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DISRUPT-THEN-REFRAME IS IN THE AIR:
A FRENCH REPLICATION AND REFINEMENT

Initiated by Davis and Knowles (1999), the-disrupt-then-reframe technique is based on the linking of two moments in time. First of all, slipping an unexpected element into a communication situation that is likely to provoke a disruption in communication. Once this disruption has been achieved, proposing a target behaviour by insisting on the benefit that the individual could derive from it. We wanted to verify that this technique, effective in American, Dutch, and Polish contexts and naturally dependent on the culture of individuals and the communication norms which prevail there, could be effective in a French context. In accordance with the literature, our results show that when the two phases of the technique are linked, a greater persuasive effect is observed. A theoretically interesting way to interpret the effectiveness of the technique is proposed.

Key words: disrupt-then-reframe, compliance, communication, cross cultural differences, construal-level theory

In the field of persuasion, social psychology research has taken an interest since the 1960s in numerous techniques that allow submission behaviours to be obtained from others, and proposed both socio-cognitive and cultural interpretations of these techniques. The foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), the labelling technique (Kraut, 1973), and the touch technique (Kleinke, 1977) are only a few examples of the most well-known and studied, certainly because they are the oldest. Known for being robust in Western European and North American literature, persuasion techniques are not however considered as

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cross-cultural (Pascual & Guéguen, 2004; see also Pascual et al., 2012). According to Morling and Lamoreaux (2008), messages in a persuasive paradigm "can also induce intuitively 'opposite' effects" depending on the culture (Aaker & Williams, 1998). For these reasons, it would be unreasonable to think that any persuasive technique will be efficient in any country. So how adaptable is the more recent American technique named disrupt-then-reframe (DTR, Davis & Knowles, 1999), which has demonstrated its effectiveness in Eastern Europe (Dolinski & Szczucka, 2012, 2013)? To our knowledge, this technique has never been studied in a French context, while it seems to be effective in different cultures once its correct operationalization is identified. In this connection, our aim was to study the possibility of operationalizing this technique in a French context in order to reinforce previous studies.

Theoretical context

This technique, which was demonstrated experimentally more than ten years ago, consists of introducing into a communication situation - most particularly into a request - a bizarre, incongruous, and unexpected element: this is the disrupt phase, directly followed by a persuasive phase, the reframe, which closes the discourse (Davis & Knowles, 1999). The original research demonstrating the effect of this technique had the aim of persuading people to buy greetings cards to support local charity work (Davis & Knowles, 1999, Study 1). To do this, two experimenters went from door to door in the Christmas period, selling packets of cards in aid of a local centre which supported mentally disabled children and adults. In the first scenario, they announced the price of the packets of greetings cards in dollars "This packet of cards sells for $3" (classic communication situation). In the second scenario, they announced the price not in dollars, but in pennies "This packet of cards sells for 300 pennies" (disrupt phase), then added after a 2 second pause, "That's $3. It's a bargain!" (reframe phase). The authors observed that 65% of the individuals approached using the DTR technique agreed to support the association by buying greetings cards compared with 35% of those approached during a classic communication situation. Following studies demonstrated that the manipulation of one of these stages only (disrupt only or reframe only) did not increase compliance. Only the linking of the two phases in the disrupt-then-reframe order increased the frequency of helping behaviours (Davis & Knowles, 1999, Studies 2 & 3). Although until now it has only given rise to a few studies, namely six articles listed in a meta-analysis (Carpenter & Boster, 2009), the DTR technique seems to be robust in facilitating persuasive communication, particularly for prosocial requests, for assistance, or volunteering. The two main theories drawn on in the literature to explain the effectiveness of the technique are the action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 2012) and the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (Chaiken, 1980).

The action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 2012) is based on the idea that every action we perform has a corresponding cognitive construction, a labelling of this action referred to as action identity by the authors. Several constructions are possible for the same action. These constructions are ordered hierarchically: from a low-level of action identity taking into account the details and particularities of the action, to a high-level of action identity taking into account the aims and implications of the action. Consider for instance the small boy who comes back from school and sees his mother busy shelling beans at the kitchen table. If he asks her what she is doing, she will have the choice of replying in accordance with the level at which she identifies the action, either that she is preparing dinner (high-level identity) or that she is removing the bean seeds from their protective envelopes called pods which we do not eat (low-level identity). One of the principles of this theory is that an individual will spontaneously prefer a high-level identity. But faced with a difficulty and to maintain the action, the individual will shift from a high-level identity to a low-level identity in order to reclaim control of the situation. In so doing, the individual will find themselves in a state of cognitive disruption and psychological instability, making them more vulnerable to influences and persuasion. In fact, numerous studies have shown that individuals performing an action and identifying it at a low-level are more easily influenced by texts of a persuasive nature (Vallacher & Selz, 1991; Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, & Arps, 1984, Experiment 1; Wegner, Vallacher, Kiersted, & Dizadji, 1986, Experiment 1). In the DTR technique the disrupt phase would then have the function of disrupting interaction, consequently contributing to a shift from a high-level identity to a lower-level identity. It is because the reframe phase and its persuasive element arrives in this context of cognitive vulnerability that the individual, disturbed, will more easily agree to the request made to them.

In another sphere, three Dutch authors, Fennis, Das, and Pruyn (2004, 2006), proposed to clarify the processes underlying the effects of the DTR technique with the aid of the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (Chaiken, 1980). This theory distinguishes two basic modes of cognitive information processing. The first mode is referred to as heuristic processing and consists in processing the information in an overall fashion, based on simple rules. The processing may then involve the use of relatively general rules, such as communication scripts, developed by individuals through their past experiences and observations. A script is defined as "a structure that describes an appropriate sequence of events in a particular context […]. For our purposes, a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that define a well-known situation" (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 41). When the recipients of a message implement heuristic processing, they accept or do not accept the message on the basis above all of their reactions to indications not related to its content, such as the credibility of the communicator, the perceived opinion of the listener,

or past experiences. The second mode, referred to as systematic processing, involves detailed processing of the information. A cognitive effort is made to understand and evaluate the arguments in the message one by one, establish their validity, and critically evaluate the persuasive argument. The factors relative to the source then only indirectly affect acceptance of the conclusion of a message, and therefore persuasion, by means of their direct impact on the processes of reception or acceptance of the arguments. Fennis et al. (2004) then postulated that the DTR technique disturbed individuals sufficiently for them to focus their cognitive resources on the processing of the bizarre element introduced into the communication script. The technique would lead them to resort to a heuristic strategy (more cognitively economic) for processing the rest of the information by virtue of the low cognitive resources remaining available to them, not allowing them to produce counter-arguments (Fennis et al., 2004, Study 1).

A technique both contextual and cultural in nature

The literature has demonstrated that the DTR technique fits in with specific communication situations, as it relates to situational communication scripts. These scripts, standard sequels to actions presumed as familiar that are shared by the majority of members of a culture and triggered in a given social situation, allow an individual to act quickly and effectively (Schank & Abelson, 1977). As a scenario internalised by the speaker, a script will generate expectations in a specific communication situation and allow the subject who activated it to make predictions about sequences to events that may occur (Fayol & Monteil, 1988). However, it is only by considering the culture that the individual belongs to and the behavioural norms which govern it that we can consider the concept of a communication script. Indeed, scripts allow us to interpret and infer the communicational intention of the discourse in a specific sociocultural context (Ranney, 1992), and depending on this context, will generate different expectations. Some authors even speak of social scripts (Meng, 2008; St Clair, Thome-Williams, & Su, 2005) and consider communication scripts as specific to a culture. According to these authors, it is because an individual has been brought up in a certain community, within a given culture, that they have internalised the social scripts corresponding to the characteristics and norms of this culture. St Clair (2006, as cited in Meng, 2008) demonstrates that classic communication scripts, like that of the restaurant for example, are very different in China and in America. When we consider its explanation in cognitive terms, the question of the transculturality of the DTR technique then arises. In other words, an operationalization of the disrupt phase may have the expected effects of the technique within a culture, but no longer work in another if the scripts employed are not socially adapted. Although the transculturality of social influence processes is a field of

research that has been little investigated by social psychologists, several studies (Aaker, 2000; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Han & Shavitt, 1994) have nevertheless demonstrated that the effects of persuasive communications varied in different cultures (Courbet & Marchioli, in press). In a similar vein, persuasion techniques like the touch technique (Kleinke, 1977) and the "but you are free of" technique (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000), or those based on successive requests as with the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), are also known for being sensitive to cultural effects (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000; Pascual et al., 2012; Petrova, Cialdini, & Sills, 2007). In the light of these theoretical elements, the disrupt phase can be interpreted, on the one hand, as the disruption of a communication situation by an odd element, an element that could not have been predicted by the subjects and which alters the sequence of events initially expected in accordance with the social situation activated. On the other hand, it can be a disruption of a communication contract. In fact, by disturbing an interaction situation with a bizarre element, we are contravening the agreement to and the implicit sharing of the rules initially fixed by the discourse and the situation, making the sequel to the interaction unpredictable as the situation would no longer be recognised by the subject as familiar. As these rules are social in nature and therefore dependent on the culture in which they have been established, the operationalization of the DTR technique and the elements that compose it do not seem to be transcultural. And so, our main objective was to reproduce the original results obtained by Davis and Knowles (1999) by adapting the procedure of their experimental paradigm into the French language.

Method

Participants and design

During the Christmas period, five young teenagers belonging to a French scout association approached 250 passers-by at random, in the pedestrianised centre of a city in the south of France, in order to offer them packets of greetings cards displaying the emblem of their movement. The money collected on a voluntary basis by these young experimenters went to the association. People who stopped walking and listened to the script in its entirety were considered as subjects. These people also had to appear over the age of eighteen and in full possession of their faculties.

Directly in line with the original experiments by Davis and Knowles (1999), our experiment illustrated a 2 x 2 (Disrupt [without, with] x Reframe [without, with]) between subjects design. In an added condition, we also controlled the order of the experimental induction disrupt-then-reframe versus reframe-then-disrupt. All of the experimenters were instructed to question 10 people per experimental condition.

Behavioural measure and hypotheses

We counted the number of subjects who agreed to buy at least one packet of greetings cards, and therefore agreed to the target-request.

Directly in keeping with the studies of Davis and Knowles (1999), we expected that the people approached using the complete DTR technique would be more inclined to buy a packet of cards than subjects approached using a classic communication technique, or using only one of the two phases of the technique (disrupt only or reframe only). We also expected a more marked acceptance effect when the technique was used in compliance with the initial order of the phases, in other words disrupt then reframe, than when the phases were reversed (reframe then disrupt), as the order of the elements of the technique theoretically has an impact on its effectiveness.

Procedure

All of the teenagers presented themselves in the following manner:

"Good day Sir/Madam! My name is [first name] and I am a scout. I would like to show you some of our movement's greetings cards. You're familiar with the French Scout movement... Well you will know that it's a voluntary movement which allows us to do lots of activities, especially amongst nature, and to carry out projects, like taking part in the protection of regional nature parks. These cards have been produced to support us. Each packet contains 5. Would you like to know the price?"

Then, the price was presented, with five different variations:

– "This packet of cards sells for two euros" (classic communication),
– "This packet of cards sells for 200 cents... that makes two euros" (disrupt phase only),
– "This packet of cards sells for two euros. It's a bargain!" (reframe phase only),
– "This packet of cards sells for 200 cents... that makes two euros. It's a bargain!" (complete DTR technique),
– "It a bargain, this packet of cards sells for 200 cents... that makes two euros" (reversed technique: reframe-then-disrupt).

Results

We performed χ^2 tests for independent samples in order to analyse our data (Howell, 2008). The statistical analysis demonstrated the absence of bias due to different experimenters, so we aggregated our data.

Table 1. Percentages of acceptance of the request (buying Greetings cards in aid of a voluntary association)

Scenario used	Percentage of acceptance of the target-request (rates into brackets)
Classic communication	36% (18/50)
Disrupt phase only	42% (21/50)
Reframe phase only	34% (17/50)
Disrupt-then-reframe	62% (31/50)
Reframe-then-disrupt	46% (23/50)

In line with our expectations, as shown in Table 1, we observed a significant difference between the percentage of people approached using the DTR technique and those approached using a classic communication technique (respectively 31/50 vs. 18/50, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 6.76$, $p = 0.009$, $\Phi = 0.26$), using the disrupt phase only (respectively 31/50 vs. 21/50, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.01$, $p = 0.045$, $\Phi = 0.20$), and finally with the reframe phase only (respectively 31/50 vs. 17/50, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 7.85$, $p = 0.005$, $\Phi = 0.28$). Moreover, we were able to observe an effect from the order of the phases of the technique, as the use of the complete DTR technique was tendentially more effective than that of the reversed technique Reframe-Then-Disrupt (31/50 vs. 23/50, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 2.58$, $p = 0.109$).

Discussion

Our results allow us to conclude that people approached using the DTR technique are significantly more numerous in agreeing to a later request, in our case, a purchasing behaviour for a voluntary association. These results are also completely in line with those obtained in earlier research (Davis & Knowles, 1999), which concluded that the linking of the two phases of the technique was necessary for it to be effective. We can therefore conclude that this communication technique is effective in France. Giving a price in cents, and not in euros, really was an element perceived in this country as sufficiently strange and disruptive for it to be thought that the classic communication script had been interrupted. On the other hand, we expected a more marked difference between the probabilities of agreement to the request of the classic disrupt-then-reframe and the reframe-then-disrupt scripts. Our results only allow us to be cautious in making a conclusion to this effect. Nevertheless, this reframe-then-disrupt condition did not differ from conditions which called on only one of the two phases (disrupt

only or reframe only), nor from the classic communication situation, thus adding an additional argument in support of the greater effectiveness of the classic DTR technique. When obtaining something from someone is involved, a new technique may now be used by professionals or studied by French researchers: the disrupt-then-reframe.

In line with Kardes, Fennis, Hirt, Tormola, and Bullington (2007), we propose to interpret these effects in the light of the construal-level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; for a review, see Trope & Liberman, 2003). In our opinion, this theory appears like a possible way for future studies to on the one hand articulate the level of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 2012) and heuristic vs. systematic information processing (Chaiken, 1980), and on the other hand to explain the necessary linking of the two phases of the DTR technique. Just like the theory of action identification, Liberman and Trope's theory (1998) proposes that individuals form more or less abstract construals of actions that are more or less distant psychologically. Like levels of identification, these construals are hierarchized along a continuum, from high-level or abstract construals referring to the objectives and aims of the action, to low-level or concrete construals referring to the details of the action. They also refer to different ways of processing the information. When an individual perceives an action in an abstract fashion, they will have a tendency to process the information in an overall and de-contextualised manner, i.e. in a heuristic manner. Conversely, when the action is perceived at a more concrete level, the individual will have a tendency to process the information in a detailed manner, i.e. in a systematic manner. The introduction of a disruptive element into a communication script may allow a shift from an initial construal to a more concrete transitory construal. In fact, the individual will mobilise their cognitive resources to process this bizarre element and engage in systematic processing of this specific element. This transitory state of psychological instability makes the emergence of a new more abstract construal possible during the introduction of the persuasive element, which is the reframe. But at this state, the cognitive resources are fewer and lead to pass over important details, that's to say to an engagement in heuristic processing. This allows us to explain not only that the technique is solely effective when it consists of its two phases (disrupt and reframe), but also that the order of these phases may not be reversed.

Moreover, as the technique is effective in a French context, our results lean in favour of the DTR being transcultural, contrary to what has previously been observed with other compliance techniques. However, there remains for us a *sine qua non* condition for this transculturality, as the technique can only be effective when the disrupted communication script is adapted for the culture and language of the place where it is being used. It is this adaptation that in our opinion would enable the emergence of new construals that have meaning for the individual. So the DTR technique has until now been effectively operationalised in the countries of North America (United States), Western Europe (the Netherlands, France), and

also in Eastern Europe (Poland). However, the study by Cialdini et al. (1999) demonstrated that the probability of obtaining compliance behaviours was higher in the United States than in Poland. The authors explain their results in the light of the notions of *individualism,* which characterises American culture, and of *collectivism,* which characterises Polish culture (Hofstede, 1980, as cited in Cialdini et al., 1999). In the case of the DTR technique, these cultural differences do not seem to play a role. Future research would no doubt benefit from manipulating these notions in the manner of Cialdini et al. (1999), within the specific framework of the DTR, and from extending the study of the technique to other cultures.

Some limitations should be highlighted. We would doubtlessly have benefited from taking into account the familiarity of the situations proposed to the individuals being approached. Indeed, in our experiment, the experimenters presented themselves as belonging to a French Scout movement, a very well-known voluntary movement, in the same way that experimenters in earlier studies presented themselves as volunteers for a neighbourhood association (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Fennis et al., 2004). It could be thought that familiarity, a feeling of closeness with the people approaching us, would partly influence the results that we obtained. Several studies have already demonstrated that familiarity had a positive impact on judgements, persuasion, and compliance (Lee & Labroo, 2004; Mitchell & Valenzuela, 2005). In the same vein, Fennis et al. (2006) observe that the introduction of a familiar brand into the DTR technique significantly increases the behavioural compliance of the individuals in comparison with habitual communication scripts, here related to selling. In other words, when individuals are familiar with the brand for which the experimenter says they work, they are more inclined to buy items from this brand whatever the condition. This effect of familiarity will have to be controlled or manipulated in future studies in order to correctly identify the mechanisms and explanatory factors inherent in this type of communication situation, whatever the language or culture in which one is working. This may be all the more important as according to Schwartz and Clore (1983), this type of effect is said to be unconscious, and therefore goes beyond simple verbal communication.

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