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DESCRIBERS

When what you say about others says something about you: Language abstraction and

inferences about describers' attitudes and goals.

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Abstract

According to the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991), a person's behavior can be described at varying levels of abstraction from concrete (e.g., "Lisa *slaps* Ann") to abstract (e.g., "Lisa is *aggressive*"). Research has shown that language abstraction conveys information about the person whose behavior is described (Wigboldus, Semin & Spears, 2000). However to date, little research has examined the information that language abstraction may convey about describers themselves. In this paper, we report three experiments demonstrating that describers who use relatively abstract language to describe others' behaviors are perceived to have biased attitudes and motives compared with those describers who use more concrete language.

Keywords: language abstraction, linguistic category model, bias, communication

Word Count: 5000

When what you say about others says something about you: Language abstraction and

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Communication is a purposive social activity in which people pursue specific goals

such as affiliation and influence (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1993; Giles & Coupland, 1998;

Higgins, 1981; Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). In the pursuit of these goals, speakers may say or

imply things that, at least prior to the conversation, they did not believe (e.g., Douglas &

Sutton, 2003). Similarly motivated by their own goals, audiences actively interpret speakers'

statements and thereby form new beliefs about the topic and speaker (e.g., Vonk, 1998; 2002).

The information that arises from communication may have an enduring effect on the beliefs

of audiences and even the speakers themselves (Higgins & Rholes, 1978). Communication is

therefore responsible for both the generation and transmission of information. Central to both

functions is the ability of its participants to determine each others' characteristics and goals

(Allbright, Cohen, Malloy, Christ, & Bromgard, 2004; Higgins, 1981).

Considerable attention has been paid to the social consequences of the characteristics

and especially the goals attributed to speakers (Elder, Sutton & Douglas, in press; Fein, 1996;

Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Vonk, 2002). However, less attention has been paid to *how* people

make these attributions. In particular, given that *language* is the primary medium of

communication, there has been remarkably little attention paid to how recipients use features

of speakers' language to determine their beliefs and intentions. In this research, we assess the

extent to which people are able to make inferences about speakers' attitudes and motives from

the extent to which their language is concrete or abstract.

This concrete-abstract dimension of language is the concern of the *linguistic category*

model (*LCM*; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). According to this model, there are four

increasingly abstract levels at which people may describe behaviors: descriptive action verbs

(DAVs - "Lisa *slaps* Ann"), interpretative action verbs (IAVs – "Lisa *hurts* Ann"), state verbs

(SVs – "Lisa *dislikes* Ann") and adjectives ("Lisa is *aggressive*"). More concrete descriptions refer to single events with or without interpretation, whereas more abstract descriptions refer to enduring psychological states or characteristics of the target. Abstract language also tends to imply that the described action is more characteristic of the actor (Maass, Montalcini & Bicotti, 1998; Maass, Milesi, Zabbini & Stahlberg, 1995; Wigboldus, Semin & Spears, 2000). Recipients view abstract language to be less verifiable and more disputable than concrete language (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Interestingly, Rodin (1972) found that descriptions of behaviors (concrete) were more informative to perceivers who were asked to match descriptions to targets, than descriptions of traits (abstract).

Much research documents the social significance of language abstraction. Describers exhibit a *linguistic expectancy bias* (LEB) such that they use more abstract language for expectancy-consistent behaviors (Wigboldus et al., 2000). This effect of expectancies is manifest in the *linguistic intergroup bias* (LIB) wherein people describe positive ingroup and negative outgroup behaviors abstractly, but use more concrete language for positive outgroup and negative ingroup behaviors (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri and Semin, 1989). As well as expectancies, describers' *goals* affect language abstraction, including the motive to protect one's ingroup from threat (Maass, Ceccarelli & Rudin, 1996), the need to achieve cognitive closure (i.e., a subjective sense of certainty: Webster, Kruglanski & Pattison, 1997), securing a prosecution or defense (Schmid, Fiedler, Englich, Ehrenberger & Semin, 1996; see also Schmid & Fiedler, 1996, 1998), the desire to compete or co-operate (Gil de Montes, Semin & Valencia, 2001), self-presentational goals (Douglas & McGarty, 2001, 2002; Rubini & Sigall, 2002), and the desire to put a positive or negative 'spin' on a behavior (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). Finally, differences in language abstraction have implications for how targets are evaluated (Wigboldus et al., 2000), so that language abstraction is a powerful way in which communicators' expectancies and goals affect recipients' attitudes to the target.

By documenting the variables that explain variations in language abstraction, this research effectively charts how language abstraction may be somewhat diagnostic of the expectancies and goals of the individuals using it. Although language abstraction is a relatively subtle feature of language and its use is somewhat implicit, optimal recipients may be able to exploit this diagnostic capacity, whether or not they are aware of doing so. Indeed participants are able to recognize some of the corollaries of language abstraction, such as low verifiability, high disputability and temporal endurance (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). It is therefore possible that recipients of descriptions may use language abstraction as a cue to form hypotheses about describers, including their characteristics and goals.

To illustrate our predictions, an abstract description such as "Lisa is *aggressive*" will normally be seen by recipients as more disputable, less verifiable and as conveying more enduring information about Lisa than a concrete description such as "Lisa *slaps* Ann". Those recipients might well conclude that the abstract describer is less likely to be Lisa's friend, to like Lisa, or to portray Lisa favorably, than the concrete describer. In this article, we report three experiments designed to test the proposition that language abstraction is a cue to a range of biases that describers might have in providing descriptions of others' behaviors.

Experiments 1 and 2

In both experiments, participants were asked to view a series of cartoons, each depicting a person performing a positive or negative behavior, and read a description of the behavior. In Experiment 1, we tested whether participants would be able to make judgements about describers' personal *relationships* with and likely *attitudes* towards protagonists. Participants were asked to rate the likelihood that the describer was a friend or enemy of the actor, an unbiased observer, as well as whether the describer's attitude was biased towards or against the actor. In Experiment 2, we tested whether participants' judgments of describers' *communication goals* would be affected by language abstraction. Participants were asked to

rate the likelihood that the describer wanted to create a positive, negative and unbiased impression of the actor.

In Experiment 1, we predicted an interaction between behavior valence (positive/negative), describer (friend/enemy/unbiased observer) and language abstraction (DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ). Specifically, we predicted that two-way interactions would emerge between describer and language abstraction for positive and negative behaviors separately. For positive behaviors, we predicted that with increasing language abstraction, participants would be more likely to rate the describer as a friend, less likely to rate the describer as an enemy, and less likely to rate the describer as an unbiased observer. For negative behaviors, we predicted that with increasing language abstraction, participants would be more likely to rate the describer as an enemy, less likely to rate the describer as a friend, and less likely to rate the describer as an unbiased observer. For ratings of describers' likely attitude towards the target, we predicted an interaction between valence and language abstraction such that for positive behaviors, there would be an increasing trend to perceive the describer as biased in favor of the person in the scene, as language abstraction increased. We predicted the opposite pattern for negative behaviors. In Experiment 2, we predicted the same pattern of results, substituting impression goal (positive/negative/unbiased) for describer.

<center>Experiment 1 - Method</center>

Participants and design

Ninety seven undergraduate students (76 female and 21 male, Median age = 21 years) from Keele University participated to fulfil course requirements. The experiment was a 2 (behavior valence: positive/negative) x 3 (describer: friend/enemy/unbiased observer) x 4 (abstraction: DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ) repeated measures design.

Materials and Procedure

A coversheet informed participants that they would observe a series of scenes, each depicting a person doing something. Participants were informed that each scene had been described by a friend, an enemy, and an observer of the person highlighted in the scene, but that just *one* of these descriptions was provided with each scene. Participants' task was to decide how likely it was that the description next to each scene was the one by the friend, enemy, and the unbiased observer. They were also to rate the describer's likely attitude towards the person in each scene.

At the top of each page, participants were asked to look at the scene, which portrayed a positive or negative action, and read the description next to it, which represented one of the four levels of language abstraction specified by the LCM. There were therefore eight cartoons presented in total. Participants were reminded that a friend, enemy and unbiased observer had all written a description of the scene. They rated the likelihood that the description had been written by each of these potential describers (1 = "unlikely", 7 = "likely"). Question order was randomized. Participants were then asked to rate the describer's likely attitude towards the person in each scene (1 = "biased against Person A", 4 = "unbiased", 7= "biased in favor of Person A"). Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Friend/enemy/unbiased observer likelihood ratings

Results were entered into a 2 (behavior valence: positive/negative) x 3 (describer: friend/enemy/unbiased observer) x 4 (language abstraction: DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ) repeated measures ANOVA. The predicted interaction between valence, describer and language abstraction was significant, $F(6, 576) = 11.40$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .11$. As planned, we then conducted separate 3 (describer) x 4 (abstraction) ANOVAs, then linear contrasts for each describer (friend/enemy/unbiased observer), separately for positive and negative behaviors.

These latter analyses required restructuring the data file so that language abstraction appeared as a between-subjects variable. We then adjusted the degrees of freedom to match the original within-subjects design, and set the alpha level for significance at .01.

Positive behaviors

Means and standard deviations for positive behaviors are in Table 1. The interaction between describer and language abstraction was significant, $F(6, 576) = 13.17$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .12$. There was a linear trend for participants to rate the describer more likely to be a friend with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 291) = 18.84$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .05$. Conversely, there was a trend for participants to rate the describer less likely to be an enemy with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 291) = 18.93$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .05$. Finally, participants rated the describer less likely to be an unbiased observer with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 288) = 36.94$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .09$. The main effects for describer, $F(2, 576) = 527.72$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .85$, and language abstraction, $F(3, 576) = 7.14$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .07$ were also significant. Participants were more likely to rate the describer as a friend and an unbiased observer than an enemy. Likelihood ratings also decreased overall from DAVs to ADJs.

Negative behaviors

Means and standard deviations for negative behaviors are in Table 2. The interaction between describer and language abstraction was significant, $F(6, 582) = 6.00$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .06$. There was no linear trend for participants to rate the describer less likely to be a friend with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 291) = 2.51$, $p = .114$, $R^2 = .006$. However, participants rated the describer more likely to be an enemy with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 291) = 12.30$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .03$. Also, participants rated the describer less likely to be an unbiased observer with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 291) = 6.73$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .02$. The main effect for describer was significant, $F(2, 582) = 168.03$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .63$. Participants were more likely to rate the describer as an enemy and unbiased observer

than a friend. The main effect for language abstraction was not significant, $F(3, 582) < 1$, $p = .95$, $\eta^2 = .001$.

Other effects

Other results emerged that were not central to the hypotheses. There was no overall main effect for behavior valence, $F(1, 576) = 2.01$, $p = .16$, $\eta^2 = .02$. There were, however, main effects for describer, $F(2, 576) = 111.05$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .54$ and language abstraction, $F(3, 576) = 4.31$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .04$. There were interactions between valence and abstraction, $F(3, 576) = 2.91$, $p = .045$, $\eta^2 = .03$, valence and describer, $F(2, 576) = 470.51$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .83$, and language abstraction and describer, $F(6, 576) = 6.36$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

Ratings of describers' likely attitude

Results for describers' likely attitude were entered into a 2 (valence) x 4 (language abstraction) repeated measures ANOVA. Means and standard deviations are in Table 3. The predicted interaction between valence and language abstraction was significant, $F(3, 291) = 15.80$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .14$. For positive behaviors, participants perceived the describer as more biased in favor of the person in the scene as language abstraction increased, $F(3, 291) = 26.45$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .06$. For negative behaviors, participants perceived the describer as more biased against the person in the scene as language abstraction increased, $F(3, 291) = 12.40$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .03$. The main effect for valence was significant, with higher ratings for positive scenes, $F(1, 291) = 436.57$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .81$. The main effect for language abstraction was not significant, $F(3, 291) = 1.56$, $p = .199$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Experiment 2 - Method

Participants and design

Eighty nine undergraduate students (65 female and 24 male, Median age = 19 years) from Keele University participated in this experiment to fulfil course requirements. The

experiment was a 2 (behavior valence: positive/negative) x 3 (impression: positive/

negative/unbiased) x 4 (language abstraction: DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ) repeated measures design.

Materials and procedure

The questionnaire was identical to that of Experiment 1, except that participants were

asked to rate the likelihood of various impression formation goals on the part of the describer

instead of rating their relationship ("Based on the scene and description, please rate how

likely you think it is that the describer wanted to: create a *positive* impression of Person A, a

negative impression of Person A, and an *unbiased* impression of Person A"). Participants

were asked to respond to each item on a scale from 1 "very unlikely" to 7 "very likely".

Question order was randomized. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Positive/negative/unbiased impression likelihood ratings

Results were entered into a 2 (behavior valence: positive/negative) x 3 (impression:

positive/negative/unbiased) x 4 (language abstraction: DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ) repeated measures

ANOVA. The predicted interaction between valence, impression and language abstraction

was significant, $F(6, 528) = 4.90$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. We conducted planned analyses on

positive and negative behaviors separately, and linear contrasts as in Experiment 1.

Positive behaviors

Means and standard deviations for positive behaviors are in Table 4. The interaction

between impression and language abstraction was significant, $F(6, 528) = 10.12$, $p = .000$, η^2

$= .10$. Participants rated the describer more likely to have wanted to create a positive

impression, with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 264) = 6.93$, $p = .009$, $R^2 = .02$. There

was no trend for negative impression, $F(3, 264) = .16$, $p = .694$, $R^2 = .00$. However,

participants rated the describer less likely to have wanted to create an unbiased impression,

with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 264) = 35.20$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .09$. The main effects

for impression, $F(2, 528) = 432.41$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .83$, and language abstraction, $F(3, 528) = 4.22$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .05$ were also significant. Participants were more likely to rate the describer as having a positive and unbiased impression goal than a negative goal. Likelihood ratings also decreased overall from DAVs to ADJs.

Negative behaviors

Means and standard deviations for negative behaviors are in Table 5. The interaction between describer and language abstraction was significant, $F(6, 528) = 7.47$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .08$. There was no linear trend for positive impression, $F(3, 264) = 2.33$, $p = .128$, $R^2 = .01$. However, participants rated the describer more likely to have wanted to create a negative impression, with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 264) = 11.15$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .03$. Finally, participants rated the describer less likely to have wanted to create an unbiased impression, with increasing language abstraction, $F(3, 264) = 30.24$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .08$. The main effects for impression, $F(2, 528) = 535.19$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .86$ and language abstraction, $F(3, 558) = 4.90$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .05$ were significant. Participants were more likely to rate the describer as having a negative and unbiased impression goal than a positive goal. Likelihood ratings also decreased overall from DAVs to ADJs.

Other effects

Other results emerged that were not central to the hypotheses. There were overall main effects for behavior valence, $F(1, 528) = 43.49$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .33$, impression, $F(2, 528) = 41.52$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .32$ and language abstraction, $F(3, 528) = 8.97$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .09$. There were interactions between valence and impression, $F(2, 528) = 891.86$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .91$, and language abstraction and impression, $F(6, 528) = 12.72$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .13$. The interaction between valence and language abstraction was not significant, $F(3, 528) = .869$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

Ratings of describers' likely attitude

Results for describers' likely attitude were entered into a 2 (valence) x 4 (language abstraction) repeated measures ANOVA. Means and standard deviations are in Table 6. The predicted interaction between valence and language abstraction was significant, $F(3, 264) = 9.24$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .10$. For positive behaviors, participants perceived the describer as marginally more biased in favor of the person in the scene, as language abstraction increased, $F(3, 264) = 4.95$, $p = .027$, $R^2 = .01$. For negative behaviors, participants perceived the describer as more biased against the person in the scene, as language abstraction increased, $F(3, 264) = 13.28$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = .04$. The main effect for valence was significant with likelihood ratings higher for positive scenes, $F(1, 264) = 559.93$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .86$. However, the main effect for language abstraction was not significant, $F(3, 264) = 1.16$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Discussion

These experiments support the notion that participants are able to use language abstraction to make inferences about describers' personal relationships with, attitudes towards, and communication goals with respect to actors. In Experiment 1, given a positive description, with increasing language abstraction participants were more likely to infer that the describer was a friend, yet less likely to infer them to be an enemy or unbiased observer. Participants were also more likely to rate the describer as biased in favor of the protagonist. For negative behaviors, with increasing language abstraction participants were more likely to infer that the describer was an enemy, yet less likely to infer them to be a friend or unbiased observer. Participants were also less likely to rate the describer as biased in favor of the protagonist.

In Experiment 2, for positive behaviors, with increasing language abstraction participants rated the describer more likely to have wanted to create a positive impression of the protagonist and less likely to have wanted to create an unbiased impression. For negative

behaviors, with increasing language abstraction participants rated the describer more likely to have wanted to create a negative impression of the protagonist and less likely to have wanted to create an unbiased impression. Results for the likely attitude of the describer towards the target replicated those of Experiment 1. The only inconsistencies were the likelihood ratings of 'negative impression' for positive behaviors and 'positive impression' for negative behaviors, which were not significant and therefore inconsistent with our hypotheses. It is plausible that participants found it difficult to rate someone as having wanted to create a positive impression when they described a negative event (and vice-versa). In Experiment 1 on the other hand, it may have been more plausible for participants to believe that a person would describe a friend's negative behavior, or an enemy's positive behavior.

One potential problem concerning Experiments 1 and 2 is that abstraction was manipulated within-subjects, so that each participant was presented with the range of language abstraction. They might therefore have been able to make explicitly comparative judgments. We were able to rule this problem out by collecting further data, obtaining similar effects in a between-groups design. [1] Another issue remains however. The more abstract a description is, the more it is likely to be strongly valenced (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), and the degree to which a description carries positive or negative valence is likely to be accessible to conscious awareness (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). For example, people may perceive the word *athletic* to be more positive than *running* and for *aggressive* to be more negative than *hitting*. It is likely therefore that our participants have been using valence to make judgements about the describers' inclinations and goals, and that participants are not using language abstraction *per se* to make judgements about describers, because abstraction is confounded by valence.

Experiment 3

Participants were asked to answer questions about a describer's likely attitudes and goals, but instead of making judgements based on individual descriptions, participants made

one set of judgements about the describer's likely attitudes and goals based on a set of descriptions (four positive and four negative). By asking participants to make one rating across all positive and negative descriptions, the confound between abstraction and valence was eliminated. There were four experimental groups, in which participants received: (1) all *abstract* descriptions, (2) all *concrete* descriptions, descriptions that were (3) *favorable* to the target (i.e., abstract descriptions for the four positive behaviors and concrete descriptions for the four negative behaviors), or (4) *unfavorable* descriptions (i.e., abstract for negative behaviors and concrete for positive behaviors). We predicted that participants in the 'abstract' condition would rate the describer more likely to have wanted to create the impression that the target often behaves in the manner depicted, than those in the 'concrete' condition. We also predicted that participants in the 'favorable' condition would be rated as having a more positively biased attitude towards the target, and more likely to have wanted to create a positive impression of the target, than those in the 'unfavorable' condition. Attitude and valence impression goal were not expected to differ in the 'abstract' and 'concrete' conditions.

Method

Participants and design

A total of 128 participants (83 female and 45 male, Median age = 21 years) were recruited whilst at leisure on the Keele University campus, and were assigned randomly to the cells of a four group design ('abstract', 'concrete', 'favorable' and 'unfavorable' descriptions).

Materials and procedure

Pictures and descriptions were identical to those in Experiment 1. However, participants were informed that there was only one describer and that s/he was acquainted with all of the targets. The following questions relating to the describer's attitudes and goals

were presented at the end of the questionnaire: "What do you think is the describer's *attitude* towards the people in the scenes in general?" (biased *in favor* of the people in the scenes/biased *against* the people in the scenes), and "What do you think are the describer's *goals* in giving these descriptions in general?" (wants to create a *positive/negative* impression of the people in the scenes; wants to create the impression that the people in the scenes *often/rarely* behave in the manner depicted). Participants were also asked "How positive or negative are the descriptions in general?" to measure perceived valence of the descriptions. [2] All questions were answered on a 7 point scale and order was randomized. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

Results were entered into between-subjects analyses with four experimental groups ('abstract'/'concrete'/'favorable'/'unfavorable') and responses to the attitude and goal questions as dependent variables. Means and standard deviations are in Table 7. There was a marginal difference across the four conditions on responses to the question about perceived valence of the descriptions, $F(3,124) = 2.27$, $p = .084$, $\eta^2 = .05$. There was no difference between the 'abstract' and 'concrete' conditions, as in Douglas and Sutton (2003) using the same materials. However, because the difference between 'favorable' and 'unfavorable' conditions was significant, $t(62) = 2.48$, $p = .016$, we conducted all analyses with responses to the valence question as a covariate.

ANCOVAs revealed a significant effect across the four conditions for participants' ratings of the describer's likely impression-formation goal (often/rarely), $F(3, 123) = 4.81$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Planned comparisons revealed that describers in the 'abstract' condition were rated more likely to have wanted to create the impression that the targets often behave in the manner depicted, than those in the 'concrete' condition, $t(62) = 2.57$, $p = .013$. There was

no difference between the 'favorable' and 'unfavorable' conditions as predicted, $t(62) = 1.40$,

$p = .166$.

There was a significant effect across the four conditions for participants' ratings of the

describer's likely attitude towards the targets in general, $F(3, 123) = 2.81$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

Planned comparisons revealed that describers who gave 'favorable' descriptions were rated as

having more favorable attitudes towards the target than those who gave 'unfavorable'

descriptions, as predicted, $t(62) = 3.21$, $p = .002$. There was no difference between the

'abstract' and 'concrete' conditions, $t(62) = 1.01$, $p = .319$. Finally, there was no difference

across the four conditions on ratings of the describer's goal to create a positive or negative

impression $F(3, 123) = .27$, $p = .849$, $\eta^2 = .006$. This is perhaps the case because, in reading

both positive and negative descriptions, participants may have perceived the describer's

overall intended impression to be fairly neutral. Indeed, the means support this interpretation

and we therefore feel that this finding is not problematic. Results overall suggest that

participants are still able to make inferences about a describer's likely attitude and impression

formation goal towards targets when valence is controlled for methodologically.

General Discussion

The present experiments demonstrate that language abstraction influences the

inferences that recipients make about describers' relationships, motivations and attitudes

towards their targets. Variations in language abstraction influenced the conclusions that

recipients drew about describers, independently of the valence inherent in the descriptions.

Previous research has shown that language abstraction is influenced by expectancies and

motivating factors, supporting the idea that language abstraction is used by describers, either

implicitly or explicitly, to achieve communicative objectives (Douglas & McGarty, 2001,

2002; Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Maass et al., 1989; Maass et al., 1995, 1996; Webster et al.,

1997; Wigboldus et al., 2000). The present research takes this further, demonstrating that

recipients are able to use language abstraction as a window to those beliefs, stereotypes and communicative objectives.

To communicate effectively, it is clear that both communicators and recipients must consensually perceive the intentions underlying messages (Albright et al., 2004). Thus our finding that recipients are able to extract information about describers' attitudes and intentions points to how language abstraction may facilitate the information transmission function of communication. From describers' strategic perspective, recipients' capacity to glean something about them from their language is a cloud with a silver lining. The cloud is that if recipients are aware their biases, their ability to transmit information about a target may be compromised. For example, if a recipient knew that a describer was motivated to describe Lisa's behavior positively, he/she may be inclined to take whatever the describer says with a 'pinch of salt', potentially discount the description (McClure, 1998; Morris & Larrick, 1995), and draw their own conclusions about both Lisa and the describer. This suggests a possible limit on the extent to which language abstraction "conveys beliefs without the accountability entailed by their explication" (Douglas & Sutton, 2003, p.693).

The silver lining is that describers may not only recruit language abstraction to explicitly influence others' impressions of someone (Douglas & Sutton, 2003), they may also recruit language abstraction to influence recipients' impressions of *themselves*. There is already some evidence that language abstraction responds to variables that arouse self-presentational concerns, such as identifiability to an audience (Douglas and McGarty 2001, 2002). In concert with those findings, the present results suggest that the use of language abstraction may comprise a subtle but useful aspect of indirect impression-management strategies, whereby people try to manage impressions of themselves by strategically presenting information about others (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980).

The processes we outline here are not necessarily the same as the processes involved in making inferences from describers' language *spontaneously*. We elicited judgements about describers by prompting participants with the goals and motives of interest, making the process more thoughtful and less automatic. Also, we sought to assess participants' judgements about goals and motives rather than specific character traits such as intelligence or kindness. However, some research suggests that people are also able to make spontaneous trait judgements about people based on their descriptions of others (e.g., Mae, Carlston & Skowronski, 1999; Skowronski, Carlston, Mae & Crawford, 1998; Wyer, Budesheim & Lambert, 1990). Research on language abstraction has yet to determine whether (a) language abstraction is a cue to describers' traits and personal characteristics, and (b) whether people are able to infer these traits spontaneously.

We also need to make one final point with relation to the role of intentionality in use of language abstraction. There is evidence to suggest that people are not necessarily aware of their language abstraction choices (Franco & Maass, 1996, 1999; see also Schnake & Ruscher, 1998; von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa & Vargas, 1997). Likewise, we do not claim here that recipients are explicitly aware that language abstraction influences the conclusions they make about describers and their motives. Similarly, we do not argue that describers intentionally employ language abstraction to create particular impressions of others, or indeed themselves. It is clear that further research is needed to determine how aware are recipients and describers of the ways in which they use language abstraction for strategic ends (Douglas & Sutton, 2003).

In summary, the present findings take the research on language abstraction further, demonstrating that recipients of 'biased' communications are able to attribute bias to describers based on differences in language abstraction. Although language abstraction enables describers to transmit their expectancies and stereotypes about others' behaviors,

there is evidence here to suggest that this may not be without consequences for the describers themselves.

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Footnotes

1   Participants were 196 undergraduate students (159 female and 37 male, Median age =

20 years). The experiment consisted of a 2 (behavior valence: positive/negative) x 2

(impression: often/rarely) x 4 (language abstraction: DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ) mixed design

with repeated measures on the first two variables. Participants were asked: "Based on

the scene and the description, please rate how likely you think it is that the describer

wanted to create the impression that: Person A *often* and *rarely* behaves this way". The

predicted interaction between impression and language abstraction was significant, F (3,

192) = 5.41, p = .001, η^2 = .08. Linear contrasts revealed that with increasing language

abstraction, participants rated the describer as more likely to want to create the

impression that Person A often behaves in the manner depicted (means of 4.84, 4.96,

5.33 and 5.48), F (3, 195) = 17.35, p = .000, R^2 = .08. Also, with increasing language

abstraction, participants rated the describer less likely to want to create the impression

that Person A rarely behaves in the manner depicted (means of 3.05, 2.95, 2.68 and

2.45), F (3, 195) = 13.25, p = .000, R^2 = .06.

2   We also included items assessing participants' liking of the describer, and describer

traits (warmth/competence, social status, aesthetic quality and dynamism). However,

these are not relevant to the current discussion and will not be covered here.

Table 1

Experiment 1 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood ratings as a function of

describer and language abstraction (positive behaviors).

	Describer		
Abstraction	Friend	Enemy	Unbiased observer
DAV	5.43 *(1.77)*	3.05 *(1.79)*	5.77 *(1.28)*
IAV	6.00 *(1.03)*	2.30 *(1.37)*	5.52 *(1.26)*
SV	6.13 *(1.05)*	2.37 *(1.64)*	5.01 *(1.44)*
ADJ	6.21 *(1.02)*	2.03 *(1.22)*	4.64 *(1.63)*

Table 2

Experiment 1 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood ratings as a function of

describer and language abstraction (negative behaviors).

	Describer		
Abstraction	Friend	Enemy	Unbiased observer
DAV	3.42 *(1.72)*	4.97 *(1.91)*	5.49 *(1.53)*
IAV	2.94 *(1.60)*	5.57 *(1.55)*	5.41 *(1.46)*
SV	3.40 *(1.90)*	5.58 *(1.58)*	4.84 *(1.65)*
ADJ	2.87 *(1.56)*	5.83 *(1.44)*	5.06 *(1.67)*

Table 3

Experiment 1 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood attitude ratings as a function

of valence and language abstraction.

	Valence of behavior	
Abstraction	Positive	Negative
DAV	4.95 *(1.25)*	3.40 *(1.50)*
IAV	5.26 *(1.18)*	2.77 *(1.50)*
SV	5.67 *(1.21)*	2.87 *(1.55)*
ADJ	5.73 *(1.13)*	2.59 *(1.23)*

Table 4

Experiment 2 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood ratings as a function of

impression and language abstraction (positive behaviors).

	Describer		
Abstraction	Positive	Negative	Unbiased
DAV	5.12 *(1.98)*	1.88 *(1.34)*	4.61 *(1.92)*
IAV	5.94 *(1.26)*	1.65 *(1.08)*	3.70 *(1.69)*
SV	5.87 *(1.19)*	1.74 *(1.17)*	3.27 *(1.77)*
ADJ	5.75 *(1.13)*	1.92 *(1.19)*	3.13 *(1.45)*

Table 5

Experiment 2 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood ratings as a function of

impression and language abstraction (negative behaviors).

	Describer		
Abstraction	Positive	Negative	Unbiased
DAV	1.89 *(1.13)*	5.49 *(1.56)*	3.01 *(1.76)*
IAV	1.85 *(1.24)*	5.80 *(1.44)*	2.71 *(1.77)*
SV	1.72 *(1.11)*	5.99 *(1.26)*	2.13 *(1.30)*
ADJ	1.66 *(0.99)*	6.13 *(1.02)*	1.89 *(1.13)*

Table 6

Experiment 2 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for likelihood attitude ratings as a function

of valence and language abstraction.

	Valence of behavior	
Abstraction	Positive	Negative
DAV	4.94 *(1.32)*	2.72 *(1.24)*
IAV	5.40 *(1.19)*	2.43 *(1.38)*
SV	5.63 *(1.33)*	2.11 *(1.34)*
ADJ	5.33 *(1.31)*	2.08 *(1.22)*

Table 7

Experiment 3 - Means *(and standard deviations)* for goal, attitude and valence ratings as a

function of experimental condition.

	Measure			
Condition	Often/Rarely Goal	+/- Goal	Attitude	Valence
'Abstract'	5.44 *(1.29)*	3.91 *(0.64)*	3.72 *(1.02)*	3.97 *(0.97)*
'Concrete'	4.63 *(1.24)*	3.94 *(0.95)*	3.96 *(0.97)*	3.78 *(1.10)*
'Favorable'	4.75 *(1.11)*	4.11 *(1.26)*	4.39 *(1.07)*	4.22 *(1.04)*
'Unfavorable'	4.34 *(1.21)*	3.69 *(1.03)*	3.53 *(1.08)*	3.57 *(1.08)*