have been found for two primary reasons. First, one of the main male characters played the role of an attorney had just starting at the district attorney’s office as an assistant attorney. This character may have used for hesitations to portray his character as being nervous or less experienced. Second, certain types of powerless speech may not be seen as “powerful” in a courtroom context.

**Implications**

Results indicate that women actually use fewer forms of powerless speech, which is not consistent with studies about real world language use. This could cause a negative effect for female attorneys. Language Expectancy Theory explains, if speakers violate expectations, it could hurt their credibility as persuasiveness (Burgoon, 1990). Therefore, the portrayal of powerless speech used in the media could create a false expectation that women use powerless speech less often. When female attorneys use more in reality, it could hurt their credibility as an attorney or in everyday situations because there is a violation of a language expectancy.

**Limitations**

For the study it was only possible to have one coder for the television show. There is only one season of the show. It is not possible to determine if the characters in the show engage in the use of the language patterns because the writers of the show added the words into the script or the characters added some of the powerless speech forms in order to better develop the character.

**Future Research**

Future research should examine television programs that have more episodes with court scenes or use actual court transcripts to compare the media to reality. Other research could also be done to compare the attorneys’ use of powerless language to the attorneys’ use of powerless language. Future research may also evaluate the credibility of the attorneys and compare the ratings to the amount of powerless language used. This research will be useful for a profession whose task it is to deliver messages and arguments credibly and persuasively. It is vital to examine this type of language in the courtroom because attorneys are taught to use some of the forms to be more powerful advocates.

**Literature Cited**


