Means of Increasing Credibility in Religious Discourse – Credibility Boosters

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The paper looks into discursive practices of increasing credibility of a message and its source deployed in religious discourse for the purpose of boosting its persuasive potential. It is based on author’s research and analysis of a corpus of religious texts and illustrates the use of credibility boosters by presenting examples selected from sources of several denominations and religious movements (Christians, Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, United Christian Action, etc.). Besides, it statistically maps the distribution of credibility boosters across four samples used by Judaism and Christianity, Church of Latter-Day Saints, Heaven’s Gate, and Church of Scientology. It also points out recent trends in some of the persuasive mechanisms deployed to induce a change of individual’s opinion and/or behavior.

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INTRODUCTION

Credibility (or authority) boosters, i.e. means of increasing credibility of information source, message presenter or the very information presented seem to play a pivotal role in any persuasion process.

The importance of objective characteristics of a message source (presenter) in the process of persuasion was emphasized as early as Antiquity when Aristotle introduced one of the earliest models of persuasion stating that *ethos*, apart from *pathos* (involving subjectivity and emotionalism) and *logos* (logical structure of the arguments presented), represents one of the fundamental keys to persuasion.

Cialdini (1993) asserts that regardless of possible misuse of the authority concept, a multilayered and widely accepted system of authority confers an immense advantage upon a society. It allows the development of sophisticated structures for resource production, trade, defense, expansion, and social control that would otherwise be impossible. In addition, every human encounters countless situations in their life in which reliance upon authority turns out beneficial be it in the form of advice they can consequently make use of in their struggle for survival or concrete and immediate reward they can attain for their obedience. Religious discourse makes no difference in this respect. The very beginning of the *Old Testament*, for instance, portrays what fatal consequences the Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience led to. In addition, basically all religious texts teem with depictions of all conceivable sorts of punishment that is inflicted on those who defy the religious authority’s code.

McCroskey (1969) points out that the text whose purpose is to persuade often contains supportive factual information that originates from a source other than speaker. He claims that while the use of evidence does not considerably increase the persuasiveness of a highly credible source, as this one is usually perceived highly persuasive by virtue of its credibility, it considerably enhances the influence of a low credibility source chiefly in the situations where the evidence was previously unknown to the audience. This fact may serve as an explanation for why, for instance, some comparatively new religious communities tend to turn to science and its “discoveries” or other sources of high repute when it comes to justifying their cause and defending the principles they promote.

In his book *The Psychology of Persuasion – How to Persuade Others to Your Way of Thinking* (Hogan, 2003), the author discusses *Law of Association*, which can be viewed as an explanation for deployment of old religious concepts in the new groups’ rhetoric and mixing these with the new ones. That is, Hogan asserts that if an advertised product is connected with people we like, we tend to have positive associations with the product as well and therefore such a product stands a greater chance of being bought by us. If the product is linked to a popular or credible source, it is already on its way to a shopping basket. The same law is exerted when it comes to selling ideas and principles:

*During election years, presidential candidates will often quote former presidents of the competing party to document and reinforce their own positions on the issues. This is an excellent tactic often used in presidential debates.*
Republican candidates will often quote statements of megapopular democrats like John F. Kennedy. This association strikes a positive chord in the minds of all democrats and former Kennedy supporters. Enough of these associations and the candidate will win a lot of votes on election day (Hogan, 2003, p. 53).

Mey (2001) also touches on the efficiency of association in persuasion process when he says advertising often relies on “techniques which basically try to seduce the viewer or reader through a promised identification with some prestigious environment or a set of ‘right people’: young, smart, rich”. (Mey, 2001, p. 210)

Sperber and Wilson (1968) point out the role credibility attributed to the message source plays in persuasion contending that “The realization that a trustworthy communicator intends to make you believe something is an excellent reason for believing it” (Sperber & Wilson, 1968, as cited in Mey, 2001, p. 85). Similarly, Sternthal et al. (1978) assert that communication practitioners appear to be convinced of communicator’s character having a significant effect on the persuasiveness of their appeals. In this respect, advertisers select consumers who typify the target audience to present testimonials on their satisfaction with the advertiser’s product and manufacturers seek the seal of approval from independent product testing agencies to substantiate their claims. Politicians running for office often solicit endorsement of prestigious individuals and organizations.

Cialdini (1993) mentions an experiment illustrating the power credible sources can exert on individuals to make them act the way they want. In the experiment, which was conducted and described by Milgram (1967), test subjects were asked by a mock researcher to participate in a “study of memory” as teachers and electrocute a person for every mistake he made when recalling a list of items he had been asked to memorize. Sanctioned by the mock researchers, the experiment was viewed by most of the subjects as harmless:

Rather than yield to the pleas of the victim, about two thirds of the subjects in Milgram’s experiment pulled every one of the thirty shock switches in front of them and continued to engage the last switch (450 volts) until the researcher ended the experiment. More alarming still, not one of the forty subjects in this study quit his job as Teacher when the victim first began to demand his release ... nor even later, when his reaction to each shock had become, in Milgram’s words, ‘definitely an agonized scream’ (Cialdini, 1993, p. 211).

Milgram’s experiment illustrates how far most individuals are willing to go when their acts are sanctioned by a reputable authority and thus the persuasive potential such an authority has.
METHODOLOGY

The first aim of the analysis this paper describes was to locate and describe the workings of those segments of religious discourse whose intended perlocutionary effect (Kurzon, 1998) is boosting credibility of the message in texts of several denominations, i.e. qualitative analysis. In this respect, an attempt was also made at their classification with special attention being paid to their differentiating features for the purpose of subsuming them under categories based on their character. The second objective was to map the distribution of these segments across four samples (altogether making up the 23,000-word research corpus) of the texts produced and utilized by five different denominations (Judaism and Christianity, Heaven’s Gate, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (also known as Mormons), and Scientologists), i.e. quantitative analysis.

When mapping the segments identified as boosting credibility of the message communicated, the author based his approach on the theory of speech acts (Austin, 1976), chiefly the category of perlocutionary object, or intended perlocutionary effect (Kurzon, 1998), i.e. the effect the writer/speaker wants his/her utterance to have on the message recipient. The author decided on this criterion rather than that based on perlocution, i.e. the effect an utterance has on the message recipient, as the latter is not only a product of the utterance itself, but gets affected by multiple contextual factors (the text surrounding the utterance, context of situation, recipient’s cultural context, etc.). In this respect, the intended perlocutionary effect proves to be easier to identify than perlocution when one only analyzes the text as such, i.e. without, for instance, having its credibility effect assessed by a group of readers.

As for the corpus, the segments identified during the qualitative analysis stage as those boosting or attempting to boost credibility of the message communicated were tagged in each sample, counted and, subsequently, their occurrence averages were compared (calculated per 1,000 words). A segment was tagged as the one with intended perlocutionary effect of boosting credibility provided the message communicated was linked to what is perceived either generally or by the intended audience as a credible source.

ANALYSIS RESULTS

Qualitative Analysis

Credibility Boosters – Facilitators of Persuasion in Religious Discourse

“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Albert Einstein

The credibility boosters identified by the author in the rhetoric of religious communities seem to fall into three major categories: references to scientific sources, references to long-established concepts whose credibility (or authority) has been forged by
the denominations for centuries or even millennia, and novel concepts (usually denoted by neologisms but often linked to the long-established ones).

The following excerpt comes from an article posted on Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Web site (www.watchtower.org), which stresses a deleterious impact of blood transfusions – a treatment Jehovah’s Witnesses oppose and strongly discourage their members from for “biblical and medical reasons”. What is worth paying special attention to in connection with the passage is the presentation of medical evidence used to gain support for the anti-transfusion argument and the sources it is said to be taken from.

The hemoglobin in the red cells carries oxygen needed for good health and life. So if a person has lost a lot of blood, it might seem logical just to replace it. Normally you have about 14 or 15 grams of hemoglobin in every 100 cubic centimeters of blood. (Another measure of the concentration is hematocrit, which is commonly about 45 percent.) The accepted “rule” was to transfuse a patient before surgery if his hemoglobin was below 10 (or 30 percent hematocrit). The Swiss journal Vox Sanguinis (March 1987) reported that "65% of [anesthesiologists] required patients to have a preoperative hemoglobin of 10 gm/dl for elective surgery."

But at a 1988 conference on blood transfusion, Professor Howard L. Zauder asked, "How Did We Get a 'Magic Number'?" He stated clearly: "The etiology of the requirement that a patient have 10 grams of hemoglobin (Hgb) prior to receiving an anesthetic is cloaked in tradition, shrouded in obscurity, and unsubstantiated by clinical or experimental evidence." Imagine the many thousands of patients whose transfusions were triggered by an 'obscure, unsubstantiated' requirement!

Some might wonder, "Why is a hemoglobin level of 14 normal if you can get by on much less?" Well, you thus have considerable reserve oxygen-carrying capacity so that you are ready for exercise or heavy work. Studies of anemic patients even reveal that "it is difficult to detect a deficit in work capacity with hemoglobin concentrations as low as 7 g/dl. Others have found evidence of only moderately impaired function." — Contemporary Transfusion Practice, 1987. (Quality Alternatives to Transfusion)

The text above contains information on what is supposed to be normal hemoglobin levels and the fact that one “can get by on much less”. Apart from providing medical data on the matter, whose inclusion contributes to the impression of the issue being tackled with an in-depth insight, the excerpt also mentions the sources these have been taken over from serving the purpose of credibility boosters, i.e. the Swiss journal Vox Sanguinis, Professor Howard L. Zauder and Contemporary Transfusion Practice.

Comparatively young Christian denominations (and not only these) tend to deploy a mixture of biblical principles and scientific data (or mentions of scientific sources, at least) to sustain credibility of the religious concepts they promote. One might possibly view this tendency as stemming from the perpetually increasing trend towards rationality in accounting for the phenomena representing inevitable part of our everyday lives. Something
entirely free of scientific evidence, rationality, a testimonial delivered by a reputable person(s) or completely lacking a logical proof of some kind no longer seems to be considered healthy or generally beneficial and thus scarcely stands a chance of success in recruitment of any sort. In this respect, the mixture of science, its latest discoveries, and pure eschatology (in the form we know it from time immemorial) serves the purpose of a suitable religious alternative to the discourse of modern advertising bombarding us with scientific and “reputable” evidence on a daily basis.

In the following extract taken from Seven-Day Adventists’ Fasten Your Seatbelt article posted in Adventist Review (online edition), the author explains why the eighth day of the baby’s life is most suitable for its circumcision. What is worth focusing on here is the aforementioned mixing of biblical principles and scientific findings, with the latter used as a credibility booster.

In Genesis 17:11, 12, God gives Abraham a strange and seemingly arbitrary command: ‘You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.’ Now, if I were Abraham, I probably would have thought to myself, H’mmm . . . God, why do You want this for a sign? Couldn’t I simply wear a certain color like red or green? It works for the army and the gangs, and it’s totally painless. And why do this operation on the eighth day as opposed to the twenty-third day? Why don’t we have it done when we’re 18 years old like the surrounding tribes?

When we look at the scientific information about circumcision, we find answers to these questions. People living in Abraham’s time, about 1900 B.C., had almost no knowledge of health or medicine. Since 1940 it’s been standard practice for doctors to circumcise all males born in the U.S., and only in the past 50 years has it been discovered that the eighth day, as the Bible commands, is typically the best time for this procedure. There are two reasons for this:

1. A baby’s blood is saturated with antitoxins or disease-fighting elements which it receives from its mother before birth. For the first week of life the infant is protected against infection. Shortly after the first week those disease-fighting agents begin to disappear.

2. In addition, during the first week a baby’s blood-clotting ability increases rapidly and reaches its normal concentration at the beginning of the second week. So operations before the eighth day might run the risk of excessive bleeding or hemorrhaging. Therefore, the ‘safest time for surgery is at the very point where both the disease-fighting qualities and the blood-clotting ability are at their highest point—the eighth day.

3. Abraham didn’t understand blood coagulation and antitoxins, but he trusted God. More than three millennia later science has caught up to show God’s brilliance. That’s one big point for the theory that God is a loving Father who wants and knows what’s best for His children. (Fasten Your Seatbelt)
Similarly, in Christian-oriented discourse, one can find scientifically sustained anti-abortion claims. The text which follows has been published by United Christian Action, an organization active in promoting pro-life and anti-abortion measures in South Africa and in, as its members say, “seeking to co-ordinate a united Christian stand for righteousness and truth through providing information and by mobilizing Christians throughout South Africa”. They also engage in nation-wide activities endeavoring to ban or place restrictions on pornography, activities targeting homosexuality and biblical reformation.

_Time Magazine_ and Rand McNally’s _Atlas of the Body_ states, ‘In fusing together, the male and female gametes produce a fertilised single cell, the zygote, which is the start of a new individual.’(_Time Magazine and Rand McNally’s Atlas of the Body_ (Rand McNally, New York, 1980) p139,144)

The Official Senate report on Senate Bill 158, the ‘Human Life Bill’, summarised the issue this way: ‘Physicians, biologists, and other scientists agree that conception marks the beginning of the life of a human being – a being that is alive and a member of the human species. There is overwhelming agreement on this point in countless medical, biological, and scientific writings.’ (_Report, Subcommittee on Separation of Powers to Senate Judiciary Committee S-158, 97th Congress, 1st Session, 1981, p7. Cited in Pro-life Answers for Pro-Choice Arguments, By Randy Alcorn, (Multnomah Press, OR, USA, 1992), p43_) (Prolife: 10 Arguments Against Abortion)

In the excerpt above, the credibility boosters of _Time Magazine, Atlas of the Body_ and the _Official Senate report on Senate Bill 158_ join forces to induce the impression of fetus being considered a human being at the very onset of its existence, which is subsequently utilized to advocate Action’s anti-abortion stance through its appeal to a legal system, another credibility booster: “From conception, the new person conceived is as deserving of the full protection of the law as any other person.” (Prolife: 10 Arguments Against Abortion)

Another medical argument intended to discourage the readers from abortion deployed in the same article revolves around the topic of breast cancer. That is, the author is trying to convince readers of the fact that the risk of developing breast cancer is substantially higher in women who underwent abortion during their first pregnancy than in those who did not attributing it to the natural process of division of breast cells and their maturation being halted abruptly by the act. The author contrasts this with the situation when pregnancy ends in birth and thus “the initial surge of estrogen is counterbalanced”. Again, what is worth noting in the following passage is the source of a presumably high repute mentioned:

_‘Every study of induced abortions performed before the first live birth is consistent with an initial increase in risk of at least 50 percent,’ reports Dr Joel Brind, professor of endocrinology at Baruch College, City University of New York, who is also a breast cancer researcher on staff at Beth Israel Hospital and Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. He has also submitted his_
research on this subject to the Journal of the American Medical Association for peer review (Nov 1993). (Prolife: 10 Arguments Against Abortion)

Credibility boosters in the form of quotations taken from scientific sources and their authors (including their academic titles) recur in the article even when other subjects than the medical ones are addressed. Thus, for instance, the author takes recourse to an alleged psychological link between abortion and child abuse contending:

A study by Dr Phillip Ney, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Christ Church, New Zealand, clearly pointed to the fact that abortion (and its acceptance of the violence of killing the unborn) lowered a parent's psychic resistance to violence and abuse of the born. (Relationship Between Abortion and Child Abuse by Dr P Ney. Canada Journal of Psychiatry, vol. 24, 1979, p.610-620) (Prolife: 10 Arguments Against Abortion)

However, it is not only science and references to its discoveries supporting the principles denominations strive to promote that are deployed as means of boosting credibility of the message they communicate but it is also the institution of God that appears to be used to this end. That is, God alone and the Church as His mediator have functioned as mighty authorities imposing behavioral rules on the man as well as driving forces behind persuasive discourse in religion for centuries. The concept of God has had enough time to pervade every conceivable sphere of human existence regardless of whether this happened either thanks to its main promoter, the Church, and its cooperation with secular authorities or as a result of His vividly depicted omnipotence and thirst for revenge taken on those who transgress His law (or both). Whatever is the case, God seems to have become for some a metaphor for absolute authority and the alpha and omega of everything. All the aforementioned qualities have granted Him a position superior to all the existent authorities. One can trace the roots of such superiority back to God being depicted as ready to act whichever way He pleases, punish whoever He finds deserving a punishment, and salvage those He thinks worthy of salvation. Moreover, it is the centuries of belief, Church’s propaganda and crusades against those who refused to act the way the Church wanted them to as well as its alliance with secular authorities, its strategy of accounting for the man’s prosperity or misfortune in terms of His reward or punishment, respectively, that seem to have granted the concept of God authority and credibility.

The excerpts below illustrate how the concept of God (and that of Jesus in the last one) is fitted with the signifieds (Saussure, 2006) shaping its image of an authority and the source of information that should be taken seriously. Besides, passages like these prepare a ground for the subsequent in-the-name-of-God presentation of the principles denominations want their members to adopt.

But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. (The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 2:24)

O how great the holiness of our God! For he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it. (The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 9:20)
8He that does not love has not come to know God, because God is love.  
9By this love of God was made manifest in our case, because God sent forth his only begotten Son into the world that we might gain life through him. (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (Jehova’s Witnesses), 1 John 4:8-9)

6And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. (The Bible, NIV, Exodus 34:6-7)

But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words. (The Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 9:6)

And Jesus approached and spoke to them, saying: 'All authority has been given me in Heaven and on the earth. (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (Jehova’s Witnesses), Matthew 28:18)

Quantitative Analysis

Distribution of Credibility Boosters across the Samples

All the samples analyzed are of approximately the same length, i.e. 5,000 words with the exception of Haven’s Gate one, which is somewhat longer. However, the author has decided not to shorten it in order to preserve it as a self-contained section (as the other three samples). Table 1 below gives averages per 1,000 words calculated for each sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>CB-occurrence Rate</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>Judaism, Christianity</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>23.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctrine and Covenants</td>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>22.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Last Chance to Evacuate Earth</td>
<td>Heaven’s Gate</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianetics: the Evolution of Science</td>
<td>Scientologists</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of CB segment distribution across the four analyzed samples shows the highest CB occurrence rate (23.42 words per 1.000) in the Ezekiel sample, followed by Mormons (22.97 words), Heaven’s Gate (2.44 words) and the Church of Scientology (1.96 words per 1.000). As regards the CB types, credibility boosters with references to God represent an overwhelming majority of those identified in the first two samples. On the other hand, most of those in the Heaven’s Gate sample are neologisms referring to, more or less, old religious concepts of God, Heaven, etc. In the Church of Scientology sample, it is CBs related to science that prevail.

DISCUSSION

As the table above indicates, the Ezekiel sample leads the others in the number of segments whose intended perlocutionary effect is boosting credibility of the information presented or its source. The Mormon Doctrine and Covenants follows with the occurrence rate slightly lower than that of the Ezekiel one. The Heaven’s Gate and Church of Scientology texts manifest comparatively low CB occurrence rates.

The author assumes the aforementioned results point to the fact that different texts (and thus possibly denominations) deploy credibility boosters in their persuasion process different ways and to varying degrees – a fact manifest in the frequency at which the segments containing these appear in them. What should be mentioned at this point is the fact that most credibility boosters identified in the first group of samples, i.e. Ezekiel and Doctrine and Covenants, contain references to God (or Lord), whereas the samples in the other group deploy other CB types (scientific data and discoveries, references to Dianetics as science, etc.). The author assumes this fact can also account for the differences in occurrence rates between the two groups. That is, while Judaism and Mormonism seem to rely heavily on God or His messengers as credible sources of information, the discourse of the Church of Scientology and that of Heaven’s Gate reflects the atmosphere in the society at the time these two came into existence (1954 and the early 1970s, respectively), i.e. the one characteristic of credibility being increasingly sustained through references to science (Church of Scientology) or via neologisms the group itself has created serving as alternatives to the old concepts of God and His kingdom (Heaven’s Gate). While God represents a somewhat abstract concept, a signifier (Saussure, 2006) that can be easily fitted with multiple signifieds depending on the purpose it is used for (Dvorak, 2012), scientific evidence and facts cannot, which always makes the former readily available for defending presenter’s cause. However, the efficiency of different credibility boosters seems to change overtime. While God may have been viewed as ultimate authority in the past, the credibility of the concept may suffer severe blows in the science-driven society of today. In this respect, the versatility of the concept and the ease of utilizing it as a credibility booster of the communicated message in the past seem to account for high CB rates in the first two samples.
CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis the paper describes reveals three major types of credibility boosters, i.e. means that religious groups utilize in order to increase credibility of their message and thus its persuasive effect: references to scientific sources, references to long-established religious concepts, and novel concepts (usually denoted by neologisms but often linked to the long-established religious categories). The quantitative analysis maps the distribution of credibility boosters across the samples analyzed. It shows quite a large difference in CB frequencies between old denominations (Judaism + Christianity and Mormons) with high CB occurrence rates (23.42 and 22.97 CB segments per 1.000 words, respectively) and those that came into existence during the second half of the 20th century (Heaven’s Gate and Church of Scientology) with 2.44 and 1.96 CB segments per 1.000 words, respectively. The segments were identified on the grounds of their intended perlocutionary effect – a type of analysis that has not, to the author’s knowledge, been conducted yet.

As the intended perlocutionary effect (the intended effect of a message) and perlocution (the real final impact of the message) may differ, the author considers it appropriate to focus future research on to what extent these correlate, particularly in relation to different types of audience (e.g. religious vs. non-religious). Besides, a study of what configuration of the CB segments and the other ones that have been identified as facilitating persuasion in religious discourse proves to have the most persuasive effect on the audience might provide more information that is needed for further clarification of persuasion mechanisms.

REFERENCES


**ANALYZED TEXTS**

*Last Chance to Evacuate Earth* (a transcript of a lecture retrieved from http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/vt092996.htm in 2012)