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The creative power of language in social cognition and intergroup relations

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Intergroup relations would be impossible without language. Groups use language to form, organize, to attach and resist stigma, to conduct and to end conflicts with other groups. Nonetheless, in the study of intergroup relations, language has received much less attention than cognition[1]. Probably, it has not always been clear to researchers how language is more than *necessary* for intergroup relations. Of course, people need language to conduct intergroup relations, but they also need to breathe, eat, drink water, and many other things. No-one would be satisfied with an explanation of an intergroup atrocity that invoked one of these merely necessary causes (e.g., "Oh, the problem was that everyone had drunk enough water").

In this chapter, we seek to examine whether language is more than a precondition for intergroup relations. Is language a causal force in its own right, with the power to create and change intergroup dynamics? If so, language must be able to affect, as well as reflect, the way that people think about groups. Thus, we review research that has been inspired by prevalent metaphors of the dynamic between language and cognition. First, language can be considered a *vessel* in which thoughts are encapsulated and transmitted from one mind to another. Second, language can be seen as a *lens* which focuses cognition on certain aspects of the world and away from others. Third, language can be seen as a *barometer* which reveals a communicator's

cognition to the audience. We discuss the implications of each of these language-cognition dynamics for intergroup relations.

Language as a Vessel: Containing and Conveying Cognition

Of the three metaphors we consider in this chapter, this is perhaps the most immediately recognizable, and has been dominant in the experimental study of language and intergroup relations (for reviews, see Fiedler, 2008; Maass, 1999; Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007). In this perspective, ideas about groups in the memory (*M*) of senders are transmitted through language (*L*) and implanted in the minds of recipients. In turn, recipients transmit these ideas to others, in *M-L-M-L* chains. Language is seen as essentially reproductive, in a process made possible by co-operative use of mutually understood symbols according to mutually understood rules.

Of course, the simplest possible way in which language can transmit ideas about groups is for senders to explicitly assert them: "those people are lazy and aggressive" (Sutton, Elder, Douglas, & Tarrant, 2008). However, the bald assertion of stereotypes has its disadvantages, as we shall see, and is by no means the only way in which stereotypes may be transmitted. For example, it is possible to transmit stereotypes of a group without referring to it. One can, instead, describe the behavior of individual group members in biased ways.

The Serial Transmission Paradigm: Biases in what Behaviors are Described.

One such bias is to describe more behaviors that are consistent, versus inconsistent, with stereotypes. Lyons and Kashima (2003) had participants relay a story which contained stereotype-consistent and inconsistent information about individual group members in serial communication chains. These chains are rather like the children's game sometimes called "Chinese whispers". As the original story is told to a recipient who in turn tells it to another recipient, and so on, it bears less and less resemblance to the original. Indeed, Lyons and

Kashima found that by the time the story had reached the end of the chains, much of the stereotype-inconsistent information had disappeared, while significantly more of the stereotype-consistent information had survived.

Crucially, Lyons and Kashima (2003) found that this bias was stronger when communicators were led to believe that the stereotype was widely shared in their community. It appears that people tend to reproduce stereotype-consistent information because they think it is consistent with a shared world view, or a *common ground*, and is therefore likely to be easily understood and accepted by recipients (Clark, 1996). In contrast, information that is inconsistent with widely shared stereotypes is less likely to result in successful communication. Instead, communicators may anticipate receiving querulous, puzzled responses.

This suggests that senders tacitly view their language as a vessel: a means to transmit information in the context of a shared set of assumptions about the world. Ironically, they therefore withhold pieces of stereotype-inconsistent information, fearing that these would disrupt transmission. Apparently, how people think about language affects how they use language. This reflexivity gives language the power to do much more than transmit thought. The serial transmission paradigm illustrates why we can view cognition and language as "two sides of the same integral whole" (Fiedler, 2008, p. 45), capable of creating and modifying reality as well as reproducing it.

The Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB): Biases in how Behaviors are Described.

Whereas the study of serial transmission is concerned with biases in *what* behaviors are described, much research has been devoted to biases in *how* they are described. For example, a considerable body of research has examined how language may perpetuate and transmit prejudice in a process called the *Linguistic Intergroup Bias* (LIB: Maass, 1999). Informed by the

linguistic category model (LCM: Semin & Fiedler, 1988), the LIB assumes that behavioral

events can be described at different levels, ranging from concrete verbs such as "hit" or "kissed"

to adjectives such as "violent" and "affectionate". As language becomes more abstract, it

conveys less about the situational context and the specific form of the behavior, implies longer

duration, and conveys more about the characteristics of the person whose actions are described.

In the LIB, ingroup members' positive behaviors and outgroup members' negative

behaviors are described in abstract terms, as if they reflected the underlying qualities of each

group. In contrast, ingroup members' negative and outgroup members' positive behaviors are

described in concrete terms, as if they were isolated events quite unrelated to how group

members would normally behave. Therefore, even if an equal proportion of the positive and

negative behaviors of each group were described, ingroup members' would be described more

favorably. The LIB occurs in many intergroup contexts, in many countries, in several languages,

and in naturally-occurring settings as well as the laboratory. In part, the linguistic bias reflects

the impact of stereotypical expectancies on the way people encode social information. Having

encoded a negative behavior abstractly, perhaps because of ingroup bias, people are more likely

to describe it in those terms.

The LIB is affected not just by how communicators have encoded events but also by their

communication goals. For example, the LIB is heightened when communicators perceive an

outgroup to be threatening, apparently because they are motivated to derogate it whilst bolstering

the ingroup (Maass, 1999). Further research suggests that under some circumstances,

communication goals may turn out to reverse the LIB. For example, given a temporary

motivation to describe an enemy in positive terms, communicators will use abstract language to

describe their positive behavior and concrete language to describe their negative behavior,

reversing the normal bias (for a review, see Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007). Thus, the LIB can be used strategically by communicators in order to create impressions of ingroup and outgroup members that diverge from their own perceptions. Far from merely replicating biased mental representations (although this is in itself an extremely important function), the LIB may be used to create new ones.

Facilitation and inhibition of behavior are regulated by different processes, as we see in the case of addiction. As many smokers may attest, being able to light a cigarette when one chooses does not guarantee that one is able *not* to light up. Similarly, communicators are able to use linguistic bias creatively but appear to have very limited power to inhibit bias when instructed to do so (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). As a result, even communicators with egalitarian intentions may be prone to the LIB, and so contribute to intergroup bias unwittingly (Maass, 1999). The LIB appears to be a force both for creation and inertia in relations between groups.

Outside the Mind: Linking Biased Transmission to Intergroup Relations.

Much of our social knowledge is based not on direct personal observation but on information that has been communicated to us, for example in gossip or though the mass media. Thus, we rely on the vessel-like properties of language to faithfully convey information to us from people who have direct access to the facts. However, language is not a perfect vessel, because its use not only transmits but also transforms information. The transformation is directional rather than random, causing social information to converge upon prevailing stereotypes.

Not only is social information transformed by communication processes; it is also externalized. Every time we share information about ingroup and outgroup members, we place that information into the public sphere, where it can be received, remembered, and written down by others. In this sense, the biases in language that we have documented cause people to

"upload" biased information into the public domain. Following Durkheim (1912/2001), it is even possible to think of stereotypes and prejudice as being represented there, freed by language from the local and fleeting character of thought, but also enabled to influence the thoughts of many others (cf. Maass, 1999).

In sum, language changes social information and transcribes it from psychological to social media. Once made public, the information will impact on the psychological representations of many others. This continual interplay is deeply social-psychological, because communicators transform information in light of the stereotypes that they believe to be shared in the community and the effects they think their statements will have on others. The dynamics are complex and recursive, but each part of the process has been demonstrated in the relatively simple experiments we have reviewed. The A-causes-B structure of the social psychological experiment documents the operation of each cog in the machine. Only a body of experiments, considered together, comprises a model of the whole machine, that is to say the process by which language, considered as a vessel for the transmission of information, shapes intergroup relations. Much the same thing is true of experiments that have been informed by our next metaphor. However the lens metaphor grants language a more obvious and immediate transformative power.

Language as a Lens: Focusing and Directing Cognition

This metaphor suggests that language has power – this has even been termed a "magic spell" (Stapel & Semin, 2007) – over cognition. This view of language was made famous by the anthropologist Benjamin Whorf (for a review see Fiedler, 2008). Human beings live in enormously complex, continually changing environments. In order to survive in such environments, they need to act in a co-ordinated, co-operative way. To do this, people need a

shared focus, when required, on a discrete subset of goal-relevant objects and events. This is where language comes in. Like a lens, it directs the joint focus of senders' and recipients' attention, thought, and memory. In this sense, it constrains the reality that people experience.

The focusing, lens-like power of language is often obvious, as in "there's a car coming". At other times, however, it is more subtle. The masculine generic is an example relevant to our purposes. Here, linguistic convention in English has long had it that masculine terms such as "man", "his", and the collective noun "Man", can be used without reference to gender. Thus our examples are supposed to refer to "person", "his or her", and "Humanity", respectively. Nonetheless, Ng (1990) showed that participants who had been presented with these masculine generic terms did not encode them in this gender-neutral way. Rather, a subsequent memory test showed that they had encoded the masculine generic as referring to men *and not women*. This result suggests that male individuals will tend to be seen as the ones who contribute "manpower", who are responsible for the achievements of "Mankind", and so on.

Ng's (1990) findings are consistent with the lens rather than the vessel metaphor. Language is a vessel insofar as its symbols are used in accordance with rules of syntax and convention. According to these rules, we should think of people of both genders when the masculine generic is used. Nonetheless, we think of men. Probably, the masculine generic effect occurs partly because words like "man" and "his" are often used to refer only to males, and so acquire an association with male referents that is carried over even into other contexts. Here is the power of the humble word to focus attention, memory and cognition, irrespective of the linguistic rules and conventions that are supposed to govern it.

Relations between other groups are also affected by this lens-like power of the word. Of particular importance are the words that people use to denote groups. Of course, some of these

verbal labels are derogatory, as in "fag", whereas others are neutral or positive, as in "gay" (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). In this respect, the labels are like vessels with which positive and negative attitudes to a group are communicated.

As it turns out, the complexity of group labels is also very important (Leader, Mullen, & Rice, 2009; Mullen, Calogero, & Leader, 2007). Here, complexity is a property of a set of group labels, rather than any single group label. Each label indicates a particular means of categorizing the group – for instance according to its territory, language, or customs. A set of labels is simple if it tends to cluster within just one of these categories. It is complex if it is distributed across several categories, meaning that available group labels collectively indicate many facets of the group.

To illustrate, the Bari of central Africa are denoted by a simple set of two labels, *Bari* and *Bai*. This set is simple because both labels mean the same thing, "the others". In contrast, the Herero of southwestern Africa are denoted by a more complex set of two labels: *Herero*, meaning "to brandish a spear", and *Dimba*, which is "alluvial soil near a stream". This set is more complex because each label means something different and refers to different means of categorizing the group. Herero refers to one of the group's behaviors, and Dimba refers to where they are from (Mullen et al., 2007).

Across three archival studies in various ethnic settings, Mullen et al. (2007) studied how the complexity of these sets of labels affected intergroup relations. Their focus was on *ethnonyms* - the labels that a group used to describe itself. They found that higher complexity of ethnonyms was associated with lower levels of intergroup hostility (e.g., the incidence of warfare and intergroup killing, as recorded in academic tracts or official public records). In keeping with the lens metaphor, complex ethonyms draw attention to the ingroup's many facets. If an

ingroup's identity is multifaceted and complex, it is likely to be less susceptible to threat, and capable of supporting nuanced relations with other groups (Mullen et al., 2007).

Extending this research, Leader et al. (2009) experimentally varied the complexity of the labels for an outgroup – all derogatory terms known as *ethnophaulisms*. Participants exposed only to simple sets of labels subsequently indicated the desire to socially exclude outgroup members (e.g., by restricting immigration and intermarriage). Those exposed to complex labels were more willing to include them. It is not yet clear what exactly drives this effect, but a reasonable guess is that simple sets of ethnophaulisms are consonant with a one-dimensional caricature of outgroup members. In contrast, complex sets of labels call attention to their three-dimensional, human character, making intergroup violence difficult to support or condone.

Intergroup relations may also be affected by another phenomenon consistent with the lens metaphor, namely the saying-is-believing effect (e.g., Hausmann, Levine & Higgins, 2008). This effect occurs when the act of describing persons or group changes subsequent memory for them. For example, when you believe your audience does not like Group A, you are more likely to describe Group A in negative terms, and subsequently, to remember them more negatively. Impressively, the saying-is-believing effect tends to grow over time. Attributing negative traits to a group creates, in memory, an association between the group and those traits. If you have just made the negative comments, you will remember them clearly and realize that they contribute to your negative feelings about the group. If you made the comments some weeks ago, you are less likely to recall exactly what you said and why. Thus the negative mental associations seem attributable to the group itself, rather than what you have said about it.

The general point made by the saying-is-believing effect exemplifies the radical idea at the heart of the "lens" metaphor, and is crucial for understanding the language-cognition

interface: our language changes how we, as well as our audiences, think. These changes occur in parallel and indeed depend partly on each other, because the lens of language brings about a *joint* focus of attention, helping to create a reality that is shared by senders and receivers alike. In keeping with this idea, the saying-is-believing effect seems to work better when communicators believe their description has reached an audience, and to work best when the audience is ingroup (for reviews see Fiedler, 2008; Hausmann et al., 2008; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008).

Language as a Barometer: Revealing Cognitions

In this metaphor, the reflexive nature of the relationship between language and cognition comes to the fore. Language is now the object of cognition, serving as a cue that may reveal its users' thoughts, memories, and motives. For example, communicators who use hate terms such as "fag" signal that they are prejudiced (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Similarly, people who make explicit , negative statements about a group (e.g., "the British are a nation of binge drinkers") are likely to be seen to have malign intentions, especially if they do not belong to the group concerned (e.g., Sutton, Elder, & Douglas, 2006). If communicators use abstract language to describe a person's negative behavior and concrete language for their positive behavior, they are also seen as having negative attitudes and intentions (Douglas & Sutton, 2006: although it is not yet known whether this finding extends to cases in which groups, rather than people, are the topic of conversation).

These examples are grounds for hope that because it is a barometer, language can be employed in the fight against prejudice. Social authorities and motivated individuals can challenge, convert or sanction those who reveal their prejudices with language. Thus the linguistic barometer can be an invaluable aid in establishing and enforcing anti-prejudice norms. Further, motivated individuals may also refer to these norms in order to prevent using language that contributes to prejudice. For example, Sutton et al. (2006, Study 3) found that individuals

were less willing to criticize outgroups than their own group. This was strongly related to the perception that criticism of outgroups is normatively unacceptable. It seems that people evaluate the potentially prejudiced things they might say, and perhaps anticipate how others would evaluate them. Hence they are more likely to show restraint.

That said, the barometric property of language is not all good news. For one thing, when people think that prejudice toward a group is normative, they may be encouraged to use hate terms, so winning kudos for adherence to the norm. Conversely, people may infer that prejudice is normative when they hear others using hate terms. In such cases, the barometer plays a vital role in a self-perpetuating cycle of prejudice. Similarly, members of groups that find themselves overtly criticized tend to view the criticism as a slur, a sign of prejudice. In research I am currently doing with colleagues, we are finding that this reading of criticism causes people to adopt a besieged, rather jingoistic form of attachment to their group that predisposes them to prejudice and intergroup hostility[2].

Further, the barometric property of language can fuel adverse intergroup relations by changing the dynamics of self-presentation. For example, there is a stereotype in Western nations that compared to men, women are more fearful of crime. A woman who says that "I'm not afraid of crime" therefore risks the backlash that often accompanies violations of stereotypical expectancies. Fear of this backlash may cause women to express high levels of fear that do not necessarily reflect their private experience. In this way, a normative climate of fear becomes self-fulfilling. Women are controlled not only by the fear of crime, but the belief that they generally are, and should be, fearful. In this schema, the fear of crime is not only an "instrument" but also a "yardstick" of social control (Sutton & Farrall, 2008).

More pitfalls stem from the limitations of language as a barometer. Prejudiced attitudes are transmitted, but not reliably signified, by certain types of language use. The LIB and the selective transmission effects we have reviewed are examples of unwitting, covert, or implicit forms of transmission that are likely to go unnoticed. Because they are not noticed, they are unlikely to trigger appropriate responses. Instead, efforts are bound to center on aspects of their language that are obviously linked to prejudice, such as explicit criticisms of a group or the blatant use of hate terms. While the elimination of this type of language is strongly desirable and likely to benefit intergroup relations in many ways, a potential downside is that becomes harder to identify and sanction those who are prejudiced. It may also be difficult to challenge ideologies that advocate prejudice and conflict when they are seldom voiced explicitly.

In contrast, implicit, gradual, and difficult to control biases are difficult for people to "read" barometrically, so may be left to degrade intergroup relations in their quiet way. As a result, minority groups may find themselves excluded from employment and many other opportunities, even though no-one goes on record with overtly prejudiced statements about them. Majority groups may be inclined to infer from the lack of blatantly prejudicial language in their community that prejudice is absent, and so resist attempts to counteract it.

The flawed use of language as a barometer may lead to a paradox of liberalism (Sutton et al., 2008). Here, debate about prejudice and other overt modes of discourse with great diagnostic and transformative potential are all but eliminated from the public sphere. What remains are the insidious modes of communication that are better equipped to help prejudice grow and thrive than to stop it. Whether these really are perverse side-effects of the liberal agenda to reform intergroup language is a difficult empirical question which has not yet been fully answered, even if the scenario just outlined seems familiar (see also Leets & Giles, 1997).

Conclusion

We have seen that language does not merely reflect but also affects cognition, and that in its interplay with cognition language creates, as well as replicates, social information.   One source of the creative power of language is the reflexivity of its use. That is, people's beliefs about language modify how they use it, and how they react to the language used by others. This causes them to transform information even as they attempt to transmit it. Another source of the power of language is the ability of words – its fundamental units – to direct and modify cognition independently of the rules that are supposed to govern their use. Further, language also has the potential to worsen or improve intergroup relations by acting as a barometric indicator of prejudice. When entrusted to interactions between reflexive, strategic, and promiscuously associative human minds, language seems unable to transmit information faithfully or to obey its own rules. Ironically, the imperfection of language grants it tremendous creative power.

Given that language has received relatively little attention in the study of intergroup relations, further research is likely to reveal that it has more tricks up its sleeve. For example, it is striking that no published empirical study has shown directly that stereotypes themselves are changed by the LIB or by the selective transmission bias. Dependent measures usually concern what is transmitted (e.g., Lyons & Kashima, 2003), or judgments about the individual group members whose behavior is described (see Maass, 1999). No study has taken explicit endorsement of a stereotype of a group as the dependent measure. This should be a priority for future research, and suggests a more general question: does language affects intergroup relations principally by altering beliefs about groups, or by other means?

In this vein, biases like the LIB may worsen intergroup relations in everyday life by biasing attention, rather than cumulatively changing the representation of groups. For example,

by using abstract language for outgroup members' negative behavior, the communicator focuses attention on the traits and motivations that may have brought the behavior about. In contrast, by using concrete language for ingroup members' negative behavior, the communicator instead draws attention to situational forces which tend to exonerate the actor. Implicitly, joint attention and therefore joint action is focused on the outrages that are willfully and characteristically committed by outgroup members, but not ingroup members. This may lead to biases in punitive, vengeful, or group-protective behaviors. Here then is another priority for further research.

These questions highlight the ability of language to operate simultaneously in more than one mode – as both vessel and lens, in this case. Indeed this is probably how language normally functions: a verbal statement about a topic simultaneously conveys information about a topic (like a vessel), focuses attention on it (like a lens), and also betrays information about the communicator (like a barometer). Thinking about the multiple functions of language opens up a range of important research questions, some of which we have already touched on. For example, can people infer from the group labels used by others whether prejudice and hostility toward outgroups are normative within their group? Similarly, can they detect whether an LIB is operating in their community and from that, infer whether prejudice is normative (cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2006; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008)?

Considering the multiple functions of language also enables researchers to import insights from one line of research into another. To illustrate, the "vessel" metaphor tends to cast language as something that happens after cognition: beliefs about the topic and the communicative context shape the way that people transmit information. In contrast, the lens metaphor casts language as something that precedes cognition – the idiomatic availability of group labels constrains the way that people can think about groups. The different temporal orders

implied by the vessel and lens metaphors have shaped research on topics such as the LIB and group labels respectively, and it is possible to turn them on their heads. For example, researchers have already shown that audiences' responses to outgroups are improved by exposure to complex labels (Leader et al., 2009). Extrapolating backwards from this work, one can predict that individuals who mentally represent an outgroup in three-dimensional, sympathetic terms are more likely to use a complex set of labels when referring to it. In turn, those exposed to their language should be favorably influenced by it. If this works out, we would have an example of a transition from an "open loop", where language affects cognition, to a "closed loop" model, where language affects cognition, which in turn affects language, in a recurring and enduring social-psychological dynamic.

This kind of transition is crucial to understanding the interplay between fleeting, situated micro-social processes and broader, more enduring features of the macro-social environment. More generally, we should not overlook the essential function of the day-to-day use of language for the survival of culture and society. There is an intuitive tendency to essentialize the social and cultural "status quo", to think of it as an entity that survives *de facto*. But in fact the status quo depends on perpetual enactment and renewal. Cultural ideas are continually passed on by the vessel of language. Objects and events of shared interest in the world are continually selected by the lens of language. The ideologies and values that hold us together are continually signaled by the barometer of language. If we were to use language in fundamentally different ways tomorrow, then our culture, society, and intergroup relations would be fundamentally different (Kashima, 2001). Thus, whether intergroup relations stay the same or change, we should look to the dynamic between language and cognition for an explanation. In this respect, language is not just *at* the heart, but *is* the beating heart, of intergroup relations.

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Note

1.   At the time of writing (Christmastime 2008), a search of PsycINFO in which the terms "intergroup relations" and "cognition" are combined turns up more than four times as many papers (213) than does the combination of "intergroup relations" and "language" (48). Some of the research and ideas included in this chapter were facilitated by a grant from the Economic and Research Council (RES 000-22-2540).