

CHARISMA – WHO HAS CHARISMA AND CAN I GET IT?

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The article puts forward very intriguing ideas on charisma and charismatic speech. A basic assumption in the article is that we can actually acquire charisma or charismatic expression; it isn't meant for just a few selected persons. From the examples of Jobs and Zuckerberg, the question might however arise whether the great charisma of Jobs is due to wording and the content of what is said, or if it is really a result of prosodic expression. Still, there is reason to believe that there are voices more charismatic than others.

To start with the opposite notion – non-charismatic speech – it can probably be stated that in Sweden there are quite a few examples of non-charismatic politicians, even for Swedish standards. If charismatic speech can be learned, it would be a valuable asset to the political party that finds the key. There are rumors of a female politician who lowered her voice pitch in order to sound more confident and credible, but in the process, she also lost her pitch variation, which supposedly made her sound tired and unenthusiastic. Apart from losing her pitch variation she also lost the election.

In this context, one question is what effect the prosody of politicians, who are native speakers of the national language, has on voters with other first languages, and vice versa. How do you convey confidence and charisma to all of your voters? In a corpus study on Swedes' opinions on impoliteness (Abelin, 2017) it was found that the prosodic trait considered the most impolite was speaking loudly. There are also opinions surging now and then that politicians are supposed to be grey and boring, in order to convey stability and confidence. But let's leave the Swedish politicians aside for now.

There are other important aspects of un-charismatic speech, or even anti-charismatic speech. Speech with a foreign accent can sometimes be un-charismatic when prosody of the speakers' first language shines through. Aronsson (2015) studied rising final intonation in Swedish, which signals friendliness. That is not the case in Spanish where rising final intonation means that the speaker is asking for information. A possible consequence of this difference could be that a learner of Spanish who has a Swedish accent can appear pushy and impolite instead of friendly. In other language combinations, the second language speaker may sound stern, boring or silly, due to pitch variations, loudness or speech tempo. Mennen (2007) quotes J. L. M. Trim's work and writes that "the relatively flat and low intonation of German learners of English may make them sound 'bleak, dogmatic or pedantic, and as a result, English listeners may consider them uncompromising and self-opinionated'". Concerning the "pleasantness" of speech, preliminary results from a study by Zetterholm & Abelin (in print) that compared native speakers of Swedish and native speakers of Somali who judged Somali accented Swedish, show that there were large similarities between listeners when rating "pleasantness" (as well as "intelligibility") of the Somali learners of Swedish. Thus, the native speakers of Somali were not more tolerant to the foreign accent of the Somali speakers even though it was the accent they could have produced themselves. A study by Rilliard, Erickson, De Moraes and Shochi (2017) show, for attitudinal expressions in USA English produced by L1 speakers and L2 speakers from Japan and France, that expressivity may be partly shared

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across cultures. The study also shows that the visual modality has to be taken into account, not just the audio.

Therefore, it appears that we can't ignore foreign accents when we discuss charismatic speech. There are tendencies for universals, but these are sometimes superimposed by language specific peculiarities.

We must touch on the subject of the universality of charismatic speech and how charismatic prosody interacts with language specific voice qualities, intonation, loudness, speech tempo and linguistic prosody, such as word tones, word accents and realizations of stress. The frequency code, where submission is signaled by high pitch and assertiveness or aggression by low pitch (Ohala, 1983, 1994), ought to be central in explaining similarities in expression and perception of emotions and attitudes, which are in some way entangled in charisma. If charisma is related to emotion, it can be difficult to control. This is the crucial question: can charisma be learned and used if natural?

Universality is also relevant for questions of sound symbolism. In an overview article, Svantesson (2017) suggests that "there is a common neural basis for sound symbolism in human language, which may explain its seemingly universal occurrence." Since sound symbolism can convey stable iconic and indexical connections between expression and content, as well as emotions, it is a good candidate for easy interpretation of speech, and thus for charismatic speech. Sound symbolism has also long been used in stylistics and poetry. Nerman (1954) made an analysis of sound symbolism in Swedish poetry from the 17th century to modern times, and an example is that /i/ often depicts movement, lively impressions and passion. This is in line with many other descriptions of the /i/ - /a/ contrast for size symbolism. Expression and perception of emotion can be included in the same sound symbolic framework.

In a study on sound symbolism in Swedish brand names (Abelin, 2015, 1999) it was suggested that knowledge of phonaesthemes (such as the consonant cluster fl- having the meaning of 'quick movement' in words like *flutter*, *flip*, *flap*, *flow*) are useful for choosing certain desired associations in product names, and avoiding other unwanted associations. It was found that certain phonaesthemes were overrepresented in certain product types, such as fl- in drug names, and bl- (bright light) and sk- (hardness) in names connected with jewelry. Pejorative phonaesthemes almost never occur in the data base of brand names. Furthermore, a priming test showed that pictures of objects with different forms or surface structures – round, oblong or rough objects – primed corresponding phonaesthetic consonant clusters: *kn-*, *sp-* or *skr-*. Thus, a well-designed sound symbolic product name can reduce product uncertainty, something which is important in advertising and selling a product. Phonaesthemes are language specific, but there is still a non-arbitrary, albeit conventional, relation between speech sounds and visual, tactile or other embodied meanings.

The next question to reflect on is the function of charisma in dialogue as opposed to monologue. Aren't the most charismatic sales agents or teachers (as opposed to the one-way communicating actors or news readers) the ones who align to their interaction partner, or does charismatic speech have qualities in itself? Yet another question is how charismatic speech functions in relation to different situations and speech acts? Does my charismatic speech have the same acoustic-perceptual characteristics if I try to sell you a product or if I want to ask you out for dinner? In further detail, a convincing voice may be very strong in a promise, but soft in an apology, also in sales relations. Therefore, context and speech acts should be taken into consideration as well as physical characteristics of the speaker and intentions of the audience before

we can discuss the charisma of speaking rates, voice loudness, voice pitch or number of hesitations. Those analyses are made in this article.

It is put forward as an example that the rhetorical advice “to speak fluently” can be translated into “split up your sentences into short phrases of no more than 4-5 words (about 2.0–2.5 seconds) and try to keep the pauses between these breaks below 500 milliseconds, i.e. the duration of about a single syllable.” Is perceived fluency independent in this context? And if so, what pedagogy is needed? The training experiments described seem promising.

I would in fact like to test a Charisma score calculator. Could social situations and speech act be included as settings in the calculator? Such a device can perhaps solve investor pitches and first encounters, but not entrepreneurship which involves long term interaction with other people.

Is this an area worth immersing into? Yes, definitely. But, in an international world of communication and commerce across the globe we have to consider cross-linguistic settings in a dialogic context.

I was just reminded of the Voyager project with greetings to the Universe in 55 different languages, which was launched in 1977. These voices could indeed have been more charismatic in order to make a good first impression on the aliens!

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