

Charisma perception in political speech: difference between normal and disordered voice

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Problem statement

In his book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Max Weber defines charisma as “an extraordinary quality of a personality that is believed endowed with supernatural powers and superhuman properties ... [by which] [s/]he gets recognition as a leader” (Cavalli, 1995, p.5). According to Weber, charisma causes a devoted following from the leader’s followers that is expressed with an attitude that ranges from “trust” to “faith” and that creates what is called “the cult of the leader” (ibid., p. 17).

However, the Weberian conception of charisma and charismatic leader is very abstract. Weber never gives any objective description of the extraordinary qualities that characterize the leader.

In our work, we first highlight the distinction between the “charisma of the mind” and the “charisma of the body”. The charisma of the mind is the result of the leader’s thought and vision and it is expressed through the linguistic and semantic content of his speeches or writings. A charismatic leader talks about himself and reveals his humanity allowing him to reach the masses. Through the “charisma of the mind” a leader inspires and motivates followers who are attracted by and identify with him. Instead, the “charisma of the body” is the verbal and non-verbal perceivable behaviour (e.g., facial expressions, head behaviours, gaze, gestures, prosody, voice quality, etc.) used by the charismatic leader to express, communicate and share his message and also his affects and emotions. Regarding emotions, Scherer (2010) states that the orator should instil emotion in listeners to get them doing things because a completely rational kind of discourse, in a political speech, would not attempt many people. In our study we suggest that within the perceptible voice characteristics of a charismatic political leader, some are more specifically responsible for conveying charisma.

Related works

To the best of our knowledge the first study on the relationship of physical voice characteristics and the perception of charisma was Rosenberg and Hirschberg (2009) that studied the correlation between acoustic, prosodic, and lexico-syntactic characteristics of political speech and the perception of charisma. Other few relevant studies that don’t concern charisma are Touati (1993) that investigated the prosodic features of rhetoric utterances in French political speech in pre and post elections discourses and Martin (2009) that analysed the intonation contour of French political leaders’ speech and its idiosyncratic and contextual variations.

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A study about the acoustic features of charisma

The work we present is part of a general work aimed at finding out if and how some acoustic characteristics of voice affect the expression and the perception of charisma in political leaders. Here we analyse the case of Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Lega Nord, a federalist Italian political party whose aim is the secession of some regions of the North from Italy. Bossi has been recognised as the charismatic leader of this party since its foundation in 1991. In 2004 Bossi suffered from a stroke causing a semi-paralysis. After the accident Bossi experienced, among others physical disabilities, trouble with speech. After a long rehabilitation Bossi returned to be the head of his party.

Our research question is whether speech impairment causes Bossi to be perceived as less charismatic than before the stroke, and whether the dramatic change in his voice characteristics is responsible for the lowering of perceived charisma. To test this hypothesis an analysis of the prosodic-acoustic features of his speech (intonational contour, average *f₀* values, etc.), an analysis on his voice quality (creaky voice, breathy voice, etc.) will be carried out, and instrumental analysis will be followed by a perceptual test.

Methodology: corpus, analysis and results

We analysed two audio samples taken from two speeches performed by Bossi during two traditional Lega Nord summits in Pontida (Lombardy, Italy), one before and one many years after the stroke, respectively, in 1994 (PRE) and in 2011 (POST). First, an auditory and acoustic analysis was run by Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2011). We decomposed and tagged the entire speech in minimal parts by a bottom-up approach. Then we compared the prosodic pattern of similar parts (same or similar topic) of the two speeches.

The first step of auditory and acoustic analysis was followed by a voice quality analysis of the PRE and the POST chunks and by a cross-cultural perceptual test inspired, in part, to Rosenberg & Hirschberg (2009).

First results

According to the first results of the segmentation and of the orthographic transcription, in the PRE speech Bossi uses a precise pattern of speech. Periods on different topics comprised between applauses or acclamations can be easily divided, from a semantic point of view, into semantically and syntactically complete utterances, and from the prosodic point of view into intonational chunks separated by pauses.

On the other hand, in the POST speech it is very difficult to find any pattern like in the PRE: intonational chunks are significantly shorter than in the PRE, while on the semantic side topics are alternated in a disordered way. This might be due to impairment in speech planning. Furthermore Bossi fails in keeping the audience attention, in the POST as opposed to the PRE, as witnessed by the fact that sometimes followers actually interrupt him even if he speaks from a stage causing him to forget the current topic of his speech.

When the voice quality analysis and the perceptual test are carried out, the results of the voice quality and auditory and acoustic analysis will be compared with those of the perceptual test, looking for correlations between voice and speech and the perception of charisma.

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