Presidential leadership and charisma: The effects of metaphor

Jeffery Scott Mio[a],*, Ronald E. Riggio[b], Shana Levin[b], Renford Reese[a]

[a]*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, USA*
[b]*Claremont McKenna College, USA*

Abstract

Two studies examined the relationship between the rated charisma of US presidents and their frequency of use of metaphors in inaugural addresses. In the first study, the incidence of metaphors was recorded from the first-term inaugural addresses of 36 presidents (17 high charisma; 19 low charisma). Charismatic presidents used nearly twice as many metaphors (adjusted for speech length) than non-charismatic presidents. In the second study, judges rated the passages from the speeches that they found most inspirational. Results suggested that metaphors are important for inspiring audience members. This work increases our understanding of the process by which charismatic leaders inspire and motivate followers.
© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Charisma; Leadership; Metaphor

What makes a leader charismatic? Weber's (1947) original conceptualization of charisma discussed the extraordinary qualities possessed by charismatic leaders that elicit devotion in followers, but he did not explicitly define what these were. Indeed, a great deal of the ever-growing body of research on charismatic leadership has focused on delineating the characteristics of charismatic leaders (Beyer, 1999). For example, Conger and Kanungo (1998) assert that charismatic leaders are visionary leaders, sensitive to their environment/followers, articulate, admired, and trustworthy, yet somewhat unconventional.

According to House and colleagues (House, 1977; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), leaders emotionally arouse and motivate followers, inspire their commitment and loyalty, and build

---

* Corresponding author.
    E-mail address: jsmio@csupomona.edu (J.S. Mio).

followers' self-esteem. Bass and Avolio (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985, 1998) view charisma as composed of a combination of leader vision and trustworthiness and ability to inspire and motivate. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the specific behavioral elements of charisma. For example, how do charismatic leaders articulate and convey their visions? How specifically do they gain followers' trust and respect? What is the process by which charismatics inspire and motivate others?

Early research focused on the charismatic individual's ability to emotionally arouse and inspire others. Much of this aspect of charisma is captured in the notion of emotional expressiveness—the ability to spontaneously and accurately portray emotions nonverbally, via facial expressions, body movement, and tone of voice (Friedman, Prince, Riggio, & DiMatteo, 1980; Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988). Some studies have manipulated the nonverbal expressive behavior of leaders in order to create more "charismatic" portrayals and then examined their impact on followers (e.g., Cherulnik, Donley, Wiewel, & Miller, 2001; Howell & Frost, 1989). Yet, Riggio (1987, 1998) argued that the elements of personal charisma involve much more than simple emotional expressiveness and involve skills in both the expression and regulation of emotional communication (similar to ability models of emotional intelligence; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), emotional and interpersonal sensitivity, rhetorical skills, and complex social role-playing skills.

Several researchers have discussed the role of the charismatic leader's use of language. For instance, Willner (1984) in his study of political charismatic leaders commented on their use of verbal imagery and ability to tailor the level of language to the specific audience. Shamir et al. (Shamir et al., 1993; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998) note the charismatic leader's use of symbolic language, labels, slogans, and metaphors. Conger (1991) emphasizes the charismatic leader's use of stories, as well as analogies and metaphors.

The present research focuses on a specific element of a leader's rhetorical skills—the use of metaphor. The charismatic leader can use metaphors as a tool to clarify meaning, to inspire, and to motivate followers. Of particular concern in the present investigation is how political leaders, specifically U.S. Presidents, might use metaphors to inspire their distant constituents–the voters–via presidential speeches.

1. Metaphor as a tool of inspiration

Scholars have emphasized the role that metaphor plays in encapsulating issues (Graesser, Mio, & Millis, 1989; Mio, 1996, 1997). Metaphors can be used to make a message more vivid and increase its retention (Katz, 1996; Ortony, 1975). In addition, metaphors can be used to convey emotional meaning and trigger emotional reactions in others, such as saying that a certain national leader "is a Hitler" (Katz, 1996). This ability to clarify and perhaps arouse emotions in followers may be a key reason why leaders use metaphors in political speeches. Indeed, some of the most memorable and inspirational political speeches of the past century, including Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, Winston Churchill's "iron curtain" speech, and George H. W. Bush's "thousand points of light" address were built on metaphors designed to inspire followers.

Speeches that contain more metaphors may be perceived to be more inspiring because they can stir up emotional connections with the topic or with the speakers while also conveying the message of action. Keizer and Post (1996) also emphasize the power of metaphors to both inform and inspire, calling the use of metaphors a catalyst for organizational change. Other organizational change scholars mention the

critical role that metaphors can play in helping to galvanize followers around change efforts and directions (Akin & Schultheiss, 1990; Burke, 1992; Inns, 2002).

The present studies examine the incidence of metaphor use in presidential addresses. When presidents are first elected, the country is often focused upon their inaugural addresses to get a sense of the tone the presidents would like to set for their administrations and the nation. Thus, in our first study, we examine the metaphor content of first inaugural addresses for those presidents considered to be charismatic versus those presidents not considered to be charismatic. We hypothesize that charismatic presidents–individuals who are articulate and who possess rhetorical skill–will use more metaphors than will non-charismatic presidents. In our second study, we examine the use of metaphor to inspire followers. We hypothesize that metaphor use will be higher for inspiring passages of a speech than for the speech overall.

1.1. Study 1

1.1.1. Method

1.1.1.1. Material. First inaugural speeches for all elected presidents, from George Washington to Bill Clinton, were taken from Lott's (1994) *The Presidents Speak.* Because some presidents were not elected to a second term, we opted to use only their first inaugural addresses, as these addresses set the tone for what they wanted to accomplish during their respective presidencies. Also, some presidents did not give inaugural addresses because they took over for presidents who either died in office or who left before their terms ended (e.g., Andrew Johnson, Gerald Ford), so we did not have any inaugural addresses from these presidents. Altogether, we examined 36 speeches.

1.1.1.2. Procedure. After detailed training that focused on the definition and identification of metaphors, two independent judges identified metaphors in the presidents' speeches. They identified each metaphor that occurred, counting a single metaphor multiple times if the president used that metaphor multiple times. Thus, if a president were to use a root metaphor (a metaphor that was used as the basis for an entire speech or a section of the speech), that president received a higher metaphor score than a president who used a metaphor, then dropped it. The judges agreed on 78.2% of the identified metaphors. Differences were resolved by discussion between the judges along with one of the coauthors of this study (JSM). Although metaphors varied in length, we opted to take a conservative approach and count a metaphor as a single unit despite the number of words used to complete the metaphor. For example, John Adams' metaphor "launched into an ocean of uncertainty" contained only six words, while Bill Clinton's metaphor "We must provide for our nation the way a family provides for its children" contained 14 words, yet both were considered to be only one metaphor. Yet another conservative choice we made was to divide the number of identified metaphors by the number of words in the speeches.

Some may have preferred to use idea units as the ideal denominator (Williams-Whitney, Mio, & Whitney, 1992). However, because presidential addresses tended to be lyrical as opposed to common speech, identification of idea units was difficult. Moreover, because the addresses averaged over 2900 words, identification of idea units would have led to errors and undermined our results. Therefore, our calculations were based upon the number of metaphors identified divided by the number of words per speech which we call a metaphor density score.

In order to determine the charisma of US presidents, we used Simonton's (1988) charisma scores. Of the 36 presidents in our study who had first inaugural addresses, 17 had positive charisma scores and 19 had negative charisma scores.

1.1.2. Results and discussion

Presidents with positive charisma scores had metaphor density scores (0.0059) that were nearly twice as dense as presidents with negative charisma scores (0.0030). This yielded statistically significant differences between these two groups [$t(34)=24.9$, $p<0.01$]. The correlation between Simonton's (1988) charisma scores and our metaphor density scores was also statistically reliable [$r(36)=0.37$, $p<0.05$].

Table 1 displays the Simonton charisma scores for each president (ordered from most positive to most negative) and the corresponding metaphor densities of their speeches. Because Simonton's article came out before George Herbert Walker Bush and William Jefferson Clinton were elected president, we placed George Bush in the middle of the negative charismatic president rankings and Bill Clinton in the middle of the positive charismatic president rankings as conservative estimates of where they may have ranked using Simonton's criteria. Presidents who lost re-election bids tended to have negative charisma ratings, so George Bush was placed in the bottom half of the rankings. Most political observers would agree that Bill Clinton was a charismatic president, so we placed him in the upper half of the charisma rankings.

These results support our hypothesis that charismatic U.S. presidents will use more metaphors in their inaugural addresses than will non-charismatic presidents. In Study 2, we explore the dynamics of these political metaphors, specifically hypothesizing that the metaphors used in presidents' speeches will be found more frequently in the more inspirational passages.

1.2. Study 2

1.2.1. Material

Stimuli for the second study were the same 36 inaugural addresses used in Study 1. Booklets of six addresses were constructed. Each booklet contained presidents scattered throughout the history of the union. In other words, booklets did not contain all recent presidents or all distant presidents. After the presidents were distributed among the booklets, we took care that no single booklet contained only "well-known" presidents. For example, we made sure that George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt were in different booklets. Finally, we took care that the length of reading was roughly comparable per booklet. For example, Theodore Roosevelt had the shortest speech (1064 words), and Ulysses S. Grant had the second shortest speech (1178 words); William Henry Harrison had the longest speech (9156), and William Howard Taft had the second longest speech (6100). We made sure that booklets did not contain both Theodore Roosevelt's and Ulysses S. Grant's speeches, nor did they contain both William Henry Harrison's and William Howard Taft's speeches.

1.2.2. Procedure

We distributed these booklets in an upper division undergraduate politics course and asked students to complete them. There were 28 students in this class. We asked the students to go through each of the inaugural addresses and underline (or highlight) those passages they considered to be the most inspiring. Our goal was to have at least four raters per president. Of the 28 students, 23 returned the booklets. Because some students did not return the booklets and some students stopped scoring after the first two or three speeches, some of our presidents had between zero and two raters. Therefore, in a subsequent

Table 1
Presidents' charismatic scores (based upon Simonton's [1988] Ratings) and their overall metaphor density scores compared with their metaphor density scores for inspiring passages

President	Simonton's charisma score	Number of metaphors	Number of words in speech	Overall metaphor density	Inspiring passages metaphor density
Positive charismatics (n=17)					
Franklin Delano Roosevelt	2.5	21	2128	0.0099	0.0125
Andrew Jackson	2.2	3	1263	0.0024	0.0046
Lyndon Baynes Johnson	1.5	17	1517	0.0112	0.0103
John Fitzgerald Kennedy	1.3	17	1354	0.0126	0.0147
Theodore Roosevelt	1.2	6	1064	0.0056	0.0016
Ronald Reagan	1.2	25	2661	0.0094	0.0154
Franklin Pierce	0.9	15	3641	0.0041	0.0142
James Garfield	0.6	13	3477	0.0037	0.0029
William McKinley	0.6	9	4389	0.0021	0.0018
Dwight D. Eisenhower	0.6	10	2750	0.0036	0.0040
Bill Clinton[a]	0.5	26	1770	0.0147	0.0195
Abraham Lincoln	0.5	8	3636	0.0022	0.0099
Richard M. Nixon	0.3	39	2041	0.0191	0.0251
Thomas Jefferson	0.2	18	1881	0.0096	0.0168
George Washington	0.1	6	1631	0.0037	0.0093
Martin Van Buren	0.1	9	4301	0.0021	0.0044
Harry S. Truman	0.0	4	2136	0.0019	0.0033
Means:	.85	14.47	2449	0.0059	0.0112
Negative charismatics (n=19)					
James Buchanan	−0.0	4	3163	0.0013	0.0000
Woodrow Wilson	−0.0	13	1760	0.0074	0.0120
James K. Polk	−0.1	9	5352	0.0017	0.0030
Benjamin Harrison	−0.1	12	4926	0.0024	0.0029
Zachary Taylor	−0.2	1	1239	0.0008	0.0000
John Adams	−0.3	11	2590	0.0042	0.0082
Jimmy Carter	−0.4	7	1286	0.0054	0.0048
Warren G. Harding	−0.5	25	3861	0.0065	0.0126
John Quincy Adams	−0.6	16	3267	0.0049	0.0117
Herbert Hoover	−0.6	7	3989	0.0018	0.0016
George Bush[b]	−0.7	39	2364	0.0165	0.0214
William Henry Harrison	−0.7	19	9156	0.0021	0.0085
Rutherford B. Hayes	−0.8	2	2998	0.0007	0.0018
James Monroe	−0.9	4	2688	0.0015	0.0000
William Howard Taft	−1.1	5	6100	0.0008	0.0043
James Madison	−1.2	6	1300	0.0046	0.0026
Grover Cleveland	−1.5	0	1943	0.0000	0.0000
Calvin Coolidge	−1.9	7	4445	0.0016	0.0038
Ulysses S. Grant	−2.2	3	1178	0.0025	0.0000
Means:	−0.73	10.00	3348	0.0030	0.0059

[a] Although Bill Clinton took office after Simonton rated presidents on charisma, most political observers suggest that Clinton was very charismatic. This ranking reflects the 75th percentile.

[b] Although George Bush took office after Simonton rated presidents on charisma, most political observers suggest that Bush was not charismatic. This ranking reflects the 25th percentile.

term, we distributed the booklets in another advanced politics course and asked students to complete them. Each student had booklets of four or five presidents' addresses, again, controlling for length of speeches and familiarity with the presidents. We received nine additional raters, thus leaving each presidential address evaluated by between four and seven raters. Overall, there were 18 women and 14 men who served as raters for these speeches.

We counted up the number of inspiring words underlined or highlighted by each rater (47.7% of all metaphors were underlined by two or more raters; only 19% of metaphors in inaugural addresses were not underlined by any raters). We then examined if the highlighted section contained any of the metaphors we had previously identified. We totaled up the number of metaphors identified in these passages and divided this total by the number of words highlighted as being inspiring, yielding a metaphor density score for the inspiring passages.

1.2.3. Results and discussion

In comparing the metaphor density for inspiring passages with the overall metaphor density passages, we found that the density increased (over the previous metaphor density score) by 90% for presidents with positive charisma scores (0.0112 vs. 0.0059) and by 97% for presidents with negative charisma scores (0.0059 vs. 0.0030). Thus, even those presidents who did not appear to be charismatic were still perceived to be more inspiring when they used metaphors. Even though the overall metaphor density scores were increased by 97% when examining inspiring passages of presidents with negative charisma scores, their metaphor density scores were still significantly lower than those of their positive charisma counterparts [$t(34)=49.5$, $p<0.01$]. Again, the correlation between Simonton's (1988) charisma ratings and our metaphor density scores yielded a significant correlation [$r(36)=0.33$, $p<0.05$]. Table 1 displays the Simonton charisma scores with the overall metaphor density scores and the metaphor density scores for inspiring passages.

1.2.4. General discussion

The results of these two studies suggest that metaphor is indeed one of the rhetorical "tools" used more frequently by charismatic US presidents, and we presume that the use of metaphor serves a role in inspiring constituents. Specifically, the metaphor density in presidential inaugural addresses was double the amount for charismatic versus non-charismatic US presidents, using Simonton's (1988) ratings of presidential charisma. In the second study, judges underlined the more "inspirational" passages from the presidents' inaugural addresses, and the fact that metaphors were relatively dense in passages deemed inspirational provides indirect evidence that the use of metaphor is indeed an inspirational rhetorical tool.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the actual use of metaphors in speeches by charismatic leaders, and to provide evidence that these metaphors may play a role in making speeches more inspirational. Of course, metaphor is only one rhetorical tool, and as noted earlier, much of a leader's ability to inspire may involve the nonverbal expressive style that is typically associated with charismatic leaders (e.g., Cherulnik et al., 2001; Howell & Frost, 1989; Riggio, 1987, 1998). Recently, for example, a study by Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl (2004) explored the "charismatic speech" of President George W. Bush before and after the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks. Analyzing the text of Bush's public speeches, but not metaphors, Bligh found that the "charisma content" of the speech increased post-9/11.

There are obvious limitations to this research. One is the reliance on inaugural addresses as a representation of the leader given that US presidents employ many speechwriters. However, it is

assumed that the president has a major hand in the final content of important speeches such as inaugural addresses, and it is assumed that the inaugural address is reflective of the president's beliefs and rhetorical style.

A second limitation is that we simply looked at the density of metaphor use in speeches, rather than assessing the "quality" of the metaphors. We did, however, examine inspirational passages as judged by students in a politics course and found that metaphors appeared to play a part in the speeches being rated as more inspirational. Certainly, not *every* metaphor used was identified as being inspirational. Moreover, if metaphors were overused, speeches may seem hackneyed or overly synthetic. Clearly, more in-depth studies of the role of metaphor in the speech of charismatic leaders are warranted.

In summary, it has been often suggested that charismatic leaders use metaphors as a rhetorical tool to inspire and motivate followers (Conger, 1991; Shamir, 1995; Shamir et al., 1998). This research provides empirical evidence to substantiate this claim by finding that there is indeed a relationship between the rated charisma of US presidents and the incidence of metaphor use in their inaugural addresses, with more charismatic presidents using nearly double the metaphors of noncharismatic presidents. It is hoped that future research on charismatic leadership will continue to investigate the specific behaviors displayed by charismatic leaders, and how those behaviors impact followers.

References

Akin, G., & Schultheiss, E. (1990). Jazz bands and missionaries—OD through stories and metaphors. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *5*, 12–18.

Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M. (1988). Transformational leadership, charisma and beyond. In J. G. Hunt, B. R. Baliga, H. T. Dachler, & C. A. Schriesheim (Eds.), *Emerging leadership vistas* (pp. 29–49). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.

Bass, B. M. (1998). *Transformational leadership: Industrial, military, and educational impact*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Beyer, J. M. (1999). Taming and promoting charisma to change organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *10*, 307–330.

Bligh, M. C., Kohles, J. C., & Meindl, J. R. (2004). Charisma under crisis: Presidential leadership, rhetoric, and media responses before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *15*, 211–239.

Burke, W. W. (1992). Metaphors to consult by. *Group and Organization Management*, *17*, 250–255.

Cherulnik, P. D., Donley, K. A., Wiewel, T. S. R., & Miller, S. R. (2001). Charisma is contagious: The effect of leaders' charisma on observers' affect. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *31*, 2149–2159.

Conger, J. A. (1991). Inspiring others: The language of leadership. *Academy of Management Executive*, *5*(1), 31–45.

Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1998). *Charismatic leadership in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Friedman, H. S., Prince, L. M., Riggio, R. E., & DiMatteo, M. R. (1980). Understanding and assessing nonverbal expressiveness: The affective communication test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *39*, 333–351.

Friedman, H. S., Riggio, R. E., & Casella, D. (1988). Nonverbal skill, personal charisma, and initial attraction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *14*, 203–211.

Graesser, A. C., Mio, J. S., & Millis, K. (1989). Metaphors in persuasive communication. In D. Meutsch (Ed.), *Models of literary understanding* (pp. 131–154). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

House, R. J. (1977). A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership. In J. G. Hunt, & L. L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The cutting edge* (pp. 189–207). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Howell, J. M., & Frost, P. J. (1989). A laboratory study of charismatic leadership. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *43*, 243–269.

Inns, D. (2002). Metaphor in the literature of organizational analysis: A preliminary tazonomy and a glimpse at a humanities-based perspective. *Organization*, *9*, 305–330.

Katz, A. N. (1996). On interpreting statements as metaphor or irony: Contextual heuristics and cognitive consequences. In J. S. Mio, & A. N. Katz (Eds.), *Metaphor: Implications and applications* (pp. 1–22). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Keizer, J. A., & Post, G. J. J. (1996). The metaphoric gap as a catalyst of change. In C. Oswick, & D. Grant (Eds.), *Organisation development: Metaphorical explorations*. London: Pitman.

Lott, D. N. (1994). *The presidents speak: The inaugural addresses of the american presidents from Washington to Clinton*. New York: Holt.

Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P. (1997). What is emotional intelligence? In P. Salovey, & D. Sluyer (Eds.), *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Implications for educators* (pp. 3–31). New York: Basic Books.

Mio, J. S. (1996). Metaphor, politics, and persuasion. In J. S. Mio, & A. N. Katz (Eds.), *Metaphor: Implications and applications* (pp. 127–145). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Mio, J. S. (1997). Metaphor and politics. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *12*, 113–133.

Ortony, A. (1975). Why metaphors are necessary and not just nice. *Educational Theory*, *25*, 45–53.

Riggio, R. E. (1987). *The charisma quotient*. New York: Dodd, Mead.

Riggio, R. E. (1998). Charisma. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of mental health* (pp. 387–396). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Shamir, B. (1995). Social distance and charisma: Theoretical notes and an exploratory study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *6*, 19–47.

Shamir, B., House, R. J., & Arthur, M. B. (1993). The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: A self-concept theory. *Organization Science*, *4*, 1–17.

Shamir, B., Zakay, E., Breinin, E., & Popper, M. (1998). Correlates of charismatic leader behavior in military units: Subordinates' attitudes, unit characteristics, and superiors' appraisals of leader performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, *41*, 387–409.

Simonton, D. K. (1988). Presidential style: Personality, biography, and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *55*, 928–936.

Weber, M. (1947). The theory of social and economic organizations (A.M. Henderson and T. Parsons, Trans.). New York: Free Press.

Williams-Whitney, D., Mio, J. S., & Whitney, P. (1992). Metaphor production in creative writing. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, *21*, 497–509.

Willner, A. R. (1984). *The spellbinders: Charismatic political leadership*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.