EFFECTS OF OBSCENE LANGUAGE UPON THREE DIMENSIONS OF LISTENER ATTITUDE

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THEORY and past research clearly indicate that attitude toward a speaker is formed in part by the language he uses.[1] It is therefore reasonable to assume that a speaker's use of language considered obscene by his listeners would affect one or more dimensions of listener attitude toward him. Yet a review of the literature reveals little experimental research on this issue.[2] On the basis of several unpublished studies Lashbrook tentatively concluded that obscenities decreased character but increased dynamism ratings.[3] However, Bostrom, Baseheart, and Rossiter found that use of profanity did not affect dynamism or safety ratings significantly, although it lowered appraisal of speaker competence.[4] In light of the importance of this question, and the apparent conflicts in reported research, it was the purpose of the present investigation to assess the effects of speakers' obscene language upon the attitudes of selected groups of listeners.

One of the earliest modern definitions of attitude was given by Allport: "*An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response.*"[5] Andersen and Clevenger related this construct to attitude toward a speaker when they defined ethos as "the image held of a communicator at a given time by a receiver."[6] During the last decade, listener attitude toward a speaker has been most effectively quantified by multi-dimensional semantic differentials established for that purpose. One semantic differential, the Speech Dialect Attitudinal Scale (SDAS),[7] which was specifically designed to investigate effects of various aspects of a speaker's linguistic production (semantic, syntactic, or phonemic),[8] was used in this study.[9] It delineates listener

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1 See for example: John W. Bowers and Michael M. Osborn, "Attitudinal Effects of Selected Types of Concluding Metaphors in Persuasive Speeches," *SM,* 33 (1966), 147-55; James C. McCroskey and Walter H. Combs, "The Effects of the Use of Analogy on Attitude Change and Source Credibility," *Journal of Communication,* 19 (1969), 333-39.

2 As Rosenfield points out, "There has been as yet little, if any, thoughtful consideration of how pornographic discourse and a given public interact." Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "Politics and Pornography," *QJS,* 59 (1973), 413-22.

3 Velma J. Lashbrook, "Source Credibility: A Summary of Experimental Research," paper presented at the SCA convention, San Francisco, Dec., 1971.

4 Robert N. Bostrom, John R. Baseheart, and Charles M. Rossiter, Jr., "The Effects of Three Types of Profane Language in Persuasive Messages," *Journal of Communication,* 23 (1973), 461-75.

5 Gordon W. Allport, "Attitudes," in *Handbook of Social Psychology,* ed. C. A. Murchison (Worcester, Mass.: Clark Univ. Press, 1935), p. 810.

6 Kenneth Andersen and Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "A Summary of Experimental Research in Ethos," *SM,* 30 (1963), 59.

7 Anthony Mulac, Theodore D. Hanley, and Diane Y. Prigge, "Effects of Phonological Speech Foreignness upon Three Dimensions of Attitude of Selected American Listeners," *QJS,* 60 (1974), 411-20.

8 For a discussion of these linguistic elements, see Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), pp. 15-18.

9 The importance of employing a semantic differential designed and tested for a specific

judgment of a speaker along three independent dimensions: *Socio-Intellectual Status, Aesthetic Quality* and *Dynamism.*

While a standard definition of obscene language refers to semantic elements "marked by violation of accepted inhibition and by the use of words regarded as taboo in polite usage,"[10] a more meaningful analysis is provided in an extension of Freud's conceptualization in which Ferenczi points out that the phenomenon of obscene words actually lies in the subconscious mind of the listener.[11] Current legal standards for obscenity established by the Supreme Court require that, among other things, "the material must be 'patently offensive' because it affronts 'contemporary community standards.' "[12] Common to these definitions is the recognition that the criteria for determining what is obscene rest with the communication recipient, and may differ from group to group.[13] Therefore, phrases used in the present investigation were considered "obscene" or "non-obscene" only after subjects drawn from the listener populations tested had rated them as such.

The effects of three other variables thought possibly to interact with the speakers' use of obscene language were also investigated: speaker sex, listener group (university students and non-students), and listener sex.[14] Since it was reasonable to assume that speakers might deliver the same speeches in a different manner depending upon whether obscenities were included, listener ratings on the SDAS dimensions were adjusted for SDAS scores for edited recordings of the same speeches with the obscenities or parallel non-obscenities omitted. This resulted in a 2 (speaker language) X 2 (speaker sex) X 2 (listener group) X 2 (listener sex) factorial design for fixed effects, adjusted for a covariate (ratings of edited speeches).

Method

Recorded Test Speeches

Two five-minute speeches were prepared by the investigator which presented opposing sides of the energy crisis: pro-environmentalists (i.e., blaming the oil companies for shortages and rising costs), and pro-oil companies. These two speeches were judged equivalent in evidence, reasoning, and language by four speech graduate teaching assistants (although such equality was not required by the experimental design employed since both speeches were rated under all possible language and speaker combinations).

Each of the two speeches was prepared in a version containing twelve obscene words or phrases, and one containing twelve strong, non-obscene words or phrases.[15] For example, one version of

purpose is clearly established. See Donald K. Darnell, "Semantic Differentiation," in *Methods of Research in Communication,* ed. Philip Emmert and William D. Brooks (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 181-88; and Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research,* 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), pp. 568-71.

10 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1966), p. 1557.

11 As referred to in Edmund Bergler, "Obscene Words," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 5 (1936), 226-48.

12 *The Report of the* [*U. S.*] *Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 45.

13 For an excellent analysis of the origins and uses of obscene language, see Ashley Montague, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

14 Other variables which might interact with use of obscene language, such as message topic and channel of communiation, were beyond the scope of this study.

15 Non-obscene words were selected to match the relative intensity of the parallel obscene words. This comparability was confirmed by twenty-six students' and non-students' "intensity" ratings of ten of the obscene words, ten of the strong, non-obscene words, and ten non-experiment words selected as representing low intensity words. The significant analysis of variance ($F = 17.59$, $df = 2/75$, $p < .001$), followed by Newman-Keuls comparisons showed significant differences between the low-intensity words

the pro-oil speech referred to the "fucking environmentalists," while the parallel version used the phrase, "over-zealous environmentalists;" the obscene version of the pro-environmentalist speech blamed the problem on the "goddamn oil companies," while the non-obscene version referred to the "money-hungry oil companies."[16] The obscenities employed were drawn from examples collected in in a brief field study (conducted by the investigator) of spontaneous persuasive discourse by students and non-students. The question of whether the parallel phrases represented "obscene" and "non-obscene" terms for the populations from whom the listeners were to be drawn was investigated by asking ten university students (five males and five females) and ten non-students (five males and five females) to rate each of these phrases (printed in random order) on a seven-point "degree of obscenity" scale, using their own standards of judgment. Analyses of these data are presented in the Results section.

Speakers chosen to record the test speeches were two professional radio announcers in their early twenties, one male and one female. Each speaker recorded the obscene and non-obscene versions of the pro-environmentalists and pro-oil companies speeches, using professional radio studio facilities.

From these recordings, eight test tapes were dubbed including all possible ordered combinations of speech thesis, speaker sex, and speaker language. For example, tape #1 presented the female speaker giving the obscene version of the pro-oil speech, followed by the male giving the non-obscene, pro-environmentalist speech. Tape #2 presented the male, obscene, pro-environmentalist speech, followed by the female, non-obscene, pro-oil speech. This procedure was employed to control for possible speaker effects, speech effects, and order effects.

Subjects

Twenty-six students from the University of California, Santa Barbara (thirteen males and thirteen females) and twenty-one non-students (eleven males and ten females) acted as volunteer listener-subjects during the Spring of 1974. Students represented a wide variety of majors and had a mean age of 20.3 years; non-students were drawn primarily from the middle-class residents of near-by communities and had a mean age of 43.6 years.

Measurement Instrument

The Speech Dialect Attitudinal Scale (SDAS),[17] a twenty-one-item semantic differential previously developed to assess listeners' attitudes toward a speaker based on aspects of his linguistic production (semantic, syntactic, or phonemic) was employed to measure the dependent variable. On this instrument, the twenty-one pairs of bi-polar adjectives are separated by seven-point scales and randomly arranged with alternating polarities. Factor analyses of resulting data from each listener subgroup (male students, female students, male non-students, and female non-students) were conducted to determine whether a similar judgmental construct emerged from ratings by each listener group. These

(none of which were used in the test tapes) and the two groups of test words ($p < .001$); no difference in intensity was found between the obscene and parallel non-obscene words ($p > .25$). For a discussion of language intensity and the definition used in the present study, see John Waite Bowers, "Some Correlates of Language Intensity," *QJS*, 50 (1964), 415-20.

[16] The investigator will supply copies of the speech transcripts upon request.

[17] For a description of the instrument and an analysis of reliabliity and validity of SDAS data generated in five separate experiments, see Anthony Mulac, "Evaluation of the Speech Dialect Attitudinal Scale," *SM*, 42 (1975), 184-189.

structures were also compared to the factor structure established in a previous investigation[18] which had found three independent dimensions of listener attitude: I. *Socio-Intellectual Status* (e.g. rich-poor, educated-uneducated), II. *Aesthetic Quality* (e.g. pleasing-displeasing, beautiful-ugly), and III. *Dynamism* (e.g. strong-weak, active-passive). Rater scores for the items comprising each of these dimensions were summed to provide dimension scores for each speech presentation.

Procedure

Subjects were stratified in terms of their group (university students or non-students) and sex, and randomly assigned to hear one of the eight test tapes. Subjects met in groups of two to four (depending on their schedules) with one of two research assistants (one male, one female), received written and oral instructions on the use of the SDAS, and were informed that they were free to leave before the listening session was completed (none did). They then rated one of the eight two-speech test tapes. In this way, each subject rated one combination of male and female speaker, with and without obscenities, in the pro-environmentalist and pro-oil speeches.

Covariate Data

To control statistically for the possibility that the two speakers might have delivered the obscene and non-obscene versions of the two speeches differently, it was necessary to obtain ratings of all of the recorded test speeches with the twelve parallel phrases omitted. This was accomplished by dubbing both versions of the pro-environmentalist and pro-oil speeches, given by both speakers, with the obscene or parallel non-obscene phrases edited out (but with pauses retained to indicate that phrases had been omitted).[19] Twenty-seven university students (twelve males and fifteen females) who had not rated the unedited tapes were trained by the investigator in the use of the SDAS and then asked to rate one of the eight edited tapes. Thus, each of these raters heard two speeches comprising one combination of the male and female speakers delivering the pro-oil and pro-environmentalist speeches, in the "obscene" and "non-obscene" versions (but with those phrases omitted). For each speaker-speech combination, raters' mean scores on the three SDAS dimensions were computed separately for male and female listeners. These ratings were used as covariate measures in order to adjust the SDAS scores of listeners who had heard the unedited tapes.[20]

Results

Factor analyses of SDAS item scores for the unedited speeches, computed separately for male and female students and non-students, indicated that all listener subgroups had rated the speakers on the same three dimensions. This was confirmed statistically through vector analyses of factor structures among subgroups in the form of Pearson product-moment correlations of factor loadings,[21]

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] An alternative method of controlling for speaker delivery would have required that each speaker record each speech only once, then record the parallel obscene and non-obscene phrases separately. The two versions of each speech would have been created by editing-in the obscene or non-obscene phrases. This procedure was rejected, however, because the individually recorded phrases would have failed to conform to speakers' intonation and rhythm patterns at the points they were introduced. Such unnaturalness would have called unwarranted attention to these phrases.

[20] For a discussion of the logic underlying analysis of covariance, see George A. Ferguson, *Statistical Analysis in Psychology and Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 326-40.

[21] Rudolph J. Rummel, *Applied Factor Analysis* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), p. 460.

which ranged from .68 to .94, with a median correlation of .84. Item scores from all listeners were therefore combined and factor analyzed, resulting in a three-factor solution consistent with previous findings: I. *Socio-Intellectual Status,* II. *Aesthetic Quality,* and III. *Dynamism.*[22]

Reliability estimates indicated that raters in each phase of the study demonstrated a remarkably high degree of agreement in their judgments. Intraclass reliability coefficients[23] for ratings of the unedited test tapes on the three SDAS dimensions were: I. = .96, II. = .97, III. = .94. Reliability estimates of SDAS ratings of the edited covariate tapes were: I. = .89, II. = .91, III. = .88. Finally, intraclass reliability was .99 for the readers' ratings of the "degree of obscenity" for the parallel phrases.

To determine whether male and female students and non-students regarded the parallel phrases used in the two versions of each speech as representing "obscene" and "non-obscene" language, a three-way analysis of variance was performed on "degree of obscenity" scores by the male and female student and non-student readers. Results indicated that the phrases taken from the obscene speech versions were perceived by all groups as significantly higher in obscenity than those taken from the non-obscene versions ($F = 41.70$, $df = 1/36$, $p < .001$). The mean rating on the seven-point "degree of obscenity" scale for phrases taken from the obscene versions was 4.27; for the non-obscene versions, 1.52. No differences were found between ratings by males and females or between those by students and non-students; nor were there any significant interactions among the variables. Results of this analysis make it reasonable to assume that differences found in listener judgments between the two versions of the speeches were attributable to the use of obscene language.

Analyses were next conducted on listener ratings to determine the effect of speaker language (obscene and non-obscene), speaker sex, listener group (students and non-students), and listener sex. These were in the form of four-way analyses of covariance[24] conducted separately for each of the three SDAS dimensions. Results, summarized in Table 1,[25] indicated the following: (1) On the *Socio-Intellectual Status* dimension, speakers using obscene language were rated significantly lower than those refraining from using such language ($F = 10.53$, $df = 1/78$, $p < .01$). None of the other independent variables (speaker sex, listener group, or listener sex) caused significant differences in ratings, acting either separately or in combinations. (2) Two significant differences were found on *Aesthetic Quality*. First, speakers using obscenities were rated lower on this dimension ($F = 61.97$, $df = 1/78$, $p < .001$) than speakers who did not. Also, the significant interaction between speaker language and listener group, followed by Newman-Keuls post hoc comparisons,[26] showed that non-students downgraded speakers using obscenities significantly more on *Aesthetic Quality* than did the university students. No other differences, either for main effects of independent variables or for interactions, were found. (3) On the third factor, *Dynamism,* no significant differences

22 Mulac, p. 187.

23 Robert L. Ebel, "Estimation of the Reliability of Ratings," *Psychometrika,* 16 (1951), 407-24.

24 B. J. Winer, *Statistical Principles in Experimental Design* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), pp. 578-605.

25 The .01 level was selected for statistical significance for the following reasons: the substantial statistical power of the analysis of covariance procedure, the large number of *F* ratios (15) computed in each analysis, and the desire to reduce the risk of type I error.

26 Winer, pp. 77-85.

were found resulting from speaker language or any of the other independent variables acting alone. However, a significant interaction between listener group and listener sex, followed by Newman-Keuls comparisons, indicated that male students, female students, and female non-students rated speakers higher on *Dynamism* than did male non-students (without regard to speaker language or sex). It is noteworthy that an analysis of variance on covariate data (listener reactions to the edited recordings with parallel obscene and non-obscene phrases omitted) indicated that the speakers had been more dynamic in their delivery when they recorded the obscene versions than when they recorded the non-obscene versions ($F = 53.33, df = 1/78, p. < .001$). When this difference in delivery was removed from listener ratings of the unedited test tapes (through analysis of covariance), no difference in *Dynamism* was found attributable to the speakers' use of obscene language. Table 2 presents adjusted means for SDAS dimension ratings of obscene and non-obscene speeches.

Discussion

This investigation was designed to assess the effects of obscene language upon listener attitude, as measured by the Speech Dialect Attitudinal Scale. The effects of three other independent variables were also studied in the interest of determining possible interactions with speaker language: speaker sex, listener group, and listener sex. Substantial statistical power for assessing effects of independent variables was achieved by presenting both obscene and non-obscene speeches to each listener, while control for possible differences in speaker delivery was accomplished through the use of analysis of covariance.

SDAS data from the four listener subgroups indicated that these subjects had rated speakers on the same three independent dimensions as had been found in previous experiments using this measurement instrument. Reliability of ratings on these dimensions of attitude was consistently high, showing the marked agreement among listeners.

Analysis of "degree of obscenity" scores

TABLE 1

Summary of Results: Four-Way Analysis of Covariance[a] for Three Speech Dialect Attitudinal Scale Dimensions

Sources of Variation	df	Factor I. Socio-Intellectual MS	F	Factor II. Aesthetic MS	F	Factor III. Dynamism MS	F
A (Speaker Language)	1	543.88	10.53*	3210.06	61.97**	31.67	1.07
B (Speaker Sex)	1	.88	.02	63.93	1.23	84.04	2.85
C (Listener Group)	1	94.27	1.82	253.46	4.89	148.23	5.03
D (Listener Sex)	1	62.42	1.21	96.58	1.86	64.59	2.12
A X B	1	1.53	.03	2.78	.05	1.74	.06
A X C	1	170.77	3.31	1032.17	19.93**	6.84	.23
A X D	1	131.20	2.51	161.41	3.12	6.56	.22
B X C	1	44.10	.85	159.42	3.08	14.93	.51
B X D	1	2.49	.05	233.56	4.51	15.96	.54
C X D	1	147.48	2.86	43.68	.84	290.10	9.84*
A X B X C	1	75.43	1.46	45.14	.87	9.17	.31
A X B X D	1	34.35	.66	272.42	5.62	76.09	2.58
A X C X D	1	2.17	.04	206.21	3.98	13.24	.45
B X C X D	1	74.20	1.44	177.16	3.42	57.79	1.96
A X B X C X D	1	92.79	1.80	173.67	3.35	40.30	1.37
Error	78	51.65		51.80		29.47	

*$p < .01$
**$p < .001$
[a]Adjusted for mean listener ratings of audiotapes with obscenities or parallel non-obscenities omitted.

TABLE 2

ADJUSTED MEANS[a] FOR SDAS DIMENSION RATINGS OF OBSCENE AND NON-OBSCENE SPEECHES

Speaker Language	Factor I. Socio-Intellectual	Factor II. Aesthetic	Factor III. Dynamism
Obscene	31.51*	21.78	32.53
Non-Obscene	36.75	34.17	30.97

*Higher mean ratings indicate more favorable scores for a given dimension.
[a]Adjusted through analysis of covariance.

for phrases taken from the parallel versions of the speeches showed that male and female student and non-student readers found the phrases from the obscene versions significantly more obscene than those from the non-obscene versions. These judgments apparently reflected the relative "contemporary community standards"[27] of each subgroup regarding the two sets of parallel phrases.

Analyses of listener SDAS data provided several significant findings. Speakers using twelve obscene phrases during five-minute persuasive speeches were rated lower in *Socio-Intellectual Status* than speakers using strong, non-obscene phrases. Male and female speakers were similarly downgraded, regardless of whether the listeners were students or non-students, males or females. This finding is in keeping with those reported by Lashbrook and Bostrom, Baseheart, and Rossiter for similar dimensions. However, in the latter study's control condition, the obscene adjectives were merely omitted rather than being replaced with strong, non-obscene adjectives.

With regard to the second SDAS dimension, *Aesthetic Quality*, speakers were again rated lower when they used obscene language than when they did not. It was on this dimension that the greatest arithmetic difference was found between ratings of speakers in the obscene versions and those in the non-obscene versions. Also, non-students rated speakers using obscenities significantly lower on *Aesthetic Quality* than did the student listeners; the non-students apparently felt such language detracted more from the speakers' pleasantness and attractiveness than did the students. As in the case of the first attitudinal dimension, these findings were consistent for male and female speakers, regardless of whether the listeners were males or females. Findings on *Aesthetic Quality* are of particular interest since previous studies have not assessed a comparable dimension.

Finally, *Dynamism* ratings failed to differ for speakers using obscene language and those using strong, non-obscene language. This finding is consistent with that of Bostrom, Baseheart, and Rossiter; however it is in contrast to Lashbrook's tentative conclusions regarding this dimension. The fact that the studies Lashbrook reviewed failed to employ ratings of edited versions of the obscene and non-obscene speeches to control for possible speaker delivery differences under the two language conditions may explain their apparent *Dynamism* effect, although a similar rationale does not apply to the Bostrom, Baseheart, and Rossiter study where no real delivery control was employed. In the present study, the speakers were found to have delivered the obscene versions in a significantly more dynamic manner than the non-obscene versions. If SDAS ratings of edited tapes had not been used in the present study as covariate mea-

[27] One of the U. S. Supreme Court's criteria for judging material obsene. For a discussion of these criteria, see: *The Report . . .*, pp. 44-49.

sures, speakers using obscene language would have been found more dynamic. This finding that even trained speakers delivered speeches in a more energetic manner when those speeches contained obscenities requires further investigation. Also, the significant interaction on this dimension between listener group and listener sex is difficult to interpret and requires further study before generalizations may be drawn. What is clear, however, is that obscene language did not, in itself, result in higher *Dynamism* ratings for the speakers.

The findings that use of obscene language detracted no more from the image of a female speaker than from that of a male speaker, and that female listeners downgraded a user of obscenities no more than did male listeners, may be indicative of shifting beliefs regarding appropriate behavior for males and females. It is unlikely that real sex differences were overlooked in this study, given the high reliability of the ratings, their previously established validity, and the substantial differences found resulting from obscene language alone. As Montague states, "With the growing emancipation of woman from her former inferior status she has now altogether abandoned the privilege of swooning and has reduced the potential oceans of tears to mere rivulets. Today, instead of swooning or breaking into tears, she will often swear and then effectively do whatever is indicated."[28] However, before the present findings may be cited in support of this generalization, similar investigations should be conducted using listeners drawn from a wider range of social strata to determine whether they exhibit different reactions to male and female speakers using obscene language or whether those male and female listeners differ from each other in their reactions toward speakers using such language.

This study did not address the question of the effect of obscene language upon the persuasiveness of the discourse. However, previous findings that low ratings on character evaluation are directly related to low persuasiveness suggest that the use of obscene language is likely to reduce a speaker's persuasive impact.[29] This issue requires further study.

In summary, it is clear that within the limitations of the subjects and experimental design employed, a speaker's use of obscene language does affect listener attitude. Although no language-related difference was found on *Dynamism*, speakers who used obscene language were consistently rated lower on both *Socio-Intellectual Status* and *Aesthetic Quality* than speakers who did not.

[28] Montague, p. 86.

[29] Arthur R. Cohen, *Attitude Change and Social Influence* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 23-29.