

Language Intensity

Communicators learn early in life that language varies as to the degree of intensity it exudes. Specifically, language intensity refers to the degree to which language deviates from affective neutrality: “Hate” is more intense than “dis like,” “horrified” more intense than “scared,” “overwhelmed” more intense than “influenced,” and so on. Receivers respond in predictable ways to intense language. Early research in this area revealed that messages employing high-intensity language consistently produced greater attitude change than similar messages using low-intensity language. Later research, however, demonstrated that this effect depends largely on the position advocated. When a communicator employs intense language while advocating a position viewed favorably by an audience, intense language enhances credibility and promotes message acceptance. Conversely, when a communicator advocates a position viewed unfavorably by an audience, intense language often hinders persuasion (Bradac, Bowers, & Courtright, 1979).

According to one view, this reaction stems primarily from receiver expectations (Burgoon & Miller, 1979). With some persuasive messages, receivers may come to expect high or low degrees of language intensity. For example, people generally expect physicians to use moderate to low intensity when recommending patient treatment, and expect high-intensity language from speakers advertising a new product on television. When language intensity matches the expectations held by receivers, message acceptance will increase. Violations of audience expectations, on the other hand, may result in heightening or hindering influence, depending on the valence attributed to the violation. For example, suppose an audience expects a celebrity endorser to use moderate-intensity language. Based on receiver views of the celebrity and the product, any violation of this expectation may be viewed either positively or negatively. Positive violations promote message acceptance while violations viewed negatively promote resistance. This explains why several studies have found that low credibility sources and females are more persuasive when they use low-intensity language (Burgoon, Jones, & Stewart, 1975).

Although the response to intense language generally depends upon the position advocated and language expectations held by receivers, some forms of intense language, notably obscene and profane language, are consistently viewed as inappropriate and impinge negatively on the receiver. Studies demonstrate that speakers who use profanity in their persuasive appeals are less influential and are perceived negatively (Bostrom, Basehart, & Rossiter, 1973; Mulac, 1976).