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WITCHCRAFT IN YOUR LIPS? – PROSODY AS PERSUASION IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract

In this study, we consider the way that elements of prosody are used in advertising texts to produce effects corresponding to the three classical strands of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos. By looking at the connection between prosodic features and persuasion, we aim to draw conclusions which will assist in the interpretation of multimodal arguments featuring linguistic content expressed in speech and to illustrate the flexibility and continued relevance of the traditional rhetorical categories in the age of digital communication. By considering several examples of audio-visual persuasive texts, we are able to illustrate the range of effects that can be achieved and the variety of rhetorical and argumentative techniques with which they can be combined. We show that the features of accent, rate of speech, and intonation can all be employed with the goal of persuasion across a variety of contexts and genres.

Keywords: advertising genre, argumentation, prosody, rhetoric



1. Theoretical background

1.1. Persuasive power of prosodic features

Prosodic features of spoken language, such as intonation, voice quality, tempo, pitch, and pauses, have been extensively examined within the field of nonverbal communication. They are considered a crucial component of nonverbal communication because prosody conveys information that goes beyond the lexical content of speech. Prosodic cues can reveal information about a speaker's emotional state, personality traits, socioeconomic status, and their relationship to both the topic and the audience. These insights are particularly important, sometimes even crucial, in rhetoric.

When individuals aim to achieve their primary rhetorical goal, namely persuasion, they may deliberately manipulate their voice and other prosodic features. For example, speakers may attempt to enhance perceptions of confidence and self-assurance or to reduce cues associated with nervousness, fear, or insecurity. A substantial body of research demonstrates widespread awareness of the persuasive importance of prosodic features, both among those who seek to persuade and those who are the targets of persuasion across various social contexts.

Experimental studies involving systematic manipulation of human voices have provided strong evidence that changes in vocal characteristics significantly influence perceptions of speakers. For instance, Puts et al. (2006; 2007) manipulated male voices and found that lower-pitched voices were rated by other men as more physically and socially dominant. Similarly, when female voices were altered to have a lower fundamental frequency, they were also perceived as more dominant (Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011). Anolli and Ciceri (2002) further demonstrated that men who employed greater vocal modulation and gradually deepened their voices during interactions with unfamiliar women were more successful in securing future dates in a simulated dating scenario.

The sound of an individual's voice thus appears to be an important external attribute used as a cue in assessing potential mates and plays a significant role in interpersonal attraction (Oguchi & Kikuchi 1997). Feinberg et al. (2005) experimentally lowered the fundamental frequencies of recorded male voices, which led to higher ratings of masculinity, physical size, and age by female listeners. These findings are consistent with a broader body of research (e.g., Zuckerman & Miyake 1993), which suggests that vocal attractiveness can be as influential as physical attractiveness in everyday social interactions.

Similar effects of vocal characteristics have been observed across different types of discourse. Bartsch (2008), for example, examined the influence of voice in customers' evaluations of voice-to-voice service encounters. Her experimental study showed that service providers with more attractive voices were rated higher in terms of competence and effort, and overall customer satisfaction was also greater. Surawski and Ossoff (2006) investigated the effects of physical and vocal attractiveness on perceptions of politicians and found that higher attractiveness in both domains positively influenced impressions, leading to perceptions of greater similarity, better comparative judgments, and increased affiliation. Importantly, the combined effect of physical and vocal attractiveness was synergistic: targets rated high on both dimensions were viewed most favourably, highlighting the persistence of attractiveness stereotypes in political contexts. In political discourse more broadly, Rezlescu et al. (2015) demonstrated that voices, much like faces, contribute to the formation of consistent trait impressions, including trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dominance.

Across contexts and professions, a general conclusion emerging from this body of research is that attractive voices tend to elicit more positive impressions. Zuckerman and Driver (1989) showed that judges reliably agreed on assessments of vocal attractiveness and that more attractive



voices were associated with more favourable personality evaluations. Subsequent studies replicated these findings, indicating that the effects of vocal attractiveness are comparable in magnitude to those of physical attractiveness (e.g., Berry 1991; 1992; Zuckerman et al. 1990; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993).

More recent research has further extended these findings by demonstrating that attractive voices are more likely to be judged as possessing higher levels of moral goodness (Wu et al. 2024). The authors argue that perceptions of vocal beauty and moral goodness involve parallel cognitive and emotional processes and may rely on shared underlying mechanisms, thereby supporting the well-established “beauty is good” effect.

In addition to influencing evaluations of attractiveness and character, prosodic features also play a crucial role in conveying emotions. Vocal expressions of specific emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, and sadness are generally recognized with accuracy well above chance levels, even across cultures, and are associated with relatively distinct acoustic patterns (Juslin and Laukka 2003; Laukka 2008).

Taken together, these findings illustrate the persuasive potential of prosodic features, which are frequently exploited in specific persuasive contexts, such as the advertising genre.

1.2. Prosodic features in the advertising genre

Advertising represents a distinct genre within public discourse. Some authors, such as El-daly (2011), argue that advertising can be considered a form of discourse in its own right, insofar as it influences not only linguistic structures but also lifestyles and the content of everyday interactions and exchanges. Similarly, Beasley and Danesi (2002) claim that advertising has become an integral part of the “spiritual encyclopedia” of almost everyone living in contemporary society. As a genre, advertising has its own specific characteristics, functions, and goals, which have been widely examined in genre studies (e.g., Bhatia 2005). For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant of these characteristics is its persuasive nature.

As O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2004, 27) note, “effective advertising is, almost always, persuasive advertising; and advertising that does not seek to persuade (relying, for example, on attention-getting or repeated exposure effects alone) is really missing an opportunity.” The role of prosodic features in the advertising genre has been explored in previous research by Kišiček (2014; 2016; 2018) and Groarke and Kišiček (2024), who conclude that prosodic features may contribute to persuasion through ethos and pathos, and even logos, that is, they can function as arguments.

The clearest, strongest, and most direct connection between prosodic features and the classical rhetorical modes of persuasion is their relationship to pathos. Pathos, according to Aristotle (1991), involves shaping the emotional disposition of the audience: “There is persuasion through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion [pathos] by the speech; for we do not give the same judgment when grieved and rejoicing, or when being friendly and hostile” (*Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356a). In line with this view, O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2004) emphasize that emotion is a major factor in persuasive advertising, particularly when the aim is to change viewpoints rather than merely to demonstrate the logical implications of data. When individuals are in the grip of emotion, they not only feel differently but also tend to think differently. Consequently, advertising that resonates emotionally has a greater chance of inducing changes in beliefs, values, motives, wants, and desires than advertising based on logic alone.



Prosodic features of spoken language are closely linked to emotional expression. Empirical research has shown that emotional expressions conveyed through voice can regulate social behaviour by eliciting affective responses in listeners (e.g., Darwin [1872] 1998; Ekman 2003; Russell 2003). At the same time, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004) argue that although emotionally resonant appeals can attract attention and even prompt action, persuasive advertising typically also needs to demonstrate that the proposed action, such as purchasing a product, is socially appropriate and can be "rationally" justified.

In this respect, prosodic features may also play a crucial role in the structure of arguments themselves (see Kišiček 2014). Moreover, prosodic cues contribute to perceptions of speaker credibility. In the context of video commercials, this role is often fulfilled by a voice-over, whose prosodic qualities can significantly enhance the persuasive force of the verbally expressed argument.

1.3. Argumentative value of prosodic features

The argumentative value of prosodic features is most commonly examined within the field of multi-modal argumentation (see Kišiček 2026). At first glance, or rather, at first hearing, it may seem difficult to conceive of prosodic features such as intonation, voice quality, or pitch as performing an argumentative function. One of the most obvious obstacles lies in the difficulty of separating the verbal component of speech from its prosodic realization. Because prosodic features are inseparably connected to words, it may appear problematic to determine how prosody could override, modify, or independently contribute to arguments expressed verbally.

A productive way to examine the argumentative value of a prosodic feature is to reconstruct the argument and then test whether the argument changes when the prosodic feature in question is altered. In most cases, prosodic features merely reinforce the verbally expressed argument by supporting the verbal message. However, in some of the most analytically interesting cases, prosodic features play an essential role: altering them results in a change to the argument itself.

For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the rhetorical value of prosodic features, namely, their contribution to ethos or pathos and their argumentative value, that is, their contribution to logos. This distinction is not always easy to make, given the often thin line between rhetorical and argumentative functions. In particular, ethos may simultaneously function as part of logos. For example, politicians commonly invest considerable effort in speech delivery and vocal training, fully aware that vocal cues strongly influence how they are perceived. By cultivating prosodic features associated with strength, determination, and confidence, qualities highly valued in political leadership, speakers enhance their ethos. Yet in a political campaign in which a politician explicitly argues that they should be elected president because of their confidence, determination, and strength, prosodic features that convey these qualities no longer merely support ethos; they become part of the argument itself. This effect relies on a widely shared stereotype according to which a strong voice signals a strong character and confidence. In such cases, prosodic features function as components of the argumentative structure.

Similarly, appeals to pathos and logos often intertwine. Consider, for instance, a speaker seeking help as a victim of abuse or violence. While such a plea clearly involves an appeal to emotion, the appeal to empathy may also function as a legitimate argument. Prosodic features such as a shaky voice, reduced volume, and slow tempo can contribute to the perception of the speaker as vulnerable, fragile, or distressed, thereby strengthening the argument for assistance.



The main objective of this paper is to examine when prosodic features have rhetorical and/or argumentative value and to reconstruct arguments in order to test whether prosodic features merely provide additional support for verbally expressed arguments or whether they constitute an essential part of the argument itself.

2. Methodology and data

For the purposes of this analysis, three audiovisual advertisements were examined: two public service announcements promoting social campaigns and one commercial advertisement.

The first example is *Smoothness*¹, a public service announcement created in 2011 by the Swedish organization IQ with the aim of raising awareness about alcohol addiction. This advertisement formed part of a broader campaign designed to challenge the “glamorized” image of alcohol frequently promoted in international marketing.

The second example, *Audition*², was also part of a wider social campaign addressing domestic abuse. The advertisement was released in 2016 by Amnesty International as part of its *Stop Violence Against Women* initiative.

The third example is a commercial for the insurance company GEICO. The *Don LaFontaine* GEICO commercial³, which first aired in 2006, is one of the most well-known entries in the company’s “Real People” campaign. It features the legendary voice actor in a rare on-screen appearance, humorously referencing his iconic status as the “King of Movie Trailers”.

Although these examples differ in purpose, genre, and communicative goals, they are all particularly relevant from the perspective of prosodic features in advertising. In each case, prosodic elements are carefully designed and deliberately incorporated to achieve specific persuasive effects, and they constitute a crucial component of the overall message.

The prosodic features subjected to perceptual and acoustic analysis were pitch and voice quality, pitch variation, speech rate and pauses, and accent. While other prosodic features – such as intonation, rhythm, or intensity – could also be examined in different datasets, the initial perceptual analysis of the selected examples indicated that these features were particularly salient and, therefore, warranted more detailed examination using acoustic measurements. Pitch was analyzed by measuring fundamental frequency (Fo) using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2021), a software program for acoustic analysis. Pitch range was calculated on the basis of minimum and maximum Fo values. The pitch contour settings were adjusted to the speakers (50Hz and 300Hz for the floor and ceiling of male voices and 100Hz and 300Hz for female voices).

Speech rate was expressed in syllables per second following a common practice (Shriberg et al. 2000). The number of syllables in each of the recordings was counted with the use of Text Analyzer⁴. Pauses were traced and measured with the use of Praat. The accent of the protagonists in the commercial was analyzed perceptually by a native speaker, namely one of the authors of this paper.

The results of the perceptual and acoustic analyses were compared across the three examples and interpreted within the framework of multimodal rhetorical discourse.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovfyUUO68FA&t=3s>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-f2LFUCnqU>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJMGS7lowT8>

⁴ Online Utility – Free Online Software Utilities <https://www.online-utility.org/>



3. Results and discussion

3.1. Smoothness

The advertisement opens with cinematic, atmospheric shots of a bar accompanied by a narrator who describes the refined qualities and “smoothness” of whisky. The visuals depict cheerful people enjoying drinks in an elegant setting. At a crucial moment, however, the narrator’s tone changes. While the “smooth” visual setting initially continues, he begins to recite statistics about the harm caused by alcohol consumption in Sweden, such as: *“One in five children suffer because their mum or dad drinks too much”*.

As these facts are presented, the bar scene gradually deteriorates. Viewers are shown people passed out, visibly distressed, or engaging in violent behaviour, culminating in the arrival of the police. What initially appears glamorous and pleasurable ultimately becomes disturbing rather than joyful. This shift is a central element of the film, creating a stark contrast with conventional alcohol advertising and implying that such advertisements conceal the darker realities of alcohol abuse.

From an argumentative perspective, the film can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claim: Alcohol abuse is a serious social problem in Sweden.
- Reasons: Verbally expressed data concerning harm caused by alcohol (e.g., children suffering due to parental alcohol abuse, alcohol-related violence, addiction).
- Additional support: Auditory elements, including both prosodic and non-prosodic sound features.

Sound plays an important, indeed, crucial role in conveying the message of the film. Non-prosodic elements such as background music and sounds associated with drinking (e.g., pouring and gulping) contribute to the atmosphere. However, it is the prosodic features of the narrator’s voice, particularly changes in tone, pauses, and speech rate, that signal the shift in the core message.

The transition is first marked by a long, meaningful pause:

“Taman. Smoothness in a bottle.” (pause: 6.6 seconds)

“But there’s more than smoothness.”

Further long pauses underscore the gravity of the message:

“In Sweden, for example, one in five children suffer because their mum or dad drinks too much.”
(pause: 3 seconds)

“Eight out of ten acts of violence in public places are alcohol related.”

The speech rate slows considerably toward the end of the video (approximately 3 syllables per second), culminating in the rhetorical question: *“Now, how smooth is that?”* Pauses and reduced speech rate function as key prosodic devices here. As Rodero (2020) argues, a slower speech rate influences cognitive processing and modifies listeners’ physiological responses. In this film, pauses not only slow down information processing but also add dramatic emphasis, reinforcing the seriousness of the verbally expressed content.

Another important prosodic feature is pitch variation. High levels of pitch variation have been shown to correlate with perceptions of liveliness and charisma (Chun 2002; Hinks and Edlund 2009), perceived competence and agency (Zhang et al. 2016), and increased persuasiveness (Suppes 2015). These effects are also evident in this example, where pitch variation contributes to



the expression of the narrator's changing attitude. Acoustic measurements confirm differences in pitch range corresponding to shifts in the message:

- *"Taman. Smoothness in a bottle."*
(min Fo = 65 Hz; max Fo = 128 Hz; range = 63 Hz)
- *"But there's more than smoothness."*
(min Fo = 70 Hz; max Fo = 123 Hz; range = 53 Hz)
- *"Now, how smooth is that?"*
(min Fo = 69 Hz; max Fo = 96 Hz; range = 27 Hz)

The most dominant prosodic feature in this video, however, is the narrator's Scottish accent. The narrator employs a standard Scottish accent, characterized by stereotypical rolled /r/ sounds, particularly in the first part of the commercial (e.g., *created, experience, carefully, ingredients*). Accents evoke culturally shared associations and stereotypes, and speakers with standard accents are generally perceived as more competent and socially attractive than those with regional or foreign accents (Adank et al. 2013). In this case, the Scottish accent exploits a well-established stereotype linking Scotland with whisky production, tradition, and authenticity.

In the first part of the video, the accent serves to mislead viewers into assuming they are watching a conventional whisky advertisement, thereby enhancing the impact of the subsequent shift. In the second part, the same accent contributes to the narrator's perceived competence when discussing the dangers of alcohol abuse. As a speaker originating from a country strongly associated with whisky, the narrator is implicitly positioned as knowledgeable about alcohol and its consequences. The accent thus enhances the perceived authenticity and credibility of the message.

In conclusion, prosodic features play a crucial role in the persuasive effectiveness of Smoothness. They contribute to persuasion through logos, by supporting the argument that despite its sophisticated portrayal, alcohol causes serious social harm; through ethos, by enhancing the narrator's credibility via accent; and through pathos, by shaping the emotional atmosphere, initially pleasant and later disturbing. Together, these prosodic elements function not merely as stylistic devices but as integral components of the advertisement's argumentative structure.

3.2. Audition

This example employs a distinctive "bait-and-switch" storytelling strategy to highlight how domestic violence often remains hidden in plain sight. Visually, violence is represented through fists, which function as a visual synecdoche for abusive behaviour. The video is framed as an "audition" for the "fist face" of domestic abuse—a deliberate parallel to familiar "poster boy" or representative-selection competitions in various areas of public discourse. This ironic framing suggests that domestic abuse has become so normalized and pervasive that it can be presented as something for which auditions might be held. While provocative, the concept is also deeply sobering.

As the "audition" progresses, viewers are introduced to different fists that personify distinct types of domestic abusers. One represents a strong and silent abuser; another appears overtly hateful and dangerous, but in a manner that is almost too obvious. The climax of the film comes with the third example, which subverts expectations. This abuser is presented as well-educated, classically trained, sophisticated, and belonging to a higher social class. The advertisement concludes with a reversal of roles: the woman who leads the audition, initially portrayed as confident and authoritative, becomes a victim of abuse herself.



This message is communicated predominantly through prosodic features, while the film as a whole instantiates an argument from example. The argument draws on well-established sociolinguistic research on language attitudes, which shows that speakers with certain accents are perceived as more educated, sophisticated, and belonging to higher social strata. Both the male and female speakers in this example use Received Pronunciation (RP) British English, a strong marker of socioeconomic status, at least for native British English audiences (see, e.g., Trudgill 1995; Coupland and Bishop 2007; Andersson and Trudgill 1990; Giles, Scholes and Young 1983). Accent is closely linked to perceptions of speakers' status, occupation, intelligence, economic situation, and prestige.

The video exploits these sociolinguistic insights to advance an argument that can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claims:
 1. Anyone, even a highly educated man of high social status, can be a perpetrator of domestic abuse.
 2. Anyone, even an educated, confident woman in a position of authority, can become a victim of domestic abuse.
- Reason:

An argument from example: a sophisticated, educated man of high social status is shown to be an abuser, while a sophisticated, confident woman of similarly high social status becomes a victim.
- Support for social status and education:

Prosodic features, most notably the use of RP British English.

In addition to accent, prosodic features such as pitch range, voice quality, and speech rate further support the main argument. Changes in pitch range and voice quality in the male speaker are perceptually salient and are also confirmed acoustically:

- *"Hello, everyone."*
(min Fo = 71 Hz; max Fo = 205 Hz; range = 134 Hz)
- *"Do you know that, on average, you can beat a woman 35 times before she calls the police?"*
(min Fo = 49 Hz; max Fo = 262 Hz; range = 213 Hz)
- *"Listen, sweetie."*
(min Fo = 90 Hz; max Fo = 236 Hz; range = 146 Hz)
- *"I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me."*
(min Fo = 80 Hz; max Fo = 151 Hz; range = 71 Hz)

When the male speaker reveals himself as an abuser, his fundamental frequency increases and his pitch range widens, signalling emotional volatility and menace. In contrast, the female speaker exhibits the opposite pattern. Initially confident, with a wide pitch range, her pitch range subsequently narrows, her voice quality changes; in the second line, there is some harshness in her voice, which makes her sound more masculine and powerful, then she becomes quieter, with a perceptibly shaky voice:

- *"Now, thank you all for attending. You've all been superb."*
(min Fo = 145 Hz; max Fo = 307 Hz; range = 162 Hz)
- *"Lovely start, keep going."*
(min Fo = 141 Hz; max Fo = 302 Hz; range = 161 Hz)



- “Sorry, sorry.”
(min Fo = 259 Hz; max Fo = 328 Hz; range = 69 Hz)

In this example, prosodic features constitute an essential component of persuasion. They contribute through logos, as they form a crucial part of the argument structure; through ethos, by signalling the social status and credibility of both protagonists; and through pathos, by shaping the emotional atmosphere. The contrasting changes in pitch range and voice quality of the male and female speakers vividly convey the dynamics of domestic violence: the male speaker’s voice disturbs and illustrates how abuse *sounds*, while the female speaker’s vocal degradation appeals to empathy and highlights the vulnerability of victims.

3.3. Don LaFontaine GEICO

The final example analyzed in this paper differs substantially from the previous two. It is a commercial produced by the insurance company GEICO and is overtly humorous and strictly commercial in nature, without an explicit social or ethical agenda. Accordingly, prosodic features in this advertisement are employed primarily for humorous effect, including a strong element of self-deprecating humour performed by Don LaFontaine, who appears as himself.

Don LaFontaine was an iconic American voice actor, best known for narrating movie trailers, having recorded more than 5,000 over the course of his career. He became particularly famous for the phrase “*In a world...*”, which is explicitly referenced in this commercial. For viewers, the parallel between the dramatic conventions of movie trailers and the comparatively mundane topic of insurance is immediately recognizable and forms the basis of the advertisement’s humour.

From the perspective of rhetorical and multimodal analysis, this commercial is especially interesting because it juxtaposes two contrasting speech styles. A “real customer” initially describes her experience with GEICO in a neutral, conversational manner. LaFontaine then rephrases her testimony, transforming it stylistically by delivering it in his signature cinematic voice. This contrast allows for a clear demonstration of how prosodic features, specifically pitch, pitch range, and speech rate, can dramatically alter the perceived meaning and impact of the same content.

Acoustic analysis shows that the male speaker’s speech rate is significantly slower than that of the female speaker (Figure 1), and his phrases are shorter and more segmented. These prosodic choices contribute to the creation of a dramatic, suspenseful atmosphere that is characteristic of movie trailers and highly engaging for the audience. As a result, the woman’s otherwise ordinary account is reframed as tense, dangerous, and epic. The humour of the commercial arises precisely from this mismatch between content and delivery, illustrating how prosodic features alone can reshape interpretation.

In this example, prosodic features do not primarily function to support a substantive argument or advance a social claim. Instead, they demonstrate their rhetorical power by transforming meaning through exaggeration and parody. The commercial thus provides a clear illustration of how prosody can operate independently of propositional content, reinforcing the central claim of this paper that prosodic features play a decisive role in shaping audience perception within multimodal rhetorical discourse.



Fig. 1 Comparison of speech rate between the female (“real customer”) and the male speaker (voice actor)

Phrase	rate	
	female	Male
When the storm hit, both our cars were totally underwater. (female) In a world where both of our cars were totally underwater. (male)	4.6 s/s	2.8 s/s
We thought it would take forever to get some help. (female) But a new wind was about to blow. (male)	5.2 s/s	3.3 s/s
With Geiko, we had our check in two days. (female) Payback, this time it's for real. (male)	3.7 s/s	2.5 s/s

Clear differences emerge in the acoustic measurements of pitch range, which is lower in the case of the female speaker, implying less excitement and more down-to-earth attitude:

- “When the storm hit, both of our cars were totally underwater.”
(min Fo = 218 Hz; max Fo = 318 Hz; range = 100 Hz)
- “In a world where both of our cars were totally underwater.”
(min Fo = 53 Hz; max Fo = 159 Hz; range = 106 Hz)

The male speaker exhibits a very low fundamental frequency, which is perceived as a deep voice. In addition, his voice quality, characterized by harshness, contributes to an overall perception of seriousness, drama, and danger. Together, these prosodic features create an atmosphere reminiscent of a complex thriller plot with an unexpected twist, typical of movie trailer narration.

The argument presented in the commercial can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claim: GEICO operates quickly and competently in dramatic situations.
(Supported by the male speaker's prosodic features, which frame the situation as highly dramatic.)
- Reason: Even in situations that could be experienced as dramatic, customers remain calm, resolve the issue quickly, and end up completely satisfied.
(Supported by the prosodic features of the “real” customer, the female speaker.)

Prosodic features thus support both the depiction of a potentially dramatic situation (car damage caused by a storm) and the calm, matter-of-fact attitude of the person who experienced it and was assisted by GEICO. The implicit concluding claim can, therefore, be formulated as: “There is no need for drama when you have GEICO insurance”.

A crucial persuasive effect in this commercial is achieved through pathos, generated primarily by the contrast between the speakers' prosodic styles. This contrast creates humour and establishes an atmosphere in which drama appears artificial, exaggerated, and unnecessary. The audience is implicitly persuaded that such drama only applies to those without GEICO, while GEICO customers can continue with “business as usual” thanks to reliable insurance cover.

Prosodic features also contribute significantly to ethos. Don LaFontaine brings a strong pre-existing ethos to the commercial: his voice is immediately recognizable, as is his signature phrase “In a world...” and the cinematic manner of his delivery. In this context, his established authority and seriousness are deliberately subverted through self-deprecating humour. By contrast, the prosodic features of the female speaker contribute to her credibility as an ordinary, “real” person whose life is generally free of drama. Her testimony suggests that although the situation had the potential to be serious, it was rendered unproblematic by GEICO's efficient response.



4. Conclusion

Advertising, as a genre, most often constitutes a form of multimodal rhetorical discourse with a clear persuasive intent. Prosodic features represent an important, sometimes even crucial, mode through which this persuasive goal is achieved. As the analyses presented in this paper have shown, prosodic features in commercials are frequently deliberately selected and strategically employed, with clearly identifiable functions in the persuasive process. They may contribute to persuasion through ethos, pathos, or logos, and in the most effective cases through all three classical modes of persuasion simultaneously.

Prosodic features such as pitch, pitch range, speech rate, accent, and voice quality can significantly shape the interpretation of verbally expressed messages, and in some cases, they may even carry the persuasive message themselves. This is particularly evident when prosody activates social stereotypes, which are often implicitly exploited in advertising discourse. In such cases, meaning is not merely supported by verbal content but is co-constructed through vocal delivery.

Prosody, therefore, constitutes an essential component of multimodal rhetoric and merits more systematic investigation in future research. This type of inquiry calls for an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars in rhetoric and argumentation with phoneticians and (socio) linguists. As contemporary communication increasingly relies on multimodality, rhetoric and argumentation should likewise be conceptualized and analyzed as fundamentally multimodal phenomena. While words remain the foundation of persuasive discourse, the manner in which those words are delivered should neither be neglected nor overlooked.

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