LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN SMALL CONVERSATIONAL GROUPS[1]

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Abstract University students, in groups of 3 or 4, discussed legal aspects of commercial surrogacy and afterwards ranked the relative influence of each group member. As predicted, high-influence members spoke more words and had more successful turns during the conversation than low-influence members. The latter used a greater rate of intonation and intensifiers than the former. A closer examination of the results showed that turns were particularly important for high influence. Unexpectedly, tag questions and hedges did not result in low influence, probably due to the different usage of tag questions and to the nature of the conversation setting which, unlike one facing court witnesses, required tactful hedging in the exertion of influence.

Language can mirror an existant social hierarchy. For example, the linguistic standards and preferences in schools, churches, and courts are those of society's dominant groups (Mueller, 1973). The choice of pronouns, and of first- and last-name usages in conversations is governed, partly at least, by hierarchy (Brown & Ford, 1961; Brown & Gilman, 1960). Apart from this reflective role, language may also function as a means of social control (Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979; Lakoff, 1973). Presently, our concern is with the role of language in interpersonal influence.

Social influence due to the use of language may be variously defined and studied. It may refer to induced changes in the behaviour (Blakar, 1979) or attitude (Jaspars, 1979) of message recipients. At the level of impression-formation, communicators who use different forms of language may be perceived by others as more or less powerful. Perceived powerfulness can be measured along such perceptual dimensions as dynamism, status, and competence. A comprehensive review (Bradac & Street, 1986) of the research in this tradition shows that most of the studies have cast the respondents in a listener or passive observer role rather than in the role of actual interaction participants. Taking a more interactive approach, we focus on small conversational groups to find out how the development of a social influence hierarchy among the group members may be related systematically to different forms of language used by group members during the conversation. For reasons to be explained below, group members who occupy a low influence rank at the end of the conversation are expected to have used a

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'powerless' language mode whereas high-ranking members would have used a 'powerful' language mode.

Possible features of a powerless language mode can be discerned from the works of Lakoff (1973). She observes that the language typically used by women differs stylistically from men's. She argues (p. 47) that 'If a little girl "talks rough" like a boy, she will normally be ostracized, scolded or made fun of.' The result of this socialising process is that women acquire a special speech style, different to the 'male' style, in that it 'submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly . . . , and encourage(s) expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it . . .' (p. 48). This female speech style is characterised by the frequent use of *intensifiers* (so, very, really), *hedges* (sort of, kind of, well, you know, I guess, I think), *polite forms* (won't you please sit down), *intonation* (i.e. using rising intonation in declarative statements) and *tag questions* (I had my glasses off. He was out at third, wasn't he?).

Use of this speech style, however, is not confined to females but seems to correspond generally with low-status speakers (Lind & O'Barr, 1979). The prime effect of the use of these linguistic features is that impressions of uncertainty and of ineffectiveness are created. For example, the use of rising intonation in a declarative statement may convey the idea of looking to the addressee for confirmation, thereby tacitly acknowledging the addressee's right to act or to decide, and thus cast the speaker in a comparatively passive role. The passive and submissive nature of these language variables leads us to expect that in the context of a newly-formed conversational group, where there is no pre-existing influence hierarchy, members who frequently use these language variables during the conversation are likely to end up later at the bottom of the emergent influence hierarchy.

Language variables that lead to high influence may be thought of in two ways. In a limited sense, they may be conceived of as the less frequent use of the features belonging to Lakoff's (1973) female (powerless) category. In a simulated courtroom experiment, Lind & O'Barr (1979) showed that the infrequent use of the powerless features by a witness, as compared to the more frequent use of the same features, elicited more favourable ratings on five social evaluation measures: competence, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, social dynamism, and convincingness. Erickson, Lind, Johnson & O'Barr (1978) obtained similar favourable ratings on the witness' attractiveness and credibility, and found that listeners accepted the witness' advocated position more strongly if the witness used the powerless features less frequently.

Another way of thinking about language dominance is to identify *positive* features the more frequent use of which would lead to high influence. Fowler *et al.* (1979) note that a significant difference between the speech of the powerful and the powerless is that the powerful speaker tends to speak of himself or herself in 'agentive' rather than 'affected' terms. The projection of an agentive image occurs in a communitave relationship that is potentially competitive and constantly negotiative. Its fulfillment depends on the successful negotiation of 'a position of "taking charge" in a talk exchange . . . to control conversational content, evalua-

tion of that content, and organization of the exchange (who speaks, when, and how long)' (Owsley & Scotton, 1984: 262). From this point of view, a crucial condition for influence in natural, non-refereed conversations is the ability at taking and holding the floor. This would require, first of all, success at turn-taking. There is a remarkable orderliness in turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974); but underneath the surface orderliness lies much politics. Taking one's turn successfully involves the skillful use of syntactic and intonational means applied competitively before or at transition relevance places (Levinson, 1983; O'Barr, 1984). In order to achieve influence, speakers must also be able to articulate their arguments and favoured positions in sufficient detail while holding the floor. A measure of this facility is verbal productivity (number of words), which was found to correlate positively with perceived influence in German and American simulated juries (Scherer, 1979).

We tested the above ideas using semi-naturalistic conversational groups each consisting of three or four interlocutors. A naturalistic context was preferred to the one created by cue manipulation or other, similarly contrived, methods in order to minimise experimental artificiality and demand characteristics (see Scherer, 1979). If, at the end of the conversation, a consensual hierarchy of influence had emerged in the group, high-ranking members would have used, as compared to low-ranking members, more turns and words, but less hedges, rising intonation, tag questions, intensifiers, and polite forms. To obtain an indicator of members' influence rankings, we asked subjects at the end of the conversation to rank the relative influence of all group members. A necessary pre-condition for the success of our study was an acceptable level of consensus among the rankings given by members of the same group. Only if the rankings showed a significant coefficient of concordance could they yield a valid indicator of influence. Their validity was further checked against Lind & O'Barr's (1979) five social evaluation measures, which were expected to be more positive with high — than with low — influence rankings.

Method

Subjects

A primary goal of the conversation session was to produce a consensual hierarchy of influence within each group. However, it was also desirable to maintain as naturalistic a conversation setting as possible. We decided not to introduce artificial roles such as 'group discussion leader' which we felt would act as a constraint upon the 'naturalness' of the situation and affect the results in an undesirable manner. Instead, we selected the subjects for each group in such a way that a clear rank ordering of influence was more likely to emerge during the course of the conversation.

Subjects were approached in class and asked to volunteer for a communication experiment. They were told that the experiment would consist of viewing a videotape of a documentary and of having a 30-minute conversation. Each group

was intended to contain one third year law student, two second year psychology students, and one first year physical education student. This composition was achieved in five of the six groups tested. (The remaining group lacked a physical education student.) It was thought that the law subjects would emerge as more influential because they were older (mean age = 21.8 years; mean ages of psychology and physical education students were respectively 19.7 and 18.7 years) and had recently covered the topic of commercial surrogacy (the topic of the conversation) in their family law classes. They could be expected to feel more confident and knowledgeable than the others in the conversation which was to be concerned with the *legal* aspects of surrogacy. Of the remaining group members, psychology subjects had a greater experience of experimental situations and procedure, and would probably emerge as more influential than the physical education subject. This procedure carried the risk of confounding the relationship between influence and language. In the event, fortunately, each category of students was about evenly split into high and low influence members. There were 13 female and 10 male subjects. Each group had one or more subjects of either gender.

Materials

The video-taped documentary, called 'The Baby Makers', was screened on New Zealand television during July 1985, two weeks prior to the first experimental session. The documentary backgrounded commercial surrogacy in the United States (where it was legal) and Great Britain (where it was illegal), looked at arguments for and against commercial surrogacy, and examined the topic from the points of view of the childless couple, the surrogacy agencies, and the legal profession.

A synchronised video and audio recording of the entire conversation was made by means of a video camera and monitor, which were stationed behind a one-way mirror in an observation room. A microphone was unobtrusively placed in the main room, where subjects sat facing the camera in a semi-circle round a low table. They agreed to and were aware of the recording.

Procedure

Subjects were told they would view a 40-minute documentary on the topic of commercial surrogacy and that following the documentary, they would discuss whether New Zealand should legislate on the issue of commercial surrogacy, and if so, in which areas. They were asked to keep in mind while watching the documentary that the ensuing conversation, which was to be videotaped, would be concerned with *legal* aspects of surrogacy. After watching the documentary, they were given a sheet of paper bearing the following topic for discussion: 'Should N.Z. legislate on the issue of commercial surrogacy? If so, in what areas should legislation be introduced, and to what effect?'

They were then left to discuss the issue for approximately 30 minutes. The experimenter encouraged them to express their own personal views and, if possible, to reach some broad group decisions. Consensus was not required in these group decisions. All groups engaged in lively conversation.

At the end of the conversation, subjects completed a person perception questionnaire under the following instruction: 'You will be asked to fill in a few questions about how you saw the other members of the group. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, it is *your* perception of the other members which is important. There are only a few items so please think about each one carefully.' Group members were identified by code numbers and told that 'All information you give will be treated as confidential.' Each subject rated the other group members individually on 10 semantic differential-type items. These were taken from Lind & O'Barr (1979) and later grouped into five 'social evaluation' measures competence (comprising items labelled competent/incompetent, intelligent/unintelligent, qualified/unqualified), social attractiveness (likeable/not likeable), trustworthiness (trustworthy/untrustworthy), social dynamism (powerful/powerless, strong/weak, active/inactive), and convincingness (believable/unbelievable, convincing/unconvincing).

Afterwards, each subject was asked to 'rank-order the people in the group, including yourself, in terms of how influential you think they have been in determining the final group decision.' Subjects wrote down members' code numbers against a 4-point scale on which 1 was labelled 'most influential' and 4 'least influential'. Upon completion, subjects were fully informed of the aim of the study, thanked, and promised a copy of the results by mail.

Results

Influence hierarchy

Within a group, members' influence rankings were analysed to yield a Kendal coefficient of concordance. The coefficients were 0.78 in the 3-person group, and 0.63, 0.68, 0.78, 0.90, and 0.91 in 4-person groups. All coefficients were significant at $p<0.05$; hence all six groups were included for analysis. The mean of the rankings ascribed to a subject by self and by other group members was used as an index of that subject's influence. Two members in one group were tied for first rank. Other than this, all other groups had clearly differentiated members. The top two members from all groups were pooled to form the 'high influence' condition ($n=12$), all others were assigned to the 'low influence' condition ($n=11$). The resulting conditions were approximately equivalent in the composition of law (4 vs 2), psychology (6 vs 6), and physical education (2 vs 3) subjects.

Social evaluation

The high and low conditions were compared on each of the five evaluation measures. All measures favoured the high condition, but only two were signi-

ficant: competence (*means* = 5.2, 4.6; *s.ds.* = 0.68, 0.63; $t(21) = 2.39$, $p < 0.05$, 2-tailed), and trustworthiness (*means* = 5.0, 4.1; *s.ds.* = 0.46, 0.71; $t(21) = 3.83$, $p = 0.001$, 2-tailed). A multiple regression analysis using the language variables as predictors was carried out on each of the evaluations. Only in the case of trustworthiness was the multiple correlation significant ($R = 0.75$, $F(7,15) = 2.78$, $p = 0.045$.) and judging from the values for standardised regression weights, turns (Beta = 0.47) and words (Beta = 0.25) appeared to be the strongest predictors.

Influence and language

A transcript was made of the conversation from the recordings. With the exception of 'intonation', a subject's score on each of the remaining six language variables was formed by counting instances of each language feature on the first ten pages of the transcripts. Where transcripts were less than ten pages, figures were adjusted to conform to the 10-page length (e.g. a transcript of eight pages would be multiplied by 1.25). The first author, while still being blind to the influence ranking results, carried out the scoring for all subjects, who were identified anonymously by code numbers. Scoring reliability was assessed by having an independent scorer to recount the frequencies on a subset of seven subjects. (See Appendix for scoring guidelines.) All the Pearson correlation coefficients were significant ($p < 0.05$, $d.f. = 5$, 2-tailed): 0.94 (turns), 0.96 (words), 0.84 (hedges), 0.86 (tag questions), and 0.77 (intensifiers). Agreement was 100% for polite forms. The video-taped discussion was examined for questioning-type intonation in declarative statements. Scoring reliability was checked by a second scorer who listened to a 15-minute segment of each group's discussion. The correlation coefficient was 0.89, $p < 0.01$, $d.f. = 21$, 2-tailed.

As subjects varied widely in the number of the words they spoke, their scores for all language variables, excepting turns and words, were adjusted to rates per 100 words. In order to derive a combination of the language variables which might distinguish between the high- and low- influence subjects, a discriminant function analysis was carried out with language variables as predictors and membership in high- and low- influence categories as criterion. The resultant discriminant function, significant at $p = 0.035$, had a canonical correlation of 0.76 and correctly classified 83% of high-influence and 91% of low-influence subjects. Words ($r = 0.86$) and turns ($r = 0.81$) correlated most positively with the function whereas intensifiers ($r = -0.36$), intonation ($r = -0.36$), and polite forms ($r = -0.31$) correlated negatively with the function. As the high- and low-influence categories were located respectively on the poitive and negative poles of the function, it appeared that words and turns were characteristic of high influence whilst intensifiers, intonation, and polite forms were characteristic of low influence. To examine the results in more detail, the high- and low-influence conditions were compared on each of the variables separately by univariate analyses of variance. Table 1 summarised the results.

The overall results provided strong support for the hypothesis concerning high influence, and moderate support for that concerning low influence. The more

Table 1 Language difference between high- and low-influence members

Language variable	*High influence (n=12)* mean	s.d.	*Low influence (n=11)* mean	s.d.	*F*	*p<*
Words	1585.5	576.06	689.3	310.57	20.98	0.001
Turns	57.8	16.24	33.1	10.20	18.71	0.001
Intensifiers	0.5	0.20	1.1	1.12	3.76	0.07
Intonation	0.3	0.12	0.5	0.29	3.62	0.07
Polite forms	0.2	0.39	0.5	0.69	2.71	ns
Tags	2.0	2.63	1.4	2.11	0.30	ns
Hedges	4.3	1.78	3.4	2.06	1.43	ns

Note. Turns and words were actual frequency counts; other language variables were rates per 100 words. Although intensifiers had discrepant variances, *t*-test based on log transformed data yielded the same result ($t = -1.94$).

frequent use of words and turns resulted in high influence, whilst a greater rate of intonation and intensifiers resulted in low influence. Contrary to prediction, neither polite forms, tags, nor hedges were significantly related to low influence; indeed, the trend was for hedges to result in *high* influence.

Discussion

Earlier research, mainly based on court speech acts, has encouraged the view that the lack of powerless speech features constitutes the powerful speech mode. This is a partial view and could be misleading for speech settings outside the court, where often there is competition for the floor. The present study tested for positive elements of the powerful speech mode separately from those of the powerless mode; and unlike most other studies, used *interlocutors'* rather than observers' influence rankings as a measure of power. In this study, the non-refereed, semi-naturalistic conversation yielded a reliable and fairly valid measure of power in terms of social influence. High-influence subjects had more turns and said more words than low-influence subjects. The latter, in turn, used a greater rate of intonation and intensifiers than the former. In line with its objective, this study found two clusters of language variables such that the *greater* use of one cluster resulted in high influence whereas the *greater* rate of use of the other resulted in low influence. Three remaining variables, polite forms, tags and hedges, were unpredicted; hedges, in particular, showed a trend opposite to the prediction.

It is worth noting that the powerless variables were measured in rates rather than, as in the case of the power variables, in absolute frequencies. If the rates were recast into absolute frequencies, high-influence subjects, because of their more numerous words, would have about the same numbers of intonation, and intensifiers as low-influence subjects would have. Using these actual frequencies, analyses of variance no longer showed any significant difference between condi-

tions. Apparently, the cause of low influence was due to the rate rather than the absolute number of these variables.

One may also note that insofar as the number of words per turn was concerned, the rate was only marginally larger in the high- than low-influence condition (means = 27 and 21). It appeared that words merely heaped as turns increased, suggesting that turns were more crucial than words in determining influence. The ability of winning the floor was a precondition to influence (which seems reasonable given the interactive nature of the conversational groups), even though it might not be a sufficient condition for influence. Future research may profitably examine the syntactic and intonational means of winning the floor, such as interruption markers, appositionals, increased amplitude, slowing tempo, and lengthened vowels (Levinson, 1983; O'Barr, 1984; Sacks *et al.*, 1974). The results will throw light on the politics of turn-taking, and may deepen our understanding of emergent leadership (Morris & Hackman, 1969).

Polite forms did not significantly distinguish low-influence subjects from high-influence subjects, but the trend was there. Tag questions failed completely to differentiate low- from high-influence subjects. From the conversation recordings, it became apparent that subjects could use tag questions in at least two different ways. Firstly, with a rising intonation, the speaker made allowance for differing opinions, and appeared unsure of himself or herself. Secondly, with a flat or dropping intonation, the speaker, on the contrary, was tacitly demanding agreement from others. As identical tag questions could change meaning through different intonation, this might explain the negative result.

There was a trend for hedges to associate with influence rather than, as initially predicted, low influence. This reverse finding is interesting because several authors (e.g. Bradac, 1982: 105) seem to be convinced that hedges are associated with powerlessness. To understand this, we need to examine the function of hedging in relation to the social context of the conversation.

Commercial surrogacy was a controversial, emotionally-charged, and relatively new social phenomenon, of which the subjects had little or no personal experience. Most part of the conversations centred around hypothetical outcomes of legislation, or around other, equally hypothetical issues. Subjects were largely concerned with imagining how individuals involved with commercial surrogacy would think, feel, or act. The course of the conversation usually began with attempts to identify areas of concern and then to discuss what the government ought to do about them. The successful nomination of a particular area of concern for discussion was a major act of influence. To achieve this, the interlocutor must avoid being seen as overbearing or domineering. Hedging, in this context, became an effective forerunner of positive influence, saying, in effect, that 'This is only my personal view, I am not very sure about it but I think it is important to . . .' Similarly, in proposing solutions, subjects who hedged (thereby acknowledging the hypothetical nature of their answers) were more well received than those who asserted in no uncertain terms. The present setting may be contrasted with the courtroom situation where witnesses do not guide the direction of the cross-examination nor are they expected to speculate. To hedge in the courtroom is

'powerless'; but to hedge when exploring social reality among peers may in fact be 'powerful.'

Hedging is not a particularly typical feature of New Zealand English (Gordon & Deverson, 1985), nor is it frequently used by New Zealand speakers. However, tactful hedging has a certain charm which enables the speaker to maintain audience interest without appearing coercive. More research is needed to establish this and other roles of hedging in the context of New Zealand English. Meanwhile, we may conclude on the main issue with a more definite note. The conventional way of thinking about the powerful speech mode as the mere absence of the powerless speech mode is unsatisfactory, misleading at times, and given the results of the present study, no longer necessary. Turns and words, and possibly hedges, are the positive features of the powerful speech mode in student conversational groups, just as intensifiers and intonation are the positive features of the powerless speech mode.

Appendix: Scoring guideline

1. *Words*: All utterances are counted, including hesitation forms (um, ah, er . . .) and incomplete words.
2. *Turns*: Only successful turns are counted, A turn is successful if the speaker makes a sensible comment, other than simply agreeing or disagreeing (i.e. a turn involves successfully 'taking the floor'). For example: 'Yeah, you'd have to sort of, um . . .' does not count as a turn, whereas: 'Brave New World' does.
3. *Intonation*: An intonation of a questioning type is one which is clearly discernable as a rising intonation, and does not occur during a question (i.e. it occurs during a declarative statement).
4. *Intensifiers*: Any word or phrase which serves to stress a statement, e.g. 'really', 'very', 'actually'. Note that not all instances of these words should be counted as intensifiers, since subjects might not always use these words to stress points, e.g. 'really' may be used as a hedge.
5. *Polite forms*: These are requests which leave the decision of whether to comply or not with the addressee, e.g. '. . . wouldn't you agree . . .?'
6. *Tag questions*: Any question expressing uncertainty about the truth of a claim, e.g. '. . . you know?', '. . . Don't you?'.
7. *Hedges*: A hedge is any statement which qualifies a speaker's position, or allows backing off from firm commitment to the position, e.g. '. . . I think it's going to have to, probably, be run by . . .', here 'probably' counts as a hedge.

Notes

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