

## The power of powerless speech: The effects of speech style and task interdependence on status conferral <sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Two studies examine the effects of speech styles and task interdependence on status conferral judgments. In both studies, participants were exposed to an individual who used either a powerful or powerless speech style in a low or high task interdependence group, and made judgments about the amount of status to confer to the individual. When task interdependence was low, participants conferred more status to powerful speakers, whereas when interdependence was high, participants conferred more status to powerless speakers. Furthermore, Study 2 demonstrated that speech styles influenced trait inferences about the speaker (agency and communality), but these traits were weighted differently in status conferral judgments across groups. These findings provide insight into both the relationship between observed behaviors and status positions and the decision process underlying status conferral judgments.

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Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality.

– Julia Penelope, *Speaking Freely*

Is there a “language of success” (Mindell, 2001)? A glance at the business section of one’s local bookstore suggests that the answer to this question is a definitive

yes. The popular press is replete with books offering strategic prescriptions for how to use language to climb the corporate ladder. Interested readers can learn “power words” (Griffin, 1998), master the art of “power talking” (Walther, 2000), and even discover how to “sound like a leader” (Toogood, 1995). The central tenet unifying these works is that one’s communication style affects subsequent status attainment at work and in life: Individuals who speak assertively are more likely to get hired, be promoted, and command respect from others than individuals who speak in a tentative, uncertain manner.

This claim has received substantial empirical support. Psychologists and organizational scientists alike have documented a consistent relationship between speech styles and subsequent status attainment. Even holding message content constant, stylistic features of a message, such as hesitations (e.g., “well,” “um”), tag questions (e.g., “That’s interesting, don’t you think?”), hedges

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(e.g., “kinda,” “sort of”), disclaimers (e.g., “This may be a bad idea, but...”), intensifiers (e.g., “really,” “very”) and formal addresses (e.g., “yes, sir”), influence how a speaker is evaluated. Individuals who speak assertively, by avoiding these tentative speech markers, are judged by observers as more likely to be hired, promoted, and supported by superiors (Gallois, Callan, & Palmer, 1992; Parton, Siltanen, Hosman, & Langenderfer, 2002; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985; see also Ng & Bradac, 1993 for a review), and are more influential (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O’Barr, 1978) than individuals who include these speech characteristics. These relationships are considered so robust that speech styles have been named according to their consequences: “Powerless” speech is a speech style defined by the presence of the abovementioned linguistic markers, whereas “powerful” speech is defined by the absence of these markers (Erickson et al., 1978; see also Lakoff, 1975).

Although this relationship between powerful speech and subsequent status attainment seems valid on its face, these findings raise an important practical and theoretical question that has not been adequately addressed in prior research: Is powerless speech truly as powerless as it seems? Or, under certain circumstances, can powerless speech actually be more effective for obtaining promotions and prestige than powerful speech? The first goal of this paper is to answer this question. Specifically, I examine whether one particular group-level factor, the level of interdependence in a task group, affects the relationship between speech styles and status attainment. In doing so, I adopt a definition of status used in prior research: Status is the extent to which an individual in a group is seen as prominent, respected, and influential by other group members (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001). This definition implies that status positions are socially determined; one can only possess as much status as others are willing to grant. In this sense, status is *conferred* to one individual by another individual (or group of individuals). The studies in this paper investigate individuals’ decisions about how much status to confer to an actor in an organizational context.

Elucidating the effects of powerless speech on status conferral has obvious prescriptive implications for how individuals should communicate to gain status. However, investigating the relationship between speech styles and status conferral has broader theoretical implications as well. The second goal of this paper is to gain some insight into the process underlying status conferral judgments. The status benefits of using powerless speech, if any, depend on how individuals make their status conferral decisions. Two theoretical perspectives offer conflicting views on how status conferral decisions are made, and consequently lead to different predictions about whether powerless speech should ever be status enhancing. One perspective, which I refer to as the *fixed criteria perspective*, is derived from research on status schemas (e.g., Con-

way, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999) and suggests that powerful speech should lead to greater status conferral than powerless speech, independent of the context in question. The other perspective, which I term the *contingent criteria perspective*, is based on theories of status characteristics (e.g., Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974) and implies that both powerful and powerless speech can be status enhancing, depending on the specific organizational context. The studies presented in this paper are designed to test the validity of these two theoretical perspectives.

### How do speech styles affect status?

It is surprising that a behavior as subtle and potentially meaningless as one’s speech style should affect something as consequential as one’s ability to get promoted or be respected. Yet, individuals often make dispositional inferences about an actor on the basis of observable behaviors (e.g., Ross, 1977), and these dispositional attributions, in turn, affect how the actor is evaluated. A host of behavioral cues—speech styles (e.g., Erickson et al., 1978; Parton et al., 2002; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985), speech rates (e.g., Brown, Strong, & Rencher, 1973), vocal tones (e.g., Ridgeway, 1987), patterns of eye contact (e.g., Washburn & Hakel, 1973), and emotional expressions (Tiedens, 2001)—have been shown to influence status positions because they influence perceptions of the actor’s personality traits.

Work in the area of person perception has demonstrated that individuals organize their perceptions of others around two fundamental trait dimensions (Asch, 1946; Bakan, 1966; Carson, 1969; Fiske et al., 2002; Kiesler, 1983; Leary, 1957; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Wiggins, 1979). Bakan (1966) referred to these dimensions as *agency*, or characteristics associated with self-assertion and mastery of one’s environment, such as ambition, dominance, and independence, and *communality*, or characteristics associated with selflessness and nurturance, such as warmth, sincerity, and tolerance. Individuals who use powerful speech are rated by observers as more competent, intelligent, and strong (i.e., agentic) than individuals who use powerless speech (Carli, 1990; Erickson et al., 1978; Parton et al., 2002; Siegler & Siegler, 1976; see also Ng & Bradac, 1993 for a review). However, there is some evidence to suggest that individuals who use a powerless speech style are viewed as nicer, more likeable and good-natured (i.e., communal) than those who use a powerful speech style (Lee, 1999; Parton et al., 2002).

Even though agency and communality may both be viewed as socially desirable traits for individuals to possess, evidence to date suggests that only the agency dimension is used in making status conferral judgments. That is, when deciding whether to hire, promote, or

support an actor, individuals use their impressions of the actor's intelligence, ambition, and dominance to inform their judgments, but not their evaluations of the actor's warmth, sincerity, or agreeableness. For example, individuals who express anger are viewed as more agentic, and consequently are conferred more status, than individuals who express sadness, even though sadness expressers are rated as more communal (Tiedens, 2001). Consistent with these findings, Wiley and Eskilson (1985) found that the five traits individuals believe to be most important in determining an individual's qualifications for a leadership position were all characteristics of agency: responsible, intelligent, qualified, hardworking, and organized. Furthermore, the importance of agency as a basis for status conferral judgments has been conveyed through the names of the trait dimensions themselves: Theories of person perception often refer to the agency and communality dimensions as *status* and *love*, respectively (e.g., Carson, 1969; Kiesler, 1983; Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979).

However, it is possible that attributions of communality may play a role in individuals' status conferral decisions as well. The fixed and contingent criteria perspectives differ in their implications about process underlying status conferral judgments, and hence lead to different predictions about the relative importance of agency and communality in individuals' status conferral decisions. The fixed criteria perspective (e.g., Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002) suggests that agency should be weighted more heavily than communality in status conferral judgments across contexts. In other words, the criteria on which status conferral judgments are based (i.e., agency) should remain *fixed* across groups. In contrast, the contingent criteria perspective (e.g., Berger et al., 1972, 1974) implies that status conferral decisions should be contingent on the group context: In some groups or organizations, agency may be weighted more heavily than communality in status conferral judgments, but the opposite may be true in other groups. Which of these two perspectives most adequately accounts for individuals' status conferral judgments should affect the consequences of powerless speech. The status conferral benefits of powerless speech depend on whether, and the extent to which, attributions of communality are weighted in status conferral judgments.

#### *Potential processes underlying status conferral decisions*

##### *Fixed criteria perspective*

Social psychologists have investigated the schemas, or mental representations, that individuals hold about members of high and low status groups. Individuals have been shown to hold distinct schemas about high and low status others: Members of high status groups (e.g., business professionals, rich people) are judged by others to

be highly agentic, but not particularly communal, whereas members of low status groups (e.g., housewives, the elderly) are perceived to be highly communal, but not particularly agentic (Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Evidence suggests that these status schemas are widely held and applied broadly, regardless of the particular group or individual in question. For example, observers apply these schemas to individuals based on the individuals' occupations (e.g., doctors vs. nurses; Conway et al., 1996), their social categories (e.g., Asians, Blacks, welfare recipients, feminists; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002), and even apply these schemas when making judgments about members of fictional groups (Conway et al., 1996).

These findings suggest that individuals may base status conferral judgments on the extent to which actors conform to these well-developed high and low status schemas. Individuals perceive high status persons to be highly agentic and view agency as a high status characteristic, so when they observe a person that conveys agentic traits they conclude that this person *should* be high status (i.e., they confer status to that individual). Similarly, individuals perceive low status others to be highly communal and view communality as a lesser valued, low-status characteristic, so when they observe an individual that conveys communal traits, they conclude that the individual should be low status, and confer less status to that individual.

If individuals rely on these situationally invariant schemas when making status conferral decisions, this implies the criteria used in making status judgments should remain fixed across situations: Observers should base status conferral decisions on perceptions of agency, regardless of the organizational, cultural, or social context. Extending this logic to speech styles, powerful speech should always result in greater status conferred to the speaker than powerless speech, since the former conveys a higher level of agency than the latter.

##### *Contingent criteria perspective*

Status characteristics theory (also referred to as expectation states theory, Berger et al., 1972, 1974, or

<sup>1</sup> Conway et al. (1996) suggest that the content of these high and low status schemas may develop as a result of the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), whereby observers make dispositional inferences about an actor based on the actor's observable behaviors. For example, high status individuals may talk more and dominate conversations more than low status individuals, not necessarily because of inherent differences between the two groups, but simply because high status individuals are asked for advice, knowledge, and opinions more frequently than low status individuals. Yet, observers may not recognize these situational differences, and conclude that high status individuals actually are more aggressive, outgoing, intelligent, etc. (i.e., highly agentic) than low status individuals, but also more rude and argumentative (i.e., not very communal). Similarly, observers may interpret the reticence of low status individuals to reflect politeness and respectfulness (i.e., high communality), but also submissiveness (i.e., low agency).

status generalization, Webster & Driskell, 1978) suggests that status is conferred to an actor based on others' assessments of the actor's expected performance on the task at hand: Individuals are conferred high status when they are expected to perform well on the given task, and conferred lower status when they are expected to perform poorly. Proponents of this perspective have actually used this argument to explain why status conferral judgments should be relatively similar across situations (e.g., Ridgeway, 1987; see also Webster & Driskell, 1978): Characteristics of agency, such as assertiveness and confidence, facilitate successful performance in most task groups, so behaviors that convey a high level of agency, such as powerful speech, should result in status conferral, regardless of the specific group in question.

However, by defining status in terms of expected performance, this theoretical framework suggests that status conferral decisions may actually be more context-dependent than the original researchers assumed. If expectations of performance are what individuals rely on when making their status conferral decisions, then any trait or attribute that is seen as facilitating performance should result in status conferral. To the extent that the traits or attributes associated with successful performance change across groups or situations, this implies that the criteria for status conferral decisions should change as well. In other words, behaviors that convey high agency, such as powerful speech, should lead to status conferral in situations where agency is viewed as a critical determinant of one's task performance, but behaviors such as powerless speech, that convey high communality, should lead to status conferral in situations where communality is indicative of successful performance.

#### *Distinguishing between these perspectives*

Current empirical evidence is not sufficient to determine which of these two perspectives best describes the process underlying individuals' status conferral decisions, since both the fixed and contingent perspectives can be used to explain the previously observed positive relationship between perceptions of agency and status conferral. To distinguish between these perspectives, it is necessary to examine status conferral decisions across group contexts. Although both theories predict that assessments of agency may serve as the basis for status conferral judgments, they differ in their predictions about whether this relationship generalizes across groups. In this paper, I focus on one group-level factor, task interdependence, which may provide insight into which of these processes most adequately accounts for status conferral judgments.

#### *Task interdependence*

The level of *task interdependence* in a group is the extent to which group members need to collaborate,

coordinate, or interact with others to complete their assigned tasks (Thompson, 1967; Wageman, 1995). The level of task interdependence in a group can be affected by cultural values of the group, which result in norms about how work should be completed (e.g., Shea & Guzzo, 1989; Wageman, 1995), or by features of the task itself, which either require or prohibit collective action (Thompson, 1967). Although all task groups or organizations, by definition, necessitate some degree of interdependence among members, there is substantial variation among groups in the level of interdependence required for task completion (Wageman, 1995). In general, the greater the level of task interdependence in a group, the greater the need for, and expectation of, collective effort and coordination among group members (March & Simon, 1958; Thompson, 1967).

The level of task interdependence in a group may affect the criteria that individuals use when evaluating group members' performance. When interdependence is low, and individuals work primarily independently, characteristics of agency may be viewed as particularly important predictors of a group member's performance. High agency is associated with the ability to think independently, having confidence in one's own views, and a motivation for achievement, which are all characteristics that should facilitate an individual's performance when working alone. In comparison, characteristics of communality, which indicate how an individual relates to and interacts with others, may be viewed as less critical for completing work in low interdependence settings, since interaction with others, by definition, is relatively low. Thus, in low interdependence groups, individuals may place greater weight on assessments of a group member's agency than on communality when judging the group member's expected performance.

In contrast, characteristics of communality may be viewed as more predictive of group members' performance than characteristics of agency when task interdependence is high. High communality is associated with high levels of concern for others, a willingness to be cooperative, and a desire for affiliation, which are all characteristics that should facilitate an individual's performance when working collaboratively. At the same time, characteristics of agency may be viewed as less predictive of performance in highly interdependent groups, since the collaborative nature of these groups implies that members can pool their collective talents and rely more on the abilities of the group as a whole rather than on the abilities of any one member: An individual that exhibits relatively low levels of agentic traits (such as dominance, independence, and competitiveness) may still be viewed as a star performer in a highly interdependent group if this individual demonstrates an ability to relate to and work with others. Furthermore, agency may sometimes be viewed as a liability in high interdependence groups, since these individuals may be

perceived as preferring and pursuing individual accomplishments (e.g., personal recognition and achievements) at the expense of group accomplishments (e.g., group performance; Ridgeway, 1982). Together, these forces imply that perceptions of communality may influence expectations of successful performance to a greater degree than perceptions of agency in high interdependence groups.

The fixed and contingent criteria perspectives make different predictions about whether the level of task interdependence in a group should affect status conferral decisions. On one hand, a reliance on fixed criteria implies that differences in task interdependence should not affect status conferral judgments. This leads to the following hypotheses derived from the fixed criteria perspective:

**Hypothesis 1.** In both high and low interdependence groups, speakers using a powerful speech style will be conferred more status than speakers using a powerless speech style.

**Hypothesis 2.** In both high and low interdependence groups, individuals will weight assessments of an actor's agency more than assessments of the actor's communality when making status conferral judgments.

On the other hand, the contingent criteria perspective predicts that status conferral decisions should change as a function of the level of interdependence in a group, to the extent that task interdependence affects the definition of successful performance. Thus, the contingent criteria perspective leads to the following predictions:

**Hypothesis 3a.** In low interdependence groups, speakers using a powerful speech style will be conferred more status than speakers using a powerless speech style.

**Hypothesis 3b.** In high interdependence groups, speakers using a powerless speech style will be conferred more status than speakers using a powerful speech style.

**Hypothesis 4a.** In low interdependence groups, individuals will weight assessments of an actor's agency more than assessments of the actor's communality when making status conferral judgments.

**Hypothesis 4b.** In high interdependence groups, individuals will weight assessments of an actor's communality more than assessments of the actor's agency when making status conferral judgments.

## Study 1

The objective of Study 1 was to investigate whether the level of task interdependence in a group would moderate the relationship between speech styles and status conferral. In this experimental paradigm, participants interacted

in an initial task with an individual that used either a powerful or powerless speech style and then made judgments about the amount of status to confer to their partner in a subsequent task group, which manipulated the level of task interdependence required. Status conferral was assessed in two ways in this study. First, participants made evaluations of how much status and respect the individual should have in the task group. Second, prior research had demonstrated that status is often conferred by endowing individuals with formal titles that signify their high status position (e.g., leader, president, and captain; Tiedens, 2001). Thus, status conferral was also assessed through participants' willingness to recommend the individual for the formal position of "group leader."

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred-twenty-four individuals (51 males, 64 females, and 9 unidentified) affiliated with a west-coast university participated in this study in exchange for a payment of \$15. Participants were recruited from an electronic mailing list at the university that advertises behavioral studies to university members that have expressed an interest in participating in them.

### Materials and procedure

Between 6 and 12 individuals participated in each experimental session. As participants arrived, they were seated in one of two laboratory rooms, each at individual study carrels with computer terminals. The experimenter informed participants that they would be participating in two decision-making tasks, each with other participants in the experimental session. The first exercise was described as a computer-mediated problem-solving task in which participants would interact with a partner via a computer. In actuality, participants did not interact with a partner; rather, they "conversed" with a scripted computer program. This exercise was designed to manipulate the speech style of the "partner." In the powerless condition, the partner used hedges, hesitations, disclaimers, formal addresses, and tag questions, whereas in the powerful condition, the partner did not use these tentative speech patterns. After completing the first task, participants were given instructions for a second task, described as a 4-person group task, in which task interdependence was manipulated. In actuality, there was no second team task; this aspect of the cover story was included to create a context for the status conferral measures of interest in this study, participants' evaluations of their "partner" from the first task.

*Experimental design.* The design of this study was a 2 (Task 1 Partner Speech Style: Powerful vs. Powerless)  $\times$  2 (Task 2 Interdependence: High vs. Low) between-subjects factorial design.

*Task 1: The desert survival problem.* After completing the general instructions, the experimenter provided specific instructions for the first problem-solving exercise. This exercise was a computer-mediated version of the Desert Survival Problem (DSP; Lafferty & Eady, 1974) in which participants rank ordered 12 items (e.g., a mirror, a map, two raincoats) in terms of importance for survival in a desert.<sup>2</sup> First, participants individually made initial rankings of the 12 items. Participants were then asked to engage in a computer-mediated discussion about their initial item rankings with another individual, described as another participant seated in the other computer lab. The experimenter informed participants that there was a correct answer to the DSP and that they would have an opportunity to revise their initial rankings after the computer-mediated discussion, so the partner discussion task would be an opportunity to gather information that could help participants improve upon their initial answers.

A web-based computer program (adapted from Shechtman, 2002) was used to facilitate this computer-mediated discussion. The program was designed to create the impression that the participant was interacting with an actual partner. The first screen of the program prompted participants to enter their initial rankings of the 12 desert survival items and, upon completion, to click a “send” button to transmit their rankings to their partner. After a brief delay, designed to convey the impression that the discussion partner was typing his or her rankings, the interface displayed both the participant’s rankings and the partner’s rankings. In actuality, the partner’s rankings were a systematic transformation of the participant’s rankings such that (a) the participant and partner disagreed on the rankings for almost all of the items and (b) the total magnitude of the disagreement was constant across all participants.

The program then prompted participants to type a short comment explaining their rationale for their ranking of the flashlight and to press “send” when they were ready to transmit the statement to the partner. The partner then responded with an analogous rationale about the flashlight and a recommendation about how the participant should revise his or her initial ranking of this item. These computer-generated responses were derived from a table based on whether the partner ranking for that item was higher or lower than the participant’s, as well as the partner’s speech condition (powerful or powerless). To create the impression that a partner was actually typing responses, all responses from the partner were delayed by a half second per word. After receiving

the partner’s rationale regarding the flashlight, the process of sending and receiving rationales about item rankings was then repeated for the remaining 11 items.

Although the content of the partner responses was held constant across conditions, the style of the responses differed. For example, in the powerful speech condition, one statement by the partner read: “The flashlight needs to be rated higher. It is the only reliable night signaling device; also, the reflector and lens could be used to start a fire, which is another way to signal for help. Put it higher.” In the powerless speech condition, the same statement suggesting that the flashlight should be rated higher read: “Do you think the flashlight should maybe be rated higher? It may be a pretty reliable night signaling device. Also, maybe the reflector and lens could be used to start a fire, which could possibly be another way to signal for help.”<sup>3</sup>

After participants sent and received messages about all 12 items, they were given an opportunity to revise their initial rankings of these items and then completed a “Communication Style Questionnaire.” This questionnaire asked participants to rate aspects of their partner’s communication style, including their assertiveness and friendliness. These two items served as manipulation checks for the speech style manipulation.

*Task 2: 4-person group task.* After completing this questionnaire, participants were given general instructions about the second task. Participants were told that they would be formed into 4-person groups, and that each group would have the task of calculating merit increases for employees in an organization (referred to as the “performance appraisal task”). This task was selected because it has been used in prior studies of task interdependence (Saavedra, Earley, & Van Dyne, 1993). The description of the task manipulated the level of task interdependence. In the low task interdependence condition, participants read the following instructions (modifications for the high interdependence condition appear in parentheses):

In the performance appraisal task, 4-person groups will rate employees of an organization on several factors and then recommend merit increases for each employee. To reach a merit recommendation for an employee, there are a series of steps that must be completed. To complete

<sup>2</sup> The original Desert Survival Problem required participants to rank 15 items. Three items from the original 15-item list, a red and white parachute, a pair of sunglasses, and a loaded .45 caliber pistol, were not included in this version of the exercise. This modification was made to shorten the amount of time participants spent on Task 1.

<sup>3</sup> In the studies presented in this paper, speech styles were manipulated through written, rather than oral, communication. Erickson et al. (1978) manipulated presentation style (written vs. oral) in their research on the consequences of powerful and powerless speech. These researchers found that observers’ inferences about a speaker depended on the speech style (powerful vs. powerless), but not on the mode of presentation. Consequently, subsequent research has manipulated speech style through either written or oral presentation. For example, Parton et al. (2002) used audiotapes, whereas Wiley and Eskilson (1985) and Hosman (1989) both used written transcripts.

these steps and successfully accomplish the performance appraisal task, the 4 members of the rating team must work independently (collectively). Each member of the team will be given their own set of employees to rate (a specific role to perform), so that each group member will complete all (some, but not all) of the steps required to produce a complete merit recommendation. Given this division of labor, members of the performance appraisal team will be highly independent of (dependent on) each other. All members need to be able to work on their own (together) if the task is to be completed successfully.

To reinforce the manipulations, and to check that participants attended to them, two questions were presented below the task instructions: Participants indicated the extent to which group members needed to collaborate and coordinate with others to complete their task and the extent to which group members would be required to complete the task independently. Both questions were presented on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *a great deal*).

**Partner evaluation questionnaire.** The main dependent measure of interest in this study was participants' evaluations of the leadership potential of their partner from the first task. After receiving the general instructions for the second task, participants were informed that each of the 4-person task groups would have a designated leader, and to choose those leaders, the experimenter wanted to solicit each participant's opinion about the partner they worked with in the first task. Participants answered three questions about how much status to confer to their partner in the 4-person group: Participants indicated the extent to which they would recommend their partner to be the leader in the 4-person group, how much status they thought their partner should have in the task group, and how much respect their partner should receive from other members of the task group. These questions were assessed on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *a great deal*) and were averaged to create a composite measure of status conferral ( $\alpha = .76$ ). Additionally, participants indicated the extent to which they thought their partner had the ability to perform well in the group (assessed on a 7-point scale anchored by 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*). This question served as a measure of the partner's expected performance in the Task 2 group.

After completing this questionnaire, the experimenter informed participants that there was no second task and the experiment was finished. Participants were fully debriefed and paid for their participation.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the dependent measures are reported in Table 1. The data from 12

Table 1  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of dependent measures in Studies 1 and 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
<i>Study 1</i>					
1. Status conferral	4.42	1.20	—		
2. Expected performance	5.34	1.28	.52***	—	
<i>Study 2</i>					
1. Status conferral	4.18	1.17	—		
2. Perceived agency	4.79	.93	.43***	—	
3. Perceived communality	4.35	.92	.34**	-.32*	—

Note. Study 1  $N = 111$ , Study 2  $N = 56$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

participants were excluded because they suspected that their Task 1 conversation partner was actually a computer program.<sup>4</sup> Data from one additional participant were excluded because the participant failed to follow instructions. Thus, all reported analyses are based on the remaining 111 participants.

### Manipulation checks

**Speech style.** Participants in the powerful speech condition (coded as 1) rated their partner's communication style as significantly more assertive ( $M = 6.3$ ) than participants in the powerless speech condition (coded as -1;  $M = 4.6$ ),  $b = .89$ ,  $t(109) = 7.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants in the powerless speech condition rated their partner's communication style as significantly more friendly ( $M = 4.8$ ) than participants in the powerful speech condition ( $M = 3.1$ ),  $b = -.84$ ,  $t(109) = -6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Task interdependence.** Participants in the low task interdependence condition (coded as -1) indicated that their group members would need to work more independently to complete their assigned task ( $M = 6.4$ ) than did participants in the high task interdependence condition (coded as 1;  $M = 3.5$ ),  $b = -1.4$ ,  $t(109) = -9.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversely, participants in the high task interdependence condition indicated that their 4-person group would require a higher level of collaboration and coordination to complete their assigned task ( $M = 6.3$ ) than did participants in the low task interdependence condition ( $M = 2.5$ ),  $b = 1.9$ ,  $t(109) = 13.76$ ,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>4</sup> These suspicious participants were roughly evenly distributed across all conditions of the study. To determine whether participants suspected they were not interacting with an actual partner, I examined the transcripts of their desert survival discussion (which were recorded by the web-based discussion program) and their questionnaire responses (which provided a space for participants to justify their rating of their partner's leadership potential). Participants were coded as suspicious if they noted, in either or both of these places, that they thought their partner was not real.

Status conferral judgments

I regressed status conferral on speech style, task interdependence, and the interaction between the two. The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 2, Regression 2. There was a marginally significant main effect of task interdependence ( $M_{low}=4.6$ ,  $M_{high}=4.2$ ,  $b=-.20$ ,  $t(107)=-1.85$ ,  $p=.067$ ). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between the partner’s Task 1 speech style and the level of task interdependence in the Task 2 group ( $b=-.28$ ,  $t(107)=-2.50$ ,  $p=.014$ ). As may be seen in Fig. 1, when task interdependence was low, participants whose partner used a powerful speech style thought that their partner should be conferred more status in the Task 2 group than did participants whose partner used a powerless speech style,  $t(107)=1.81$ ,  $p=.073$ . However, when task interdependence was high, participants that interacted with a powerless speaker in Task 1 thought their partner should be conferred more status in the second task group than did participants that interacted with a powerful speaker,  $t(107)=1.72$ ,  $p=.089$ . Thus, Hypotheses 3a and 3b, predicting an interaction between speech style and interdependence, were supported, but Hypothesis 1, predicting a main effect for powerful speech, was not.

Performance expectations

The above findings provide support for the contingent criteria perspective, which suggests that the criteria for status judgments in a group should change as the criteria for successful performance changes across groups. To determine whether the partner’s speech style in Task 1 affected participants’ expectations of the partner’s performance in Task 2, I regressed expected performance on speech style, task interdependence, and the interaction between the two (see Table 2, Regression 6). This analysis revealed only a significant interaction between speech style and task inter-

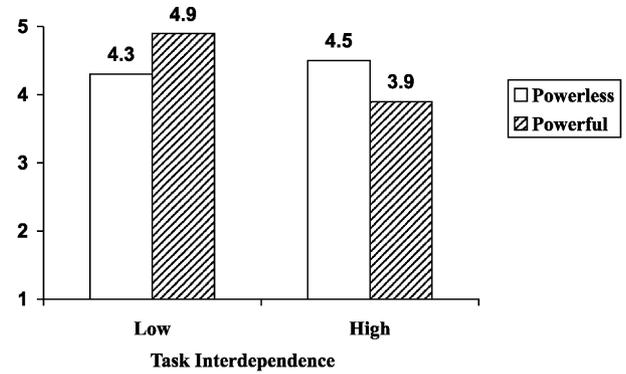


Fig. 1. Study 1: Status conferral as a function of partner’s Task 1 speech style and Task 2 interdependence.

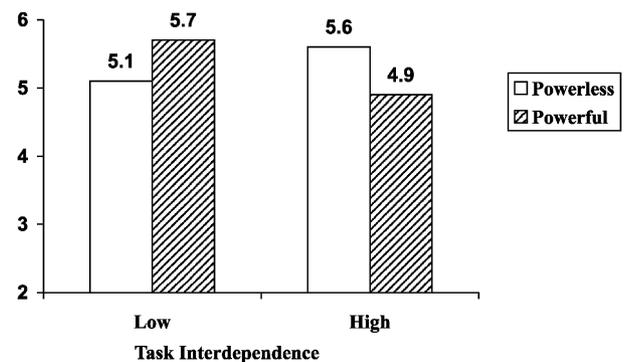


Fig. 2. Study 1: Performance expectations as a function of partner’s Task 1 speech style and Task 2 interdependence.

dependence ( $b=-.32$ ,  $t(107)=-2.65$ ,  $p=.009$ ). As may be seen in Fig. 2, when Task 2 was described as a low interdependence task, participants that interacted with a powerful speaker in Task 1 thought that their partner would per-

Table 2  
Study 1: OLS regressions to predict status conferral and expected performance

Measures	Status conferral				Expected performance	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant	4.42***	4.41***	4.42***	4.42***	5.34***	5.33***
Speech style	.01	.01	.01	.02	-.01	-.01
Task interdependence	-.21†	-.20†	-.17†	-.17†	-.09	-.08
Speech × interdependence		-.28*	-.13	-.13		-.32**
Expected performance			.46***	.46***		
Performance × interdependence				.02		
$R^2$	.03	.08	.31	.31	.01	.07
$\Delta R^2$		.05*	.23***	.00		.06**

Note.  $N = 111$ . For speech style, powerful speech was coded 1 and powerless speech was coded -1. For task interdependence, low interdependence was coded -1 and high interdependence was coded 1. Continuous independent measures were mean-centered before conducting analyses, and these mean-centered variables were used in computing the interaction terms between continuous and categorical predictors. Regression models are presented vertically; numbers across the top of the table in parentheses signify different regression models, and the labels across the top of the table signify the dependent measure for the regressions in the columns below. Entries in the columns represent unstandardized regression coefficients.

†  $p < .10$ .  
\*  $p < .05$ .  
\*\*  $p < .01$ .  
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

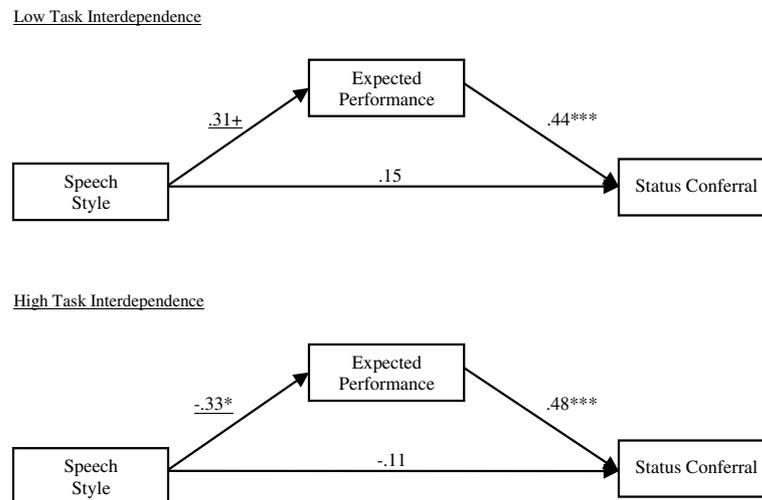


Fig. 3. Study 1: Simple paths at each level of the moderator variable (task interdependence). Note.  $N = 111$ . For speech style, powerful speech was coded 1 and powerless speech was coded  $-1$ . Figure entries are unstandardized path coefficients. Paths with underlined coefficients are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) across levels of the moderator variable.  $+p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $***p < .001$ .

form better in the Task 2 group than did participants that interacted with a powerless speaker,  $t(107) = 1.83$ ,  $p = .069$ . However, when Task 2 was described as a high interdependence task, participants that interacted with a powerless speaker thought their partner would perform better on the second task than did participants that interacted with a powerful speaker,  $t(107) = 1.92$ ,  $p = .058$ .

The contingent criteria perspective also implies that the effects of an individual's speech style on status conferral judgments should be mediated by expectations of the individual's performance in the group: an individual's speech style provides a cue to how the individual will perform in a group, these performance expectations, in turn, influence how much status the individual should be conferred. Following the procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Edwards and Lambert (2004), I regressed status conferral on the independent variable (speech style), the moderator (task interdependence), the interaction between the independent variable and the moderator, the proposed mediator (expected performance), and the interaction of the mediator and the moderator (see Table 2, Regression 4).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> To determine whether the mediator (expected performance) and the dependent measure (status conferral) were distinct constructs, I conducted a two-factor confirmatory factor analysis in which the factors were performance and status conferral, which had one and three items, respectively. For performance, the item loading and measurement error variance of the single item were fixed to reflect the assumed reliability of the item (Hayduk, 1987), and for status conferral, the item loadings and measurement error variance were freely estimated. These analyses revealed that, if the reliability of the single performance item was assumed to be .65 or higher (a reasonable assumption—see Wanous & Hudy, 2001; Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997 for discussions of the reliability of single-item measures), the performance and status conferral measures achieved discriminant validity, as indicated by a factor correlation whose 95% confidence interval excluded unity (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1982).

Expected performance significantly predicted status conferral ( $b = .46$ ,  $t(105) = 5.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and, comparing this model to Regression 2, the interaction between speech style and task interdependence was no longer significant when expected performance was added into the model ( $b = -.13$ ,  $t(105) = 1.31$ , n.s.). To interpret these effects, I then conducted a moderated path analysis (see Fig. 3) to determine the specific form of mediation in question by examining simple paths (or slopes) at each level of the moderator variable (Edwards & Lambert, 2004). The first thing to note is that speech styles exerted significant, yet opposite, effects on expected performance across levels of the moderator variable (task interdependence). When task interdependence was low, powerful speech was associated with higher performance expectations, whereas when interdependence was high, powerful speech was associated with lower performance expectations. Furthermore, the path from the mediator (expected performance) to the dependent variable (status conferral) was statistically significant in both high and low interdependence conditions, and the magnitude of this path did not differ across levels of the moderator.

To test for mediation, I then used a bootstrap procedure to test the magnitude of the indirect effect (the effect of speech style on status conferral through the mediator, expected performance) at each level of the moderator variable. Mediation is indicated when the size of an indirect effect differs significantly from zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). I implemented the bootstrap by drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Stine, 1989). The indirect effect was computed using each of these bootstrap samples, and based on these results, I constructed bias-corrected confidence intervals to ascertain whether the indirect effect differed significantly from zero (see MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). In the low interde-

pendence condition, the indirect effect from the original data set was 0.14 ( $0.31 * 0.44$ ), and the 90% confidence interval for this effect excluded zero (0.01, 0.31), indicating a marginally significant indirect effect in the low interdependence condition. In the high interdependence condition, the indirect effect from the original data set was  $-0.16$  ( $-0.33 * 0.48$ ), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ( $-0.37, -0.02$ ), indicating a significant indirect effect in the high interdependence condition. Collectively, these findings support the conclusion that expected performance mediated the relationship between speech styles and status conferral in both the low and high interdependence conditions.

### Discussion

The findings of Study 1 extend our current understanding of status conferral judgments in several ways. First, these findings suggest that behaviors that have been traditionally deemed *ineffective* for enhancing one's status position may not necessarily be so. When an upcoming task necessitated independent work, the results replicated prior research: Participants were more likely to recommend their partner for a leadership position in the group, and they thought the partner should receive more status and respect in the group, when the partner used a powerful speech style than when the partner used a powerless speech style. However, this pattern reversed when the task necessitated interdependent work, and greater status was conferred to the partner when the partner used a powerless speech style. To date, little value has been attributed to powerless speech, and conventional wisdom generally counsels against the use of such tentative speech patterns. On the surface, characteristics of powerless speech, such as hesitations, qualifiers, and disclaimers, seem to convey only negative messages about the speaker, such as the speaker's lack of certainty (i.e., low agency). However, these negative attributions may be offset by attributing characteristics of communality to the speaker, and consequently behaviors such as powerless speech may be status-enhancing in situations where communality is valued for performance. Thus, this study suggests that the relationship between an individual's verbal and nonverbal cues and their conferred level of status may be more complex than previously thought.

Second, this study provides greater insight into the process underlying status conferral decisions. Consistent with the predictions derived from the contingent criteria perspective, the effects of speech styles on status conferral judgments depended on the level of task interdependence in the group. In further support of this perspective, these effects were mediated by expectations of the partner's likely performance. In contrast, the fixed criteria perspective, predicting that powerful speech would lead to greater status conferral than powerless speech regard-

less of the level of interdependence, was not empirically supported. Thus, this study provides a more conclusive test of the process underlying status judgments than those conducted in prior empirical research.

### Study 2

The objectives of Study 2 were both to replicate the pattern of results obtained in Study 1 and to explore the role of agency and communality in individuals' status conferral decisions. In support of the contingent criteria perspective, Study 1 demonstrated that the status benefits of powerful versus powerless speech depended on the level of task interdependence in a group. This perspective also predicts these effects are due to the differential weighting of agency and communality in status judgments across groups that vary in task interdependence (Hypotheses 4a and 4b): In low interdependence groups, individuals should weight agency more than communality as a basis for status conferral judgments, whereas in high interdependence groups, individuals should weight communality more than agency. To explore this possibility, participants in Study 2 were asked to rate an actor on several agentic and communal traits.

Another objective of Study 2 was to replicate Study 1's pattern of results using a more ecologically valid manipulation of task interdependence. In Study 1, participants were explicitly instructed to use either an independent or interdependent process in Task 2. In reality, however, individuals do not always receive such explicit instructions about how a task should be completed. Rather, the increasing prevalence of self-managed work teams implies that organizational members are often given tasks to complete, and left to their own devices to determine the appropriate processes (Wageman, 1995). In such cases, one important factor that is likely to affect this process decision is the culture of the group or organization. Organizational culture has been conceptualized as a form of social control; a way to communicate to organizational members about the values and norms they are expected to uphold (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). An important cultural distinction has been made between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Earley, 1993). One of the most distinguishing characteristics between these two types of cultures is the level of task interdependence that they foster (Chatman et al., 1998; Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991): In comparison to individualistic cultures, collectivistic cultures place greater emphasis on collaborative work and collective action (i.e., they have norms of high task interdependence; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Wagner & Moch, 1986). In this way, an organization's culture communicates the level of task interdependence that is expected of its members through implicit means—without explicitly mandating a

particular process, organizational cultures provide cues as to the way that work *should* be completed. In support of this assertion, Chatman et al. (1998) found that the identical task was completed with greater or lesser degrees of interdependence depending on the organizational culture: When participants were placed in a work group that was described as collectivistic, participants reported greater interaction and collaboration in the work process than when the group was described as individualistic. Thus, regardless of the specific task at hand, organizational cultures provide implicit cues about how that task should be and is likely to be completed.

In this study, participants' perceptions of the level of task interdependence expected in an organization were manipulated by asking participants to read a description about a collectivistic or individualistic organizational culture. Participants were then exposed to an organizational member that used either a powerful or powerless speech style, and then made trait ratings and judgments about the amount of status that should be conferred to the individual.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Fifty-six individuals (24 males, 32 females) affiliated with a west-coast university participated in this experiment in exchange for a \$5 payment. Participants were recruited from an electronic mailing list that advertises behavioral studies to university members that have expressed an interest in participating in them.

#### *Materials and procedure*

Approximately 10 individuals participated in each experimental session. Participants first read a brief description of an organization and then read a transcript of a phone call that was made by an employee of the organization. Participants read either a collectivistic (high task interdependence) or individualistic (low task interdependence) organizational culture description and either a powerful or powerless version of the conversation transcript. Thus, the design of the study was a 2 (Task Interdependence: High vs. Low)  $\times$  2 (Speech Style: Powerful vs. Powerless) between-subjects factorial design. After reading the conversation transcript, participants completed a questionnaire to measure the amount of status they conferred to the speaker, and their perceptions of the speaker's agency and communality.

*Manipulation of organizational culture.* The two cultural descriptions were adapted from Chatman et al. (1998), which demonstrated the effects of organizational culture on task interdependence. To reinforce the cultural distinctions, the organizations were given names that were consistent with the expected level of interdependence in each condition. The low interdepen-

dence organization was named Solo Ventures and the high interdependence organization was named Alliance Partners. In the low interdependence condition, participants read the following organizational description (modifications for the high interdependence condition appear in parentheses):

Solo Ventures (Alliance Partners) is an organization known for valuing individualism (collaboration). The president and founder of Solo Ventures (Alliance Partners), M.L. Smith, is still the driving force of the company's culture. He and the founding senior managers are proud of Solo Ventures' (Alliance Partners') reputation in the industry as an individualistic (team) organization. At Solo Ventures (Alliance Partners), individual effort and initiative (cooperation and teamwork) are highly valued and rewarded, and competition (cooperation) among individuals is considered to be the best road toward innovation and success. Employees are rewarded based on their independent achievements (teamwork) and their individual (team's) contributions to Solo Ventures' (Alliance Partners') success. Thus, both employees and outsiders categorize Solo Ventures (Alliance Partners) as having a very individualistic (collectivistic) corporate culture.

Immediately following these organizational descriptions, participants answered three questions about the organization. On separate 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*), participants indicated the importance of being a team player in the culture, the importance of working independently, and the level of interpersonal interaction that was required in the organization. These questions served to confirm that the manipulations had the intended effects on perceptions of the expected level of task interdependence in the two organizations.

*Manipulation of speech style.* After reading the organizational description, participants were instructed to imagine that they worked for this organization and that one day, as they were working at their desk, they overheard a conversation in which Robert, an employee seated at a nearby desk, was talking on the phone to Michael, another employee. To enable participants to focus on one member of the conversation, only Robert's side of the conversation was presented. The conversation centered on the discussion of an upcoming deadline for Robert and Michael (adapted from Holtgraves, Srull, & Socal, 1989). The content of Robert's speech was identical in both versions of the transcript, but the versions differed in the style in which the content was delivered. In the powerless version, Robert used hedges, hesitations, disclaimers, formal addresses, and tag questions, whereas the powerful version of the interview did not contain these tentative speech patterns. The two versions of the conversation transcript are presented in the [Appendix](#).

*Post-task questionnaire.* After reading the conversation transcript, participants completed a questionnaire. All questions were assessed using 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). First, participants rated the extent to which they thought Robert possessed nine agentic traits (competent, confident, independent, competitive, intelligent, ambitious, dominant, unambitious [reverse scored], and submissive [reverse scored]) and eight communal traits (likeable, tolerant, sincere, good-natured, warm, and cold [reverse scored], agreeable, and quarrelsome [reverse scored]). The first five traits in each of these categories were taken from Fiske and colleagues' scales of competence and warmth (which correspond to the dimensions of agency and communality, respectively; Fiske et al., 2002). The remaining items were taken from Wiggins (1979) interpersonal circumplex dimensions of agency and communality. The relevant traits were averaged to create composite measures of agency ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and communality ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Second, participants made decisions about how much status to confer to Robert. Participants were informed that Robert, who had just completed the training phase of his employment, was interested in a permanent position in the company, and that their responsibility was to make decisions about his future status in the company. Participants then responded to three status conferral questions, which were selected because they are similar to measures used in prior studies investigating speech styles and organizational status conferral (Gallois et al., 1992; Parton et al., 2002; Tiedens, 2001; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985). Participants rated how much social status Robert should have if he were to have a permanent position in the organization, how likely they would be to promote Robert into a permanent position in the organization, the extent to which Robert had the qualities to be a success in the organization. The three status measures were averaged to create a composite measure of status conferral ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Finally, participants rated the assertiveness and friendliness of Robert's speech. These items served as manipulation checks.

After completing the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed and paid for their participation.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the dependent measures are reported in Table 1.

### Manipulation checks

*Speech style.* As in Study 1, participants in the powerful speech condition (coded as 1) rated Robert's speech as significantly more assertive ( $M = 5.3$ ) than participants in the powerless speech condition (coded as  $-1$ ;  $M = 4.0$ ),  $b = .66$ ,  $t(54) = 3.63$ ,  $p = .001$ . Participants in the powerless speech condition rated Robert's speech as significantly more friendly ( $M = 5.1$ ) than participants in

the powerful speech condition ( $M = 3.9$ ),  $b = -5.9$ ,  $t(54) = -3.48$ ,  $p = .001$ .

*Task interdependence.* The organizational descriptions had the intended effects on participants' perceptions of the level of task interdependence expected in these organizations. Participants thought that there would be more interaction among organization members in the high interdependence culture (coded as 1;  $M = 6.4$ ) than in the low interdependence culture (coded as  $-1$ ;  $M = 3.4$ ),  $b = 1.5$ ,  $t(54) = 10.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . Also, participants thought that the ability to be a "team player" was more important in the high interdependence culture ( $M = 6.3$ ) than in the low interdependence culture ( $M = 2.3$ ),  $b = 2.0$ ,  $t(54) = 12.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas the ability to work independently was seen as more important in the low interdependence culture ( $M = 6.6$ ) than the high interdependence culture ( $M = 3.2$ ),  $b = -1.7$ ,  $t(54) = -12.82$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Status conferral judgments

I regressed status conferral on speech style, task interdependence, and the interaction between the two. As may be seen in Table 3, Regression 2, this analysis revealed only a significant interaction between speech style and task interdependence ( $b = -.43$ ,  $t(52) = -2.86$ ,  $p = .006$ ). In the low interdependence culture, participants awarded significantly more status to Robert when he used a powerful speech style than when he used a powerless style,  $t(52) = 2.00$ ,  $p = .051$  (see Fig. 4). This pattern was reversed, however, in the high interdependence culture: Robert was awarded more status when he used powerless speech than when he used powerful speech,  $t(52) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .046$ . Thus, consistent with the results of Study 1, Hypotheses 3a and 3b, predicting an interaction between speech style and interdependence, were supported, but Hypothesis 1, predicting a main effect for powerful speech, was not.

### Perceptions of agency and communality

To determine whether speech styles affected participants' perceptions of Robert's traits, I first regressed perceptions of Robert's agency on speech style, task interdependence, and the interaction between the two (Table 3, Regression 6). This analysis revealed only a main effect of speech style ( $b = .34$ ,  $t(52) = 2.86$ ,  $p = .006$ ): Robert was perceived as more agentic in the powerful speech condition ( $M = 5.1$ ) than in the powerless speech condition ( $M = 4.5$ ). I then conducted a similar analysis with perceptions of Robert's communality as the dependent measure. This analysis revealed that speech styles exerted the opposite effects on perceptions of Robert's communality (Table 3, Regression 8;  $b = -.33$ ,  $t(52) = -2.88$ ,  $p = .006$ ): Robert was perceived as more communal in the powerless speech condition ( $M = 4.7$ ) than in the powerful speech condition ( $M = 4.0$ ).

Table 3  
Study 2: OLS regressions to predict status conferral, agency, and communality

Measures	Status conferral				Agency		Communality	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Constant	4.18***	4.21***	4.20***	4.12***	4.79***	4.80***	4.35***	4.36***
Speech style	-.01	-.01	-.05	-.01	.34**	.34**	-.33**	-.33**
Task interdependence	-.06	-.06	-.00	-.00	-.17	-.17	.12	.12
Speech * interdependence		-.43**	-.30*	-.09		-.05		-.17
Agency			.73***	.76***				
Communality			.60***	.63***				
Agency × interdependence				-.26*				
Communality × interdependence				.33**				
R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.14	.50	.61	.16	.16	.14	.18
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.14**	.36***	.11**		.00		.04

Note.  $N = 56$ . For speech style, powerful speech was coded 1 and powerless speech was coded  $-1$ . For task interdependence, low interdependence was coded  $-1$  and high interdependence was coded 1. Continuous independent measures were mean-centered before conducting analyses, and these mean-centered variables were used in computing the interaction terms between continuous and categorical predictors. Regression models are presented vertically; numbers across the top of the table in parentheses signify different regression models, and the labels across the top of the table signify the dependent measure for the regressions in the columns below. Entries in the columns represent unstandardized regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

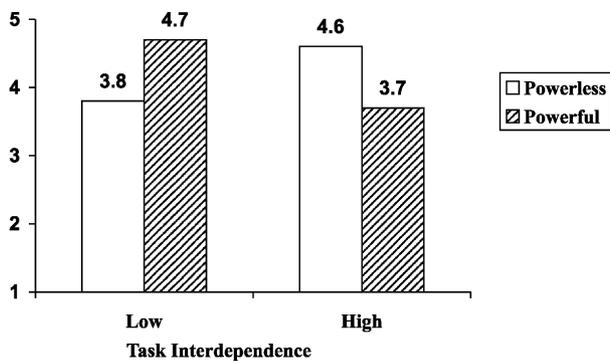


Fig. 4. Study 2: Status conferral as a function of speech style and task interdependence.

#### Mediation of trait perceptions

To determine if individuals weighted these assessments of agency and communality differently in the two organizations as the basis for their status conferral decisions, I examined the extent to which agency and communality mediated the relationship between speech style and status conferral in each organization. I regressed status conferral on the independent variable (speech style), the moderator (task interdependence), the interaction between the independent variable and the moderator, the proposed mediators (agency and communality), and the interaction of each of the mediators with the moderator (see Table 3, Regression 4). Comparing this model to Regression 2, the interaction between speech style and task interdependence is no longer significant when agency and communality are added into the model ( $b = -.09$ ,  $t(48) = -0.77$ , n.s.). Furthermore, agency ( $b = .76$ ,  $t(48) = 5.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and communality ( $b = .63$ ,  $t(48) = 4.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ) both

significantly predict status conferral. These main effects need to be interpreted with caution, however, because this model also reveals significant two-way interactions between task interdependence and agency ( $b = -.26$ ,  $t(48) = -2.02$ ,  $p = .049$ ) and task interdependence and communality ( $b = .33$ ,  $t(48) = 2.43$ ,  $p = .019$ ). These two coefficients suggest that the extent to which individuals used agency and communality as bases for their status conferral judgments depended on the organization in question (i.e., moderated mediation).

To interpret these interactions between the trait mediators and task interdependence, I again followed the moderated path analysis procedure recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2004). As may be seen in Fig. 5, the paths from both mediator variables (agency and communality) to the dependent variable (status conferral) were all statistically significant, indicating that perceptions of both agency and communality affected status conferral judgments in both organizations. However, the magnitude of these paths differed across levels of the moderator variable (task interdependence): Agency was a stronger predictor of status conferral when task interdependence was low than when it was high. Conversely, communality was a stronger predictor of status conferral when task interdependence was high than when it was low. I also compared the magnitude of the agency and communality path coefficients within levels of the moderator. In the low interdependence condition, the path from agency to status conferral ( $b = 1.02$ ) differed significantly from the path from communality to status conferral ( $b = .30$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 52.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that agency was a stronger predictor of status conferral than communality when interdependence was low. However, in the high interdependence condition, the path from communality to status conferral ( $b = .96$ ) was

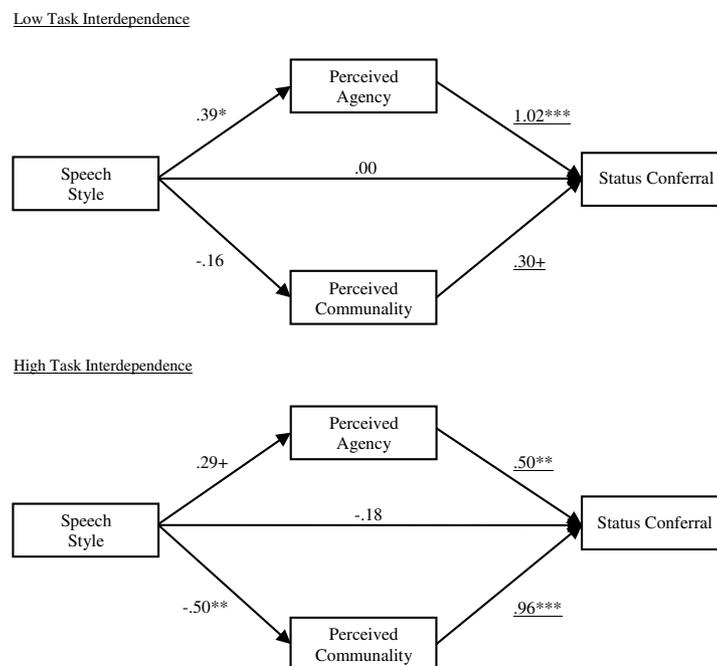


Fig. 5. Study 2: Simple paths at each level of the moderator variable (task interdependence). Note.  $N = 56$ . For speech style, powerful speech was coded 1 and powerless speech was coded  $-1$ . Figure entries are unstandardized path coefficients. Paths with underlined coefficients are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) across levels of the moderator variable.  $+p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $***p < .001$ .

significantly larger than the path from agency to status conferral ( $b = .50$ ,  $F(1, 48) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .052$ ).

I again used a bootstrap procedure, drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample, to test the magnitude of the two indirect effects at each level of the moderator variable. In the low interdependence condition, the indirect effect through agency was 0.40 ( $0.39 * 1.02$ ), 95% CI: (0.15, 0.75), and the indirect effect through communality was 0.05 ( $-0.16 * 0.30$ ), 95% CI: ( $-0.31$ , 0.03). Furthermore, the 95% confidence interval for the difference in absolute values of the two indirect effects excluded zero (0.07, 0.71), indicating that the indirect effect through agency was larger than the indirect effect through communality in the low interdependence condition. In the high interdependence condition, the indirect effect through agency was 0.15 ( $0.29 * 0.50$ ), 95% CI: (0.01, 0.40), and the indirect effect through communality was  $-0.48$  ( $-0.50 * 0.96$ ), 95% CI: ( $-0.91$ ,  $-0.21$ ). The 95% confidence interval of the difference in absolute values of the indirect effects excluded zero ( $-0.69$ ,  $-0.02$ ), indicating that the indirect effect through communality was larger than the indirect effect through agency in the high interdependence condition. Together, the results of the moderated path and bootstrap analyses suggest that agency was a stronger predictor of status conferral judgments than communality when task interdependence was low, but communality was a stronger predictor than agency when task interdependence was high. These findings are contrary to the predictions of the fixed criteria per-

spective (Hypothesis 2), but are supportive of contingent criteria perspective whereby the criteria used as a basis for status conferral judgments change across groups as the attributes necessary for successful performance change (Hypotheses 4a and 4b).

### Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate and extend the findings of Study 1. The effects of speech styles on status conferral decisions were moderated by the level of task interdependence in the group in question. When participants were exposed to an individualistic organizational culture associated with norms of low task interdependence, participants thought that Robert should be conferred more status when he used a powerful speech style than when he used a powerless speech style. However, when participants were exposed to a collectivistic organizational culture with norms of high task interdependence, participants thought that Robert should be conferred more status when he used a powerless speech style than when he used a powerful speech style. Furthermore, this pattern of results was driven by the differential importance of agency and communality as a basis for status conferral judgments in the two organizations. In the low interdependence culture, participants weighted perceptions of Robert's agency more than perceptions of communality in making their status conferral judgments. However, the reverse was true in the high interdependence culture: participants weighted communality more

than agency in making their status conferral decisions. Together, these findings provide further support for the contingent criteria perspective, which suggests that status conferral decisions are based on expectations of task performance, and that agency and communality are weighted differently in determining performance expectations, based on the expected level of task interdependence in the group. In contrast, the fixed criteria perspective, which predicted that agency would be the primary criteria for status conferral judgments, regardless of the group context, was not empirically supported.

It is also important to note the benefits and limitations of the operationalization of task interdependence used in this study. In Study 1, task interdependence was manipulated by explicitly instructing participants to use either an independent or interdependent task process. Although this manipulation isolates the construct of interest, it does not necessarily represent the only way that task interdependence is communicated to group members in everyday organizational life. Task interdependence is frequently conveyed through subtle, implicit channels. That is, organizational members are often told *what* tasks to complete, but are not necessarily told *how* to complete them, and consequently need to look for cues that tell them what process is appropriate or normative (Wageman, 1995). Thus, the objective of Study 2 was to investigate a context in which task interdependence was communicated implicitly, rather than explicitly. Task interdependence was operationalized through organizational culture, based on prior research which has demonstrated that organizational culture (in particular, individualism and collectivism) affects the extent to which group members complete their tasks independently or interdependently (Chatman et al., 1998; Cox et al., 1991). Although this manipulation is not as specific as that used in Study 1, it strengthens the conclusions that can be drawn from the current research by improving the ecological validity of the task interdependence manipulations. The two different operationalizations of task interdependence used across the two studies are evidence for the robustness of the phenomenon: Regardless of whether interdependence is communicated explicitly (as in Study 1) or implicitly (as in Study 2), the results on status conferral decisions are the same.

## General discussion

In the two studies in this paper, participants made status conferral judgments about an actor that used either a powerful or powerless speech style. When task interdependence in a group was low, actors were conferred more status when they used a powerful speech style than when they used a powerless speech style. This pattern replicates the results of prior empirical studies linking powerful speech to high status positions (Erick-

son et al., 1978; Gallois et al., 1992; Parton et al., 2002; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985). However, when task interdependence was high, the reverse pattern occurred: Actors that used a powerless speech style, containing hesitations, disclaimers, and hedges, were conferred more status than actors that used a powerful speech style. Study 1 demonstrated that the relationship between an actor's speech style and subsequent status conferral was mediated by participants' perceptions of the actor's expected performance in the group. Study 2 demonstrated that these relationships were due to the trait inferences that participants made about the actors: In low interdependence groups, participants weighted agency more than communality when making status conferral judgments, whereas in high interdependence groups, participants weighted communality more than agency.

## Implications

These studies have a number of implications for our understanding of status conferral judgments and the process underlying these decisions. Most specifically, these findings provide evidence for the power of powerless speech. Although generally devalued, these studies suggest that powerless speech may be more status-enhancing than powerful speech in certain contexts. Consequently, powerless speech may be a useful communication behavior for those that wish to gain organizational standing. This prescription runs counter to the current popular wisdom that the use of powerless speech characteristics will "brand you as emotional, sentimental, a sob sister...all pejoratives that won't win you the job or promotion you seek." (Mindell, 2001, p. 32). To remain consistent with prior research in this area (Erickson et al., 1978), I have used the terms powerful and powerless to distinguish between these two frequently observed speech styles, but, in fact, the studies presented in this paper suggest that these terms are misnomers.

At a more general level, these findings suggest that the relationship between an individual's external attributes (i.e., their characteristics and behaviors) and the individual's conferred status position may be more complex than prior researchers have assumed. Prior empirical investigations of status conferral have focused on verbal and nonverbal behaviors that affect the amount of status conferred to an actor. The takeaway from much of this literature is that certain behaviors lead to status conferral whereas others do not. This is the case for research on speech styles (e.g., Erickson et al., 1978; Parton et al., 2002; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985), but also for a host of other verbal and nonverbal behaviors as well, such as speech rates (Brown et al., 1973), vocal tones (Ridgeway, 1987), patterns of eye contact (Washburn & Hakel, 1973), and emotional expressions (Tiedens, 2001). However, even though status conferral decisions occur within group contexts, research to date has paid relatively little

attention to specific group features that may affect the behaviors that are most status enhancing. The findings of the current research suggest that the predominant research question should be shifted from “*What* behaviors are effective for enhancing one’s status in a group?” to “*When* (and *why*) are these particular behaviors effective?”

This research also provides empirical support for the contingent criteria perspective suggested by status characteristics theory (e.g., Berger et al., 1972, 1974). The findings of the current studies indicate that as the criteria for evaluating successful performance changes across groups, individuals’ criteria for status conferral judgments change as well. Of the existing theoretical perspectives on status conferral, this perspective is the one that has been the most explicit about the process underlying status conferral judgments. At a theoretical level, status conferral decisions are presumed to be based on performance expectations. However, empirical tests of this perspective have generally equated attributions of agency with performance expectations, and most evidence for a performance-based process comes from studies that link characteristics associated with agency, such as gender, race, and communication behaviors, to high status positions in task groups (see Webster & Driskell, 1978 for a review). While these findings are consistent with the contingent criteria perspective, conclusive evidence for this performance-based status conferral process has been lacking, since multiple processes can account for these prior empirical results. Specifically, the fixed criteria perspective suggested by status schema theories (Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002) implies that agency will be used as the criteria for status conferral judgments regardless of the group context. This suggests a competing decision process that could explain the empirical relationship between perceptions of agency and status conferral judgments. The current studies were designed to provide a more stringent test of the contingent criteria perspective, and help to distinguish this perspective from another competing theoretical account.

#### *Possible boundary conditions and future directions*

The current research also has some limitations that are worthy of mention. Most importantly, the current studies investigate situations in which individuals have not yet been assigned hierarchical positions, either because they are new to an existing group, or the group is in its formative stages and no hierarchy has yet formed. In other words, these studies investigate how status positions are *created*. Individuals face such situations frequently throughout their lives. Individuals change jobs and join new organizations, and organizations often create cross-functional task forces or workgroups. Although outside the scope of this paper, it is also interesting and important to think about how status

positions can be *changed*. That is, once an individual has been conferred a particular status position, how do the individual’s observed behaviors affect his or her subsequent placement in the status ordering? The findings of the current studies may or may not generalize to these types of changes in status positions. An alternative hypothesis in such situations is that communication behaviors lose their potency as status signals once a status hierarchy has already been created. However, another possibility is that observed behaviors may interact with prior status positions to influence future status conferral. For example, once an individual has been placed in a low status position, the use of powerful speech may be seen as evidence that the individual is acting out-of-role (e.g., Rudman, 1998). Consequently, the individual may not be able to gain status from this low status position by using powerful speech, regardless of the level of interdependence in a group.

In a similar vein, future research might address how speech styles interact with other individual characteristics or behaviors to influence status judgments. Prior research has demonstrated that demographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and age, influence status conferral judgments (see Webster & Driskell, 1978 for a review). These demographic differences may also moderate the relationship between speech styles and status conferral. For example, women are generally stereotyped as highly communal, and can sometimes be evaluated negatively if they violate this stereotype (e.g., Rudman, 1998). In the studies presented in this paper, the gender of the target was either unspecified (Study 1) or male (Study 2). It is possible that powerless speech may result in even greater status conferral for women, since this speech style is associated with the stereotypically female trait of communality. Additionally, a host of other verbal and nonverbal behaviors have been linked to status attainment, such as speech rates (e.g., Brown et al., 1973), vocal tones (e.g., Ridgeway, 1987), patterns of eye contact (e.g., Washburn & Hakel, 1973), and emotional expressions (Tiedens, 2001). However, most studies to date have focused on only one of these behaviors in any given study, and consequently have not examined the effects of simultaneous expression of multiple behaviors. Thus, it may be worthwhile to examine how observers make sense of multiple, and possibly conflicting, verbal and nonverbal behaviors when making status judgments.

Finally, the current research also demonstrates that the effects of speech styles on status positions require observers to make corresponding inferences about a speaker’s likely personality traits. That is, speech styles only affect status conferral judgments because they influence the traits and qualities that the speaker is believed to possess. Yet there may be instances in which observers’ do not make the predicted trait inferences on basis of speech styles. This could occur because observers’ possess more “objective” information about an actor’s agency and communality (e.g.,

prior interactions with the actor, or knowledge of the actor's past performance evaluations). In cases where observers have access to other indicators of the actor's agency and communality, the effects of an actor's speech style on these two trait inferences may diminish, and may not significantly affect the amount of status conferred to the actor. Furthermore, the role of trait inferences in status conferral judgments suggests that, although speech styles may be used as strategies to gain status, they may not succeed if they are perceived as such. Observers are generally very willing to make dispositional inferences based on an individual's observed behaviors, but these inferences may be discounted if other alternative explanations are available (Morris & Larrick, 1995). If observers believe that an individual is deliberately altering their speech style, or any other behavior, to influence how they are perceived, these behaviors may be less likely to produce the desired effects.

## Conclusion

Language is a defining feature of human interaction. Consequently, it is important to understand how language can shape the nature of interpersonal relationships. Of particular interest in organizational contexts

is the ability of language to affect a speaker's prominence, respect, and position (i.e., their status). As Ng and Bradac (1993, p. 1) state, "language...does more than neutrally inform hearers or readers. It is inevitably an instrument for enacting, recreating, or subverting power." Yet despite this recognition, our knowledge about how language affects status positions has remained incomplete. Based on prior empirical research, many have argued that a "language of success" exists: an assertive manner of speaking that has been shown to improve an individual's status position (Erickson et al., 1978; Gallois et al., 1992; Ng & Bradac, 1993; Parton et al., 2002; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985). The implication of this assertion is that there exists also a corresponding "language of failure": an unassertive style of speech that is unlikely to lead to status conferral. However, the studies presented in this paper suggest that this may be an oversimplification, and multiple languages may lead to status attainment, depending on the particular features of the task or organizational context in question. As a result, the current studies improve our understanding of how status conferral decisions are made, and in doing so, provided greater insight into the relationship between subtle, observable behaviors and subsequent status positions.

## Appendix A

### Study 2: Conversation transcript with powerful and powerless speech styles

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Robert: Hi Michael, it's Robert.

Michael:

Robert: I saw a message that you called me?

Michael:

Robert: I'm ok. It's been (pretty) hectic lately, (hasn't it?)

Michael:

Robert: The Jackson project(?) Unfortunately, it's going a little slow right now.

Michael:

Robert: (Well...) one of the (kind of) big problems is that we haven't received the projections from the accounting department yet.

Michael:

Robert: You should tell them to hurry things up (Do you think you could possibly ask them to hurry things up a little?)

Michael:

Robert: I know. (I'm not really sure, but) I (think we really) need the results of the Xerox project to help guide us. (I totally don't want to be a pain or anything, but do you know) why haven't we received them yet?

Michael:

Robert: (It seems like) we need those results. (Would it be possible for you to maybe) call the guys at Jackson and ask them to extend the deadline (?)

Michael:

Robert: Yes, I'm going to ask Jack's department to help, although they're pretty busy these days, (you know?)

Michael:

Robert: I can't (Um...I'm not sure if I can. You're the expert, but it seems to me) the group's already feeling too pressured right now.

(continued on next page)

**Appendix A** (continued)

- 
- Michael:  
 Robert: I agree. A team meeting is (could be) a good idea.  
 Michael:  
 Robert: Let's meet Thursday, the 24th. (Well, I don't know. Maybe Thursday, the 24th?)  
 Michael:  
 Robert: (Maybe) 1 o'clock.  
 Michael:  
 Robert: (Yes sir, that sounds) fine (to me.)  
 Michael:  
 Robert: (Well, I could be wrong, but I think) we still need to find a way to speed this project up (a) little. Do you think it would be at all possible to have the team postpone working on the IBM project until after the Jackson project is done?  
 Michael:  
 Robert: I know. But (it seems like) the Jackson project is probably more important.  
 Michael:  
 Robert: (Um...) One other thing. Bill needs someone to make a presentation on the Jackson project at the monthly board meeting. (Please don't think I'm putting words in your mouth, but) I told him you would do it.  
 Michael:  
 Robert: Great. (Is there) anything else (we should talk about?)  
 Michael:  
 Robert: Ok, (I'll talk to you) later, (Michael).
- 

*Note.* Modifications for powerless speech appear in parentheses.

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