

Charisma myths scrutinized - how (well) phonetic evidence relates to traditional rhetorical statements

Oliver Niebuhr

Centre for Industrial Electronics, University of Southern Denmark, Sønderborg/DK

There is a general consensus among scientists, rhetorical trainers, and their customers that speaker charisma is an important element for economic success and inspiring, conflict-free leadership. It is also uncontroversial that prosody is a very important factor in these contexts. As Soorjoo (2012: 20) points out: "Yet, when it comes to preparing a pitch, most people tend to focus on the content of their speech and their PowerPoint ... This is one of the principal reasons why most people deliver bad pitches ". Fox Cabane (2012) also claims that "nonverbal modes of communication are hardwired in our brains, much deeper than the more recent language-processing [i.e. word-related] abilities, and they affect us more strongly "(p. 89).

In view of this general consensus about the relevance of speech prosody for a the charismatic impact of a speaker, it is surprising that the chapters on prosody (i.e. "voice" or "tone of voice") in rhetorical manuals are always among the shortest, vaguest and most contradicting. The reason for this is the same that also gave prosody a shadowy existence in phonetic research until the pioneering work of Janet Pierrehumbert (1980): Prosody is a lot less tangible than words. This applies to both the syntagmatic elements of prosody and their phenomenological description.

The research of our team and the associated startup company has been addressing this knowledge and method gap for more than 5 years now. We develop concepts for signal-based prosodic charisma assessment and training. In doing so, we also examine key statements in the rhetoric literature that have been passed on from trainer to trainer and from book to book for decades. One could also say that one aspect of our work is to revisit traditional charisma myths with experimental phonetic methods.

Based on the overview paper by Michalsky & Niebuhr (2019), the colloquium lecture summarizes our results for 5 of these myths: (1) Words beat prosodies; (2) Charismatic speakers have a low-pitched voice; (3) Filled pauses must not be used in charismatic speeches; (4) Abdominal "belly" breathing supports the charismatic voice of a speaker; (5) A glass of champagne before going "on stage/air" makes you a better speaker.

References

Fox Cabane, O. (2012). *The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism*. New York: Penguin.

Michalsky, J., & Niebuhr, O. (2019). Myth busted? Challenging what we think we know about charismatic speech. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Philologica*, 2019(2), 27-56.

Pierrehumbert, J. B. (1980). *The phonology and phonetics of English intonation* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

Soorjoo, M. (2012). *Here's the Pitch: How to Pitch Your Business to Anyone, Get Funded, and Win Clients*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.