

# **Use of Linguistic Markers in the Identification and Analysis of Chief Executives' Hubris**

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## **Abstract**

It is firmly established that many psychological changes can be associated with distinctive patterns of spoken and written discourse (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). The words people use every day have the potential to reveal a great deal about an individual's personality, social and psychological world (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003).

As noted by Groom and Pennebaker (2002), the combination of language, accent and dialect could often indicate one's nationality, city or even an area a person was born in. It seems that in certain circumstances language can work as a "DNA" sample or a "fingerprint" – it is sufficiently unique to identify not only personal characteristics of the author of the discourse, but also to signify one's identity (Groom & Pennebaker, 2002).

Executive leaders of business organizations (i.e. Chief Executive Officers, hereafter CEOs), in turn, it will be argued, express their leadership through their verbal and written discourses. Statements they make in public speeches, interviews, press releases, letters to shareholders, reports or in other documents or settings are reflections of their personalities which predispose their behaviour and cognition (Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2010). What is more, spoken or written utterances of CEOs' language reveal complexities of their personal world and convey "symbolic, emotional, cultural and political overtones" (Amernic, Craig & Tourish, 2010, p.25). These utterances of the language also allow identifying and observing changes in a person's personality, cognition and psychological modes (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003).

Moreover, as researchers often lack direct access to such leaders, it will be argued that at-a-distance analyses can provide a valid and reliable insight into a leader's personality, cognition and actions as well as helping to solve the problem of lacking direct access to such leaders (Taber, 2000; Winter, 2003). The core assumption of any at-a-distance analysis approach is that verbal output (spoken or written discourse) of the leader provides an insight into the leader's personality characteristics, views, attitudes and styles (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Consequently, if language provides a source of valid and reliable data to analyse personality and personality change, features of hubris (e.g. excessive over-confidence) are likely to be reflected in the discourse of those acquiring such behaviours, manifesting in a variety of linguistic features (Garrard et al, 2014).

This research seeks to provide an insight into identification and understanding of the linguistic markers of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) hubris. It analyses spoken and written discourse samples of CEOs deemed to be hubristic and benchmarks results against those of the sample of non-hubristic CEOs. In doing so it explores the hypothesis that language produced by hubristic CEOs shows consistent differences from the language produced by CEOs who have not been identified as possessing hubristic tendencies. In order to analyse these particular differences, this research adopts a word count approach that concentrates on linguistic style (the way words are being used) as opposed to content (what is being said or described). Numbers of linguistic metrics (or markers) are captured in this way in text samples of hubristic and non-hubristic subjects for comparison purpose.

This research focuses explicitly on leaders who occupy or have occupied a position of CEO for a significant amount of time and were identified by other researchers, subject matter experts or media as having exhibited the features of Hubris Syndrome (Owen & Davidson, 2009) during their time in office.

In summary, exploring if and how hubris symptoms manifest in CEOs' language use contributes to wider research regarding the diagnosis and prevention of this phenomenon. In addition, it helps to mitigate the risk of potentially destructive CEO behaviour for the organisation and prevent organisational failures induced or aggravated by Hubris Syndrome.

**About the researcher:** Vita Akstinaite is a PhD researcher at University of Surrey and a King's College London alumnus. She has an MSc in Organisational Psychology and Psychiatry and is currently conducting Economic and Social Science Research Council sponsored PhD research at Surrey Business School with support from Daedalus Trust. Her main research focus is on the identification of linguistic markers of CEO (executive) hubris from leader's natural language use.

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