

“Like, comment, subscribe” – Prominence and the perception of charismatic speech on YouTube

Stephanie Berger

Kiel University

This study is mainly based on Berger (2024), and investigates how prominent syllables can affect the perception of charismatic speech and charisma-related attributes (e.g., likability) on YouTube. Speakers on YouTube use strong prominences and in particular emphatic prominences frequently in their speech, which is part of what popular media outlets call “YouTube voice” (Beck, 2015). This style of speaking polarizes listeners, which is why it is also reasonable to assume that listeners accustomed to the speaking style would rate the speakers more positively. The investigation therefore also includes possible influences of raters being accustomed to the speaking style on YouTube or not. In general, prominent syllables are more salient compared to surrounding syllables – for example through pitch height, pitch accent timing or duration – and can be used in speech for functions such as structural organization, focus, or contrast (see Baumann & Lorenzen, 2024, for an overview). They can be categorized into different perceptual strength levels (weak, strong, emphatic; see the DIMA guidelines, Kügler et al., 2022). Previous investigations of speeches from business and political speakers found that they were perceived as more charismatic when they used more frequent and more varied types of emphatic accents (e.g., Niebuhr et al., 2020). These prominences stand out from the rest of an utterance more extremely than other prominent syllables, for example because of a combination of a pitch movement as well as a segmental hyper-articulation or lengthening (Kügler et al., 2022). This investigation addresses two prominence-related features and their correlation with charisma and likability ratings: the duration-normalized ratio of prominent to total syllables in a phrase, as well as the frequency of prominent syllables of different levels. The results provide insights into the use of emphatic prominence in storytelling on YouTube and illustrate the relevance of phonetic detail for the perception of charisma and likability.

References:

- Baumann, S., & Lorenzen, J. (2024). Boosting or inhibiting-how semantic-pragmatic and syntactic cues affect prosodic prominence relations in German. *Plos one*, 19(4), e0299746. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0299746>
- Beck, J. (2015). The linguistics of ‘YouTube voice’. *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2015. Retrieved December 7, 2023, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/12/the-linguistics-of-youtube-voice/418962/>
- Berger, S. (2024). “Like, comment, subscribe” – *Perception of acoustic-prosodic features of content creators’ charismatic speech on YouTube* [Doctoral dissertation, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel: Kiel]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38071/2024-00858-9>
- Kügler, F., Baumann, S., & Röhr, C. T. (2022). Deutsche Intonation, Modellierung und Annotation (DIMA). Richtlinien zur prosodischen Annotation des Deutschen. In C. Schwarze & S. Grawunder (Eds.), *Transkription und Annotation gesprochener Sprache und multimodaler Interaktion – Konzepte, Probleme, Lösungen* (pp. 23-54). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag. DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.24053/9783823394693>
- Niebuhr, O., Brem, A., Michalsky, J., & Neitsch, J. (2020). What makes business speakers sound charismatic? A contrastive acoustic-melodic analysis of Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. *Cadernos de Linguística e Teoria da Literatura*, 1(1), 1–40.