THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT MARKERS OF LINGUISTIC POWERLESSNESS IN PERSUASION

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This research examined the unique effects of different markers of linguistic powerlessness (hedges, hesitations, and tag questions) on persuasion. Participants read (Experiment 1) or listened to (Experiment 2) a communication advocating comprehensive exams. Under high message relevance, messages containing powerless markers resulted in less favorable attitudes and more negative perceptions of the message and source than did the control message. This effect occurred in both experiments and was a result of these markers lessening the impact of strong arguments; in Experiment 2, strong arguments were no more persuasive than weak arguments when the message contained any of these markers. Under low message relevance, tag questions improved the persuasiveness of message arguments relative to the control condition. These results demonstrate that the effects of linguistic markers of powerlessness are complex and depend on marker type and processing depth.

Keywords: *powerless language; persuasion; attitudes*

Language is probably the most frequent medium for persuasive communications. And because of this, the linguistic content of a communication is crucial for determining persuasive success; strong arguments (assuming they are processed) are usually more effective than weak arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). But linguistic style may

also be important. How something is said may at times be as important as what is said (Brennan & Williams, 1995). Linguistic style is a construct that encompasses a wide variety of linguistic and paralinguistic phenomena (Holtgraves, 2001), including speech rate (Brown, 1980), language intensity (Bowers, 1963), indirectness (Holtgraves, 1997), and so on. In the present research, we focused on an aspect of linguistic style referred to as powerless (vs. powerful) language. We chose to research this dimension because this variable has been of interest to scholars across a variety of disciplines for more than 25 years; variability in linguistic power is clearly a salient feature of how people use language. Surprisingly, however, relatively little research has examined the impact of this variable on persuasion, and the research that has been conducted has produced conflicting results.

POWERFUL VERSUS POWERLESS LANGUAGE

Powerless language refers to the presence of one or more linguistic features such as tag questions, hesitations, disclaimers, hedges, polite forms, and so on. Powerful language refers to the absence of these features. Earlier research by Lakoff (1975) related these styles to gender differences in language use (powerless language was believed more typical of women than men). Findings regarding gender differences were decidedly mixed (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Holtgraves, 1997; Rundquist, 1992), however, and this has led researchers such as O'Barr (1982) to conclude that a putative women's linguistic style is neither characteristic of all women nor limited only to women. Most important, variation in women's language appears to be more related to social powerlessness than to gender per se. Thus, what in the past was referred to as a female linguistic style gradually came to be known as a powerless linguistic style.

Researchers have examined the impact of a powerless linguistic style in a variety of contexts. For example, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) investigated the impact of powerful versus powerless language in the context of a witness's testimony in the courtroom. They presented courtroom statements to participants, with the statements differing only in the type of language used (powerful vs. powerless). Powerless statements included hedges, intensifiers, formal grammar, and polite forms. Their results indicated that the use of the powerful style resulted in higher perceived credibility of the witness and greater acceptance of the position advocated than did the powerless style, and that this occurred regardless of witness gender.

Communication researchers (e.g., Bradac, Hemphill, & Tardy, 1981; Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Hosman, 1989; Johnson & Vinson, 1990; Wright & Hosman, 1983) have also conducted research on powerless language. Results from these studies have been consistent with those of the Erickson et al. (1978) study: The use of powerless language produces

negative judgments of the communicator's sociability (attractiveness and likability) and competence (Bradac & Mulac, 1984). In addition, people who use powerful language (at least in the courtroom) are perceived more favorably with respect to social power, credibility, attractiveness, and intelligence relative to those who use powerless language (Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Erickson et al., 1978; Gibbons, Busch, & Bradac, 1991; Hosman & Wright, 1987). Overall, then, research on linguistic power suggests that those who use a powerless style will be perceived negatively on the dimensions of credibility, power, and competence.

Linguistic Power and Persuasion

Given the effect of powerless language on perceptions of a speaker, it is surprising that very little research has been conducted on linguistic power and persuasion. Furthermore, an examination of the research that has been done indicates inconsistent and/or inconclusive results. Carli (1990) examined the effects of powerful versus powerless (tentative) language on persuasion as a function of the gender of the speaker and the listener. She found that the effects of linguistic power on message agreement depended on the gender of the speaker and the listener. Specifically, a female speaker was more persuasive with males when she used powerless language but was more persuasive with females when she used powerful language. When the speaker was male, linguistic power had no effect on persuasion.

Gibbons et al. (1991) were the first researchers to use the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as a guide to examine the effects of linguistic power on persuasion. They had participants read a message in which arguments were either stated in powerless (i.e., containing hedges, hesitations, and tag questions) or powerful language. They also varied personal relevance and argument strength. They found that powerless speech had a significant effect on perceptions of the speaker, but it did not influence how the participants felt about the position being advocated. Holtgraves and Lasky (1999) used an auditory message and examined the effects of linguistic power on persuasion as a function of gender of speaker, gender of participant, and distraction. Participants in this study were more persuaded with a powerful language message than with a powerless language message. In addition, the effect of linguistic power on persuasion was mediated by both perceptions of the speaker and the perceptions of the message, and these effects occurred when participants could process the message deeply as well as when they were distracted and hence not able to process the message deeply. More recently, Hosman, Huebner, and Siltanen (2002) found that powerless language negatively affected persuasion but found little evidence to suggest whether linguistic power acted as an argument or a peripheral cue.

Clearly, there is conflicting evidence regarding the effects of linguistic powerlessness on persuasion. Powerless language had no effect on persuasion (regardless of participant involvement) in the Gibbons et al. (1991) study. In contrast, Holtgraves and Lasky (1999) found powerless language had an effect on persuasion for participants who could and could not process the message deeply, and Hosman et al. (2002) found a decrease in persuasion with powerless language. Carli (1990), on the other hand, found that linguistic power affected persuasion via an interaction with speaker and recipient gender. There are at least two possible reasons for these conflicting results. One possible explanation is the mode of presentation. Sparks, Areni, and Cox (1998) examined the possible effect of linguistic power on persuasion as a function of the mode of communication (written vs. audio vs. video). When the message was presented in written form, powerless language did not influence persuasion or had a weak effect on persuasion, a finding that is consistent with the results of the Gibbons et al. study. In contrast, when the message was in audio or video form, linguistic power had an effect on attitudes toward the message, consistent with the results of Holtgraves and Lasky and Carli. In the present research, we used both written (Experiment 1) and auditory (Experiment 2) materials to test for the possible difference in message modality.

A second possible reason is that Carli (1990), Holtgraves and Lasky (1999), Hosman et al. (2002), and Gibbons et al. (1991) used different powerlessness markers in their research. Carli used tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers (e.g., "I may not be an expert, but . . ."), whereas Holtgraves and Lasky and Hosman et al. used tag questions, hesitations, and hedges. Gibbons et al. used the same types of markers as Holtgraves and Lasky, but used fewer of them. This raises the issue of the relative effects of different linguistic markers of powerlessness. Researchers in the past have appeared to assume, at least implicitly, that the various linguistic markers of powerlessness are roughly equivalent, and thus, that it is permissible to combine them in order to create a powerless message. However, some research suggests that not all markers of linguistic powerlessness have the same effect. For example, Bradac and Mulac (1984) examined the separate effects of powerless language markers on perceptions of the speaker in the context of a job interview. They found that the powerful and polite forms were perceived by participants as being the most powerful and effective, followed in descending order by deictic phrases, hedges, tag questions, and hesitations. Hence, it is possible that these markers will have different types of effects on the persuasiveness of a message. Very little research has been conducted to test this possibility. Previous research examining the effects of linguistic power markers have perhaps assumed that these markers have similar effects (O'Barr, 1982), and this may be why conflicting results are found. Before one can understand the combined effects of different markers on persuasion, first

focusing on how each marker affects persuasion may help clarify past research as well as provide new predictions for future research. In addition, it is also possible that these markers will vary in terms of *how* they effect the persuasion process. The present research was designed to investigate both of these issues.

We conducted two experiments to examine the effect of different markers of linguistic power on persuasion. In both experiments participants read (Experiment 1) or listened to (Experiment 2) a persuasive message advocating the institution of comprehensive exams as a graduation requirement. Linguistic power was manipulated by constructing versions of the message that contained either no markers of powerlessness (the control, or powerful, version), or multiple instances of a linguistic marker of powerlessness: hedges, hesitations, and tag questions (Experiment 2 only). These three markers were chosen because of their frequent use in past powerless language research (Ng & Bradac, 1993). Experiment 1 was an initial, exploratory study of the effects of two of these markers on persuasion. It was expected that both hesitations and hedges would have negative effects on the persuasiveness of the message (replicating Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999, and Hosman et al., 2002). Experiment 2 involved a more complex design in order to assess in greater detail the processes through which linguistic power played a role in persuasion.

EXPERIMENT 1

This was an exploratory study designed to investigate several issues. First, previous research on linguistic power and persuasion has produced conflicting results, due in part to the use of different stimulus modalities. In general, research using written materials has failed to demonstrate an effect of linguistic power on persuasion (Gibbons et al., 1991), or has yielded weak effects (Hosman et al., 2002). However, before concluding that linguistic markers of powerlessness have no effect on persuasion when written materials are used, we deemed it wise to examine this possibility again. The second goal of this experiment was to determine whether two markers of linguistic power (hesitations and hedges) were similar in terms of their effects on persuasion. This was accomplished by constructing different powerless messages that contained either hesitations or hedges.

A third goal was to examine *how* these markers might affect persuasion. This was accomplished by manipulating message relevance. In general, increasing the relevance of a message increases the extent to which participants will process the message deeply (i.e., systematically or via the central route). Under conditions of high message relevance, variables such as argument quality tend to have an impact on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). One possibility, then, is that the

linguistic markers examined in this study—hedges and hesitations—will decrease the perceived quality of the message by lessening message forcefulness (Wright & Hosman, 1983). If this is the case, then these markers should decrease persuasion (relative to the control message) under conditions of high relevance but not necessarily when relevance is low.

In contrast, when message relevance is relatively low, participants tend to process messages in a more superficial manner (heuristically, or via the peripheral route). Under these conditions, variables such as speaker credibility and attractiveness will have an impact on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Past research has demonstrated that the use of hedges and hesitations can result in the speaker being negatively evaluated on several dimensions (Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Hosman, 1989; Hosman & Wright, 1987; McCroskey & Mehrley, 1969; Miller & Hewgill, 1964). A second possibility, then, is that the linguistic markers examined in this study (hedges and hesitations) will result in less persuasion due to the more negative evaluation of the speaker, and that this should be more likely to occur under conditions of low rather than high message relevance. Finally, in addition to assessing attitudes toward the message topic, we also included measures of participants' perceptions of the speaker and the message as a means of assessing the possibility that the effects of these markers on persuasion are mediated by their impact on perceptions of the message and source.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 63 female and 40 male introductory psychology students who received partial credit toward completion of course requirements. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36, with a mean of 19.1 years and a standard deviation of 2.3 years. They participated in groups of 2 to 7 in a classroom setting.

Design

Participants read a message arguing that comprehensive final exams should be implemented for seniors in all majors. The message consisted of sample arguments adapted from Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The design was a 3 (linguistic marker: none vs. hesitation vs. hedge) $\times$ 2 (relevance: low vs. high) completely crossed, between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions.

To manipulate message relevance, participants in the high-relevance condition were given a paragraph explaining that as a result of a recent academic reevaluation, the president of the university had recommended a number of changes that their university would begin the next academic year. The editorial described one of the changes that would personally affect each of the students. For participants in the low-relevance conditions, the background paragraph explained that the editorial would concern a proposal that the president of a distant university (University of Pittsburgh) had recommended be in effect at this institution in 10 years. Thus, none of the students present would be affected personally by the proposal. The message contained three major arguments that were logically sound, defensible, and compelling. The specific arguments in the message were taken from the strong communications described by Petty and Cacioppo (1986).

Finally, one powerful and two linguistic marker versions of the messages were constructed. The version containing hedges (e.g., "sort of," "probably") had six hedges in the message. The version containing hesitations (e.g., "um . . .," "ah . . .,") had six hesitations in the message. Finally, the powerful version of the message had none of the powerless language markers. The number of words in the messages was 315, 312, and 305, respectively.

Dependent Measures

Three sets of dependent measures were used assessing participants' attitude toward the advocated position, perceptions of the speaker, and perceptions of the message. Attitudes toward the message proposal (attitude favorability) were assessed with five 9-point semantic differential scales (beneficial/harmful, wise/foolish, good/bad, favorable/unfavorable, and desirable/undesirable) and a single 9-point question regarding the extent to which respondents agreed with the message proposal (*strongly agree/strongly disagree*).

Participants also rated their perceptions of the source using 9-point scales as done by Gibbons et al. (1991) and Holtgraves and Lasky (1999). Participants indicated their perceptions of the source's likability (*not very likable/very likable*), competence (*not very competent/very competent*), knowledge (*not very knowledgeable/very knowledgeable*), and trustworthiness (*not very trustworthy/very trustworthy*). Participants also indicated their perceptions of the message. This was done using four 9-point items assessing the message's soundness (*not very sound/very sound*), reasoning (*not very well reasoned/very well reasoned*), strength (*not very strong/very strong*), and logic (*not very logical/very logical*). Additional questions were included that served as filler items.

Manipulation checks embedded in the questionnaire assessed the effectiveness of the linguistic power manipulation and relevance

manipulation. The linguistic power manipulation check consisted of four items that assessed the extent to which the speaker stammered, added questions, used terms like "kind of" and "sort of," as well as perceptions of how powerful the speaker's language was. The relevance manipulation check consisted of one item assessing how relevant the message was to participants.

Procedure

Participants were told that each year the psychology department assists the College of Communication, Information, and Media in evaluating radio editorials that are sent in by colleges and universities throughout the country, and their task would be to provide ratings of the broadcast quality of the editorials. Following these instructions, participants signed an informed consent form, listened to some introductory remarks about the editorials they were about to read, and then read one of the messages. After reading the editorial, participants completed the dependent measures and were debriefed and given course credit for participating. This procedure is similar to the one used by Petty, Cacioppo, and Heesacker (1981).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation Checks

The analyses indicated that the two manipulations were successful. Participants in the high-relevance condition tended to perceive the message as more personally relevant relative to the low-relevance condition ($M = 5.7$ vs. 4.77), $t(102) = 1.82, p = .07$. Participants in the hesitation conditions perceived the speaker as stammering more often relative to the control condition ($M = 7.23$ vs. 2.88), $t(61) = 10.28, p < .001$. Participants in the hedge conditions perceived the speaker as using words such as "kind of" and "sort of" more often relative to the control condition ($M = 6.55$ vs. 2.39), $t(58) = 6.11, p < .001$.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA examined participants' perceptions of speaker power, which was found to be significant $F(2, 103) = 9.44, p < .001$. The message containing no powerless language markers was rated significantly more powerful ($M = 5.47$) than the messages containing hesitations (3.97), and hedges (3.59), with no difference in perceptions of speaker power between hesitations and hedges $t(66) = 0.82, p = .42$.

Major Analyses

The major dependent measure—attitude favorability—was created by computing the mean of the five semantic differential items and one Likert-type scale agreement item ($\alpha = .92$). In addition, composite measures of perceptions of the message (soundness, reasoning, strength, logic; $\alpha = .92$) and perceptions of the speaker (likable, competent, knowledgeable, trustworthy; $\alpha = .85$) were constructed.

Each of the dependent measures was analyzed with a 3 (linguistic marker) $\times$ 2 (relevance) ANOVA. Significant effects for linguistic power were followed up with the Newman-Keuls procedure. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Significant main effects for language occurred for attitudes toward the proposal, $F(2, 98) = 6.91$, $p < .01$, perceptions of the message, $F(2, 98) = 10.9$, $p < .01$, and perceptions of the source, $F(2, 98) = 11.65$, $p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 1, participants who read the message containing linguistic Markers of powerlessness had more negative attitudes toward the proposal, and perceived the message and the source more negatively, than participant who read the control message. These effects occurred regardless of message relevance as the Relevance $\times$ Linguistic marker interaction was not significant for any of the dependent measures (all ps > .61). Follow-up tests indicated no significant differences between the two markers—hesitations and hedges—on any of the dependent measures.

Overall, these results suggest that (a) markers of linguistic powerlessness can have an effect on persuasion with written messages, (b) the effect is largely negative, (c) the effect occurs via both the central (under conditions of high-message relevance) and the peripheral (under conditions of low-message relevance) routes, and (d) the effects of hedges and hesitations on persuasion are roughly similar.

There are several limitations of this study. First, the manipulation check for message relevance was only marginally significant. Hence, it would be desirable to examine the possible moderating role of message relevance with a stronger manipulation. Second, although linguistic power had an effect on persuasion, we have no direct evidence regarding the specific process or processes that underlies or underlie this effect. Third, only two linguistic markers of powerlessness were examined in this study. Before concluding that linguistic markers of powerlessness have similar effects on persuasion, it would be helpful to examine the effects of other markers of powerlessness. All of these issues were examined in Experiment 2.

Table 1

Attitude Favorability and Perceptions of Message and Speaker as a Function of Linguistic Power: Experiment 1

	Control	Hesitations	Hedges
Attitude favorability	6.31_a	5.19_b	4.75_b
Perceptions of the speaker	6.8_a	5.47_b	5.11_b
Perceptions of the message	6.7_a	5.22_b	4.82_b

Note: Row means (within each level of relevance) not having a subscript in common are significantly different at $p < .05$ using Newman-Keuls.

EXPERIMENT 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to replicate and extend the results of the first experiment. The general method and materials were the same as in Experiment 1. However, several changes were made. First, we included an argument-strength manipulation in order to examine in more detail how linguistic markers of powerlessness affect persuasion. Second, we included tag questions as a third marker of linguistic powerlessness. Third, we used audio rather than written versions of the message.

As in Experiment 1, we expected messages containing markers of linguistic powerlessness to have a negative effect on persuasion and perceptions of the message and source. However, the more complex design of this experiment allowed for a more detailed assessment of *how* linguistic power can affect persuasion. We used the ELM of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as a guide to possible effects. An interesting feature of the ELM is the notion that some variables can affect persuasion through multiple routes. This multiple-roles notion states that any given variable (e.g., mood; Wegener, Petty, & Smith, 1995) can affect persuasion by serving as a cue, an argument, by biasing the processing or information, or by affecting the amount of thought given to an advocated position (Petty & Wegener, 1999). It is possible that linguistic markers of powerlessness could affect persuasion through any one of these routes.

Our starting point was research conducted by Petty et al. (1981). These researchers investigated the impact of rhetorical questions (roughly similar to tag questions in the powerless language literature) on persuasion. They found that rhetorical questions interacted with message relevance and argument quality. In general, when message relevance was high, tag questions were distracting and inhibited the processing of strong arguments (and hence decreased persuasion). This suggests that the linguistic markers of powerlessness examined in Experiment 1 had a negative effect on attitudes because these markers disrupted the processing of the strong arguments contained in that

message. The inclusion of an argument-quality manipulation in this experiment allowed us to test that possibility. In this experiment, then, we expected that when participants were motivated to process the message, markers of linguistic powerlessness would be distracting and hence decrease the effectiveness of strong arguments. Hence, we expected strong arguments to be more persuasive than weak arguments in the control message condition but not for messages containing markers of linguistic powerlessness.

Second, when perceivers are not motivated to process a message, markers of linguistic powerlessness could still play a role in persuasion, albeit via a process different from that played when motivation to process the message is high. In Petty et al.'s (1981) research, rhetorical questions enhanced the effectiveness of strong arguments when message relevance was low. They did this by prompting participants to process the arguments more deeply. We expected a similar effect in this research. Hence, under conditions of low relevance we expected a strong-argument message containing tag questions to be more effective than a strong-argument message not containing tag questions.

Third, our expectations for hedges and hesitations were different. These markers should not facilitate the processing of message arguments in the same way as tag questions. Instead, consistent with Experiment 1, we expected these markers to have a negative effect on attitudes and perceptions of the message and source when relevance was low.

Finally, in addition to examining the processes through which linguistic markers of powerlessness might affect persuasion, we were interested also in the ultimate effects that these markers have on persuasion. That is, are tag questions, hedges, and hesitations similar in terms of their effects on the recipients' attitudes? The hypotheses outlined above involve some predictions in this regard (e.g., under conditions of low relevance, tag questions should result in more favorable attitudes than hesitations or hedges). In addition, we tested for other possible differences between the markers as a means of determining whether they were equivalent in terms of their effects on persuasion.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 219 female and 132 male introductory psychology students who received partial credit toward completion of course requirements. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 with a mean of 19.6 years and a standard deviation of 2.8 years. They participated in groups of 8 to 12 in a classroom setting.

Design

Participants listened to an audio compact disk of a male speaker arguing that comprehensive final exams should be implemented for seniors in all majors. The message consisted of sample arguments adapted from Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The design was a 4 (linguistic marker: none vs. tag question vs. hesitations vs. hedges) × 2 (relevance: low vs. high) × 2 (argument quality: weak vs. strong) completely crossed, between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of the 16 conditions.

To manipulate message relevance, we used the same procedure as in Study 1. The message also contained either three major arguments that were logically sound, defensible, and compelling (strong-argument condition) or that were open to challenge and easy to refute (weak-argument condition). The specific arguments in the message were taken from the strong and weak communications described by Petty and Cacioppo (1986).

Finally, one powerful and three powerless language versions of the strong- and weak-argument messages were constructed. The version containing tag questions had six tag questions (e.g., "right?" "isn't it?" "don't you think?") in the message. The version containing hedges (e.g., "sort of," "probably") had six hedges in the message. The version containing hesitations (e.g., "um . . .," "ah . . .") had six hesitations in the message. Finally, the powerful version of the message had none of the powerless language markers.[1]

Dependent Measures

The dependent measures were similar to those used in Experiment 1 with the addition of a manipulation check item designed to assess the argument-quality manipulation.[2]

After completing the attitude scales, participants completed a cognitive response task similar to the one used in the Petty et al. (1981) study. Participants were given 3 minutes to list the thoughts they had while listening to the message. After recording their thoughts, participants were instructed to rate their thoughts as either plus (in favor of senior comprehensive exams), minus (opposed to senior comprehensive exams), or zero (neutral or irrelevant).

Procedure

The procedure was similar to that used in Experiment 1 except that after listening to the introductory remarks, participants listened to an audio version of the message, which was of a male voice reading the editorial.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation Checks

The analyses indicated that the three manipulations were successful. Participants in the high-relevance condition perceived the message as more personally relevant than did participants in the low-relevance condition ($M = 5.13$ vs. 4.2), $t(349) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, and participants perceived the strong-argument messages as being stronger than the weak-argument messages ($M = 4.41$ vs. 4.02), $t(349) = 2.53$, $p < .01$. In addition, participants in the strong-argument condition produced more positive cognitive responses relative to the weak-argument condition ($M = 2.01$ vs. 0.02), $t(349) = 14.51$, $p < .001$, and participants in the weak-argument condition produced more negative cognitive responses relative to the strong argument condition ($M = 3.2$ vs. 1.1), $t(349) = 11.51$, $p < .001$. Participants in the tag question conditions perceived the speaker as adding more questions relative to the control condition ($M = 6.5$ vs. 2.4), $t(173) = 22.44$, $p < .001$. Participants in the hesitation conditions perceived the speaker as stammering more often relative to the control condition ($M = 5.1$ vs. 2.5), $t(177) = 12.34$, $p < .001$. Participants in the hedge conditions perceived the speaker as using words such as "kind of" and "sort of" more often relative to the control condition ($M = 5.18$ vs. 2.0), $t(176) = 12.48$, $p < .001$.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA examined participants' perceptions of speaker power, which was found to be significant $F(3, 347) = 17.16$, $p < .001$. The message containing no powerless language markers was rated significantly more powerful ($M = 4.34$) than the messages containing tag questions (3.59), hedges (3.31), and hesitations (2.94).

Major Analyses

The major dependent measure—attitude favorability—was created by computing the mean of the five semantic differential items and one Likert-type scale agreement item ($\alpha = .91$). In addition, composite measures of perceptions of the message (soundness, reasoning, strength, logic; $\alpha = .89$) and perceptions of the speaker (likable, competent, knowledgeable, trustworthy; $\alpha = .85$) were constructed. An overall measure of thought favorability was constructed by subtracting the number of participant-rated negative thoughts from the number of positive thoughts and dividing this sum by the total number of thoughts.

The first hypothesis was that when participants were motivated to process the message (high-message relevance), linguistic markers of powerlessness would distract them from comprehending a message containing strong arguments. Hence, it was expected that strong

arguments would be more effective than weak arguments for the control message but not for messages containing linguistic markers of powerlessness. An ANOVA performed on attitude favorability for participants in the high-relevance condition yielded a reliable Linguistic Marker × Argument Strength interaction, $F(1, 173) = 8.56$, $p = .004$. Simple effects indicated that strong arguments ($M = 5.74$) were more effective than weak arguments ($M = 4.67$) for the control message, $F(1, 44) = 25.21$, $p < .001$, but not for the messages containing markers of powerlessness ($M = 4.26$ vs. 4.32), $F(1, 129) < 1$.

The cognitive response data provided additional support for this hypothesis. There was a reliable Linguistic Power × Argument Strength interaction for this variable, $F(1, 173) = 5.41$, $p = .02$, and simple effects analyses indicated that the linguistic markers of powerlessness had a larger effect on thought favorability for the strong arguments (2.0 vs. –0.65), $F(1, 87) = 31.52$, $p < .001$, than for the weak arguments (–1.3 vs. –2.3), $F(1, 86) = 4.38$, $p = .04$.[3] These results help explain how linguistic markers of powerlessness affect processing when message relevance is high. Each of these markers disrupts the processing, and hence the impact, of strong arguments.

The second hypothesis was that when participants were not motivated to process the message (low relevance), tag questions would stimulate processing of the arguments and hence increase the effectiveness of strong arguments (i.e., Petty et al., 1981). We analyzed attitude favorability (for participants in the low-relevance condition) as a function of argument strength and linguistic marker (control vs. tag questions). There was a reliable language main effect, $F(1, 81) = 9.31$, $p < .01$, with tag questions producing greater attitude favorability ($M = 5.09$) than the control message ($M = 4.40$). The Linguistic Marker × Argument Strength interaction was not significant, $F(1, 81) < 1$; tag questions resulted in greater attitude favorability for both strong (Ms = 5.48 vs. 4.73) and weak (Ms = 4.70 vs. 4.07) arguments. Thus, when relevance was low, tag questions enhanced the effectiveness of all arguments, regardless of their quality.

Third, unlike tag questions, we expected that under conditions of low relevance, hesitations and hedges would result in negative perceptions of the speaker and message and less favorable attitudes toward the proposal (similar to Hosman, 1989). These measures were analyzed (for participants in the low-relevance condition) as a function of linguistic power (marker vs. control) and argument strength. The message was perceived more negatively when it contained hedges ($M = 4.08$) than when it did not ($M = 4.70$), $F(1, 82) = 6.56$, $p < .01$. Hesitations did not have a significant effect on perceptions of the message, $F(1, 85) < 1$. In addition, the speaker was perceived more negatively when the message contained hesitations ($M = 4.12$) than when it did not ($M = 4.68$), $F(1, 85) = 7.52$, $p < .01$. The effect for hedges was in the same direction (Ms = 4.3 vs. 4.68) and marginally significant, $F(1, 82) =$

3.53, $p < .06$. However, neither hedges, $F(1, 82) = 2.9$, $p = .09$, nor hesitations, $F(1, 85)$ 1, had a reliable effect for the attitude favorability measure.

Although hesitations and hedges affected perceptions of the message and source, these markers did not have a corresponding effect on attitude favorability when message relevance was low. However, as noted above, these markers (together with tag questions) did have a reliable effect on attitude favorability when relevance was high. Subsequent analyses confirmed that the effect of these markers on attitudes was significant when tested separately against the control message, hesitations: $F(1, 85) = 37.25$, $p < .01$; hedges: $F(1, 87) = 17.53$, $p < .01$. In addition, as can be seen in Table 2, these markers had reliable effects on perceptions of the message and source, and cognitive responses, when message relevance was high. In short, hesitations and hedges had a slightly negative impact on perceptions (but not attitude favorability) when message relevance was low, but a strongly negative impact on both perceptions and attitude favorability when relevance was high.

Supplementary Analyses

We conducted additional post hoc analyses (all ps $< .05$ using Newman-Keuls) to explore possible differences between the linguistic markers in terms of their effects on persuasion. These analyses were conducted separately for the high- and low-relevance conditions and are summarized in Table 2. Although the linguistic markers, as a group, distracted participants and hence lowered the effectiveness of strong arguments when message relevance was high (as noted above), there were some differences between these markers in terms of their overall effects on persuasion (collapsing over argument quality). Specifically, hesitations resulted in significantly less attitude favorability ($M = 4.03$) than the hedges ($M = 4.31$) or tag questions ($M = 4.52$), and all of these markers produced less attitude favorability than the control message ($M = 5.20$).

Hesitations also produced significantly more negative perceptions of the speaker ($M = 3.75$) than did tag questions ($M = 4.4$), with hedges ($M = 3.9$) falling between the two. And hesitations resulted in more negative thoughts ($M = -2.02$) than hedges ($M = -1.3$) and tag questions ($M = -1.16$). The order of the markers was somewhat different for perceptions of message strength. Hedges produced more negative perceptions of the message ($M = 3.60$) than hesitations ($M = 4.18$), and hesitations were significantly more negative than tag questions ($M = 4.70$).

The results were different under conditions of low relevance. Tag questions resulted in greater attitude favorability ($M = 5.09$) than hedges ($M = 4.80$), hesitations ($M = 4.84$), and the control message ($M =$

Table 2

Attitude Favorability, Perceptions of Message and Speaker, and Thought Favorability as a Function of Message Relevance and Linguistic Power: Experiment 2

Measure	Low-Message Relevance				High-Message Relevance			
	Control	Tags	Hesitations	Hedges	Control	Tags	Hesitations	Hedges
Attitude favorability	4.40_b	5.09_a	4.83_b	4.80_b	5.20_a	4.52_b	4.03_c	4.31_b
Perceptions of								
Message	4.70_{ab}	4.94_a	4.71_{ab}	4.08_b	5.23_a	4.70_a	4.18_b	3.60_c
Speaker	4.68_a	4.60_a	4.12_a	4.30_a	5.05_a	4.40_b	3.75_c	3.90_{bc}
Thought favorability	-0.81_a	$-.69_a$	-1.54_a	-1.86_a	0.34_a	-1.16_b	-2.02_c	-1.3_b

Note: Row means (within each level of relevance) not having a subscript in common are significantly different at $p < .05$ using Newman-Keuls.

4.40). With one exception, there were no other differences between the markers under conditions of low relevance. The only other difference occurred for perceptions of the message, with hedges resulting in significantly more negative perceptions of the message ($M = 4.08$) than tag questions ($M = 4.94$).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The overall purpose of this research was to examine the impact of different markers of linguistic power on persuasion. Prior research on this topic has been inconclusive. Some studies have demonstrated that linguistic markers of powerlessness can have an impact on persuasion (e.g., Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999); others have shown no effect (Gibbons et al., 1991). Moreover, past research has used both auditory and written messages and has included a set of diverse linguistic (and paralinguistic) features presumed to be markers of linguistic powerlessness. The purpose of the present research was to (a) examine again the effect of these markers on persuasion using both written (Experiment 1) and auditory (Experiment 2) messages, (b) examine *how* these markers might affect persuasion, and (c) explore the possibility that these markers have different effects on persuasion. Our results can be summarized as follows.

First, with some important exceptions to be noted below, linguistic markers of powerlessness appear to have clear, negative effects on persuasion. In both Experiments 1 and 2, messages that contained hedges or hesitations resulted in more negative attitudes toward the proposal, message, and source relative to a message that did not contain these markers. This effect occurred with both written and auditory materials and was roughly similar over levels of issue relevance.

Second, in terms of how these markers affect persuasion, the present results suggest the effects vary as a function of processing depth and marker type. In both experiments, all linguistic markers of powerlessness had negative effects on persuasion when participants were motivated to process the message. The results of Experiment 2 suggest that this occurs because these markers are distracting and hence lessen the overall impact of strong arguments. In Experiment 2, the normally persuasive impact of strong arguments (relative to weak arguments) was eliminated when the message contained markers of linguistic powerlessness. Similar effects occurred for cognitive responses, suggesting that the reduction in argument effectiveness was due to greater negativity in the thoughts that participants generated while they processed the message. The effect was similar for the three markers examined in this study.

The effects of powerlessness markers are different when people are not motivated to process a message. Although the effects on persuasion were generally negative, they were not as strong as when participants

were motivated to process the message. Moreover, the markers varied in terms of their effects on persuasion. Specifically, in Experiment 2 one of the markers, tag questions, resulted in more favorable attitudes than the control message when message relevance was low. It did this by instigating deeper argument processing, a positive benefit that did not occur with hedges and hesitations. Hence, under certain conditions some markers of powerlessness actually may be beneficial. The results for the other two markers—hedges and hesitations—were somewhat mixed. In both experiments, their use produced more negative perceptions of the message and the speaker relative to the control message. Their use also resulted in more negative attitudes toward the message proposal, although this difference was not significant in Experiment 2.

Third, our results suggest that the three markers we examined may differ in terms of *how* they effect persuasion. Tag questions appear to affect persuasion either by instigating argument processing (when relevance is low) or disrupting processing (when relevance is high). This pattern is the same as that reported by Petty et al. (1981) in their research on rhetorical questions, and it suggests that tag questions operate via the central route, either disrupting the effects of strong arguments when participants are processing the message deeply or by instigating deeper processing when message relevance is low.

The manner in which hesitations and hedges operate is somewhat less clear. Both had their strongest effects under conditions of high relevance rather than under conditions of low relevance. For hesitations, this was surprising. Hesitations, it seemed to us, would operate as a peripheral cue (similar to physical attractiveness) and affect persuasion when message relevance was low. Of course, hesitations did have clear effects on perceptions of the speaker in both Experiments 1 and 2. However, in Experiment 2 those effects were greater when relevance was high, and when relevance was low these perceptions did not affect attitude favorability. Note that this finding could be interpreted within Kruglanski and Thompson's (1999) unimodel of persuasion. In that model, persuasion does not occur through two qualitatively different routes but rather through one single mode. The different persuasion routes uncovered in prior research are assumed to be a result of a confounding of information presentation and information type (i.e., source cues are always shorter and simpler than argument manipulations). Importantly, this confounding does not occur with hesitations. Unlike some source cues (e.g., expertise), this marker appears throughout the message precisely in conditions under which peripheral cues will play a role similar to that played by arguments.

Hedges had the most negative effect on perceptions of the message. In both experiments, and regardless of whether relevance was low or high, hedges resulted in more negative perceptions of the message than any other marker or the control message, an effect that was particularly detrimental for the strong argument condition in Experiment

2. We conducted mediational analyses to see whether the effect of hedges on attitude favorability was accounted for by their effects on message perception. The results of an ANCOVA examining the effect of hedges on attitude favorability indicated that the effects were no longer significant when perceptions of the message was used as a covariate, $F(1, 88) < 1$. However, when attitude favorability was used as a covariate, $F(1, 88) = 24.99, p < .001$, the effect of hedges on perceptions of the message remained significant, $F(1, 88) = 26.90, p < .001$. Because hedges have such a strong effect on message perceptions, and because their effects on attitude favorability occurred only when participants were motivated to process the message deeply, hedges, similar to tag questions, appear to operate via the central route.

Overall, the present results suggest that the effects of linguistic markers of powerlessness on persuasion are complex, and because of this complexity, prior research on this topic has yielded conflicting results. First and foremost, it may be an overgeneralization to conceptualize these markers as a monolithic group. Under some conditions, these markers can have opposite effects on persuasion. Some of the inconsistency in past research may be due to researchers using different types of markers. This is not to say that these markers can not co-occur. Clearly, they can, as past research (e.g., O'Barr, 1982) has demonstrated. However, going back a few steps to examine individual markers and their (non)persuasive effects might prove fruitful. In addition, although not examined in this research, it is also possible that researchers have differed in terms of the number of markers included in a message, a difference that could also contribute to different results. The effects of some markers, for example, may be curvilinear. In certain contexts, a few well-placed hedges might yield a positive benefit by tempering perceptions of the speaker as being absolutist. Of course, as the number of hedges increases, the benefit could turn into a liability.

Second, the impact these markers have on persuasion will vary as a function of motivation to process a message, as well as message variables such as argument quality. Differences in how these variables were manipulated, and whether they were even included, may explain some past discrepancies. For example, if argument quality is not manipulated and only relatively poor arguments are used, then linguistic markers of powerlessness will appear to have little effect on persuasion under conditions of low relevance. This, of course, is misleading, as these markers can have very strong effects when message relevance is high, but by distracting participants and hence lessening the impact of strong arguments.

Finally, the hypotheses regarding the role of tag questions in persuasion were based on work on rhetorical questions. Although there are differences between tag questions and rhetorical questions (see Areni, 2003, for a review), similarities do exist. As with rhetorical

questions (Petty et al., 1981), tag questions in the present research had a distracting effect under high-relevance conditions, suggesting that when participants are already motivated and able to process the message, tag questions disrupt this processing. Under conditions of low relevance, however, tag questions increased the persuasiveness of the message, not processing of the message per se. Both the research presented here and the Petty et al. work used the same topic, which has been pretested to be moderately counterattitudinal (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Other work on rhetorical questions has found that the strength of the persuasiveness effect has varied with position of the message, with rhetorical questions having a greater effect when the message is counterattitudinal (Zillman, 1972; Zillman & Cantor, 1974). Future work regarding the role of tag questions in proattitudinal versus counterattitudinal messages may help further delineate the similarities and differences between tag questions and rhetorical questions.

Linguistic markers of powerlessness are but one language variable that can play an important role in persuasion. Other language variables—intensity, indirectness, complexity, and so on—may also play an important role in this process. With persuasion, as with conversation in general, how something is said can sometimes be as important as what is said.

NOTES

1. The tag question messages contained 318 and 323 words (for strong- and weak-argument messages, respectively). The hedge messages contained 315 and 320 words (for strong- and weak-argument messages, respectively). The hesitation message contained 312 and 316 words (for strong- and weak-argument messages, respectively). Finally, the control message contained 305 and 310 words (for strong- and weak-argument messages, respectively).

2. A 7-point semantic differential scale was used instead of a 9-point scale.

3. Another way to delineate this interaction would be to examine the cognitive responses comparing argument quality for both the powerless and control conditions (similar to the comparisons made on the attitude measure). The means suggest that the difference between strong and weak arguments is greater in the control conditions than in the powerless conditions. This, combined with the main effect of language, suggests that participants had more negative responses to the powerless message, which made argument quality matter less in those conditions than in the control conditions.

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