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SELF-PRESENTATION AND LANGUAGE ABSTRACTION IN RECRUITMENT CONTEXT

The present research explicates how job applicants employ language abstraction to present themselves as a good or bad candidate. According to the LIB theory (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989), we tested the hypothesis that, with positive instruction (i.e., to be recruited), participants' responses would be more abstract with positive items and more concrete with negative items. Conversely, we expected that participants' responses would be more concrete with positive items and more abstract with negative ones when the instruction was negative (i.e., to not be recruited). Results of this experiment (N = 85 French participants) confirm our hypothesis and revealed a strong interaction effect between level of language abstraction and goal of self-presentation. Implications for linguistic bias effect and normative behavior in the interpersonal context of recruitment are discussed.

Keywords: language abstraction, personal recruitment, individual goal, interpersonal context

A lot of scholars in social psychology have investigated the many effects of language in different paradigms. The question about language is not only what a person talks about, but also how they talk. According to social psychologists, the dimension of abstraction provides a relevant framework for studying the role of language in many processes. The importance of abstraction level can be found in past research on linguistic abstraction in several domains such as law (Burguet, 2011; Schmid & Fiedler, 1996; Schmid, Fiedler, Englich, Ehrenberger, & Semin, 1996), media (Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, & Sommer, 2010), sport (Arcuri, Maass, & Portelli, 1993; Burguet & Girard, 2008; Maass, Corvino, & Arcuri, 1994), health care (Watson & Gallois, 2002), politics (Rubini & Sigall, 2002), or gender (Fiedler, Semin & Finkenauer, 1993). This effect of stylistically biased communication is the so-called linguistic intergroup bias (Maass et al., 1989; Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007), which describes a subtle language strategy that is used to positively differentiate between the ingroup and the outgroup. According to the LIB, ingroup members' positive behaviors and outgroup members' negative behaviors are described in relatively abstract terms. Conversely, ingroup members' negative behaviors and outgroup members' positive behaviors are described in relatively concrete terms. The LIB is largely based on the Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), which proposes four categories according to their level of abstraction: from descriptive action verbs (e.g., "Jim hits John"), the most concrete level, to adjectives (e.g., "Jim is violent"), the most abstract level. More recently, Carnaghi et al., (2008) added a more abstract level to the LCM with nouns (e.g., Jim is an aggressor). For the authors, abstract descriptions reveal more about the target and imply a higher perceived stability of the described behavior (Maass et al., 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1988). In other words, they cause stronger dispositional inferences (Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000). In contrast, concrete descriptions lead to the particularization of an event, which is produced in circumstantial reasons and not necessarily repeated several times.

Some studies have analyzed linguistic abstraction in participants' productions such as descriptions of positive/negative ingroup/outgroup behaviors (Maass & al., 1989). Results of the content's analysis (Burguet & Girard, 2008; Schmid & Fiedler, 1996) and experimentations have shown the effect of group power (Rubini, Moscatelli, Albarello, & Palmonari, 2007), gender (Rubini & Menegatti, 2014), group status (Shulman, Collins, & Clément, 2011) or goals (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Gil de Montes, Semin, & Valencia, 2003; Menegatti & Rubini, 2013). In general, positive behaviors performed by an ingroup member and negative behaviors performed by an outgroup member are described more abstractly than negative behaviors performed by an ingroup member and positive behaviors performed by an outgroup member. Other studies manipulated LIB as an independent variable and investigated

its impact on the target's perception (Douglas & Sutton, 2006; Gelman & Heyman, 1999) or its effect on group judgment (Assilaméhou, Lepastourel, & Testé, 2013; Burguet & Girard, 2011; Moscatelli, Prati & Rubini, 2019). Described with descriptive action verbs (i.e., concrete), a positive event is more attributed to the outgroup while the same event described with adjectives (i.e., abstract) is more attributed to the ingroup. An abundance of findings confirmed the robustness of this model, where language abstraction might be the cause or the consequence of discrimination.

Many social psychologists are interested in the self-presentation domain. They used dimensions like the Five Factor Model measured by questionnaires like Personality Inventory (NEO PI: Costa & McCrae, 1985; NEO PI-R: McCrae & Costa, 2006) or Alter Ego (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Perugini, 1993). Studies assess the influence of the social value between two dimensions of personality traits, social desirability (DS) and social utility (US), on targets' evaluations (Beauvois, 1995; Beauvois & Dubois, 2008; Cambon, 2004). Other researches show that recruitment can be subject to in-group favoritism (Marlow, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996) or stereotypes (Heilman, Martell, & Simon, 1988). Considering that few studies about language abstraction have been conducted in the self-presentation domain, the current research manipulated linguistic abstraction in the context of job selection. More precisely, we examined how applicants manage their self-presentation when they wish to be attractive or unattractive for a job. We predict that the language they use, especially the level of abstraction, may be different according to the instruction given. The domain of self-presentation has been used by authors to examine the role of language abstraction to create impressions of describers themselves. Results (Rubini & Sigall, 2002) showed that presenters used more abstract language when the audience was politically similar to them and when the goal was to be liked by the audience. Another study examined how hiring committees use language abstraction to explain their decision to hire a job applicant over the others (Rubini & Menegatti, 2008). These findings supported the effect of linguistic bias: Members of hiring committees described selected applicants with more abstract positive terms and more concrete negative terms.

If language abstraction is employed by decision makers to provide a good impression of hired applicants and a bad impression of the rejected ones, we think it will be the same for applicants in a self-presentation paradigm (Jellison & Green, 1981). The present study investigated the goals' effect on language used by applicants to present themselves.

Pre-Test Study

Before our experiment, we carried out a pre-test to check if abstract and concrete expressions were equivalent for each item.

Method

Participants

Participants were 61 French undergraduate students in communication (49 women and 12 men; $M = 19.22$, $SD = 1.47$).

Procedure and Measures

For all 24 items (12 positive, 12 negative), we presented the concrete expression to the participants in an open question. For each item, the participants had to indicate the most appropriate adjective corresponding to the sentence. For example, “A person who gives an order is ...”

This measure allowed us to choose the adjective which translates the best equivalent concrete item. For each expression, we selected the adjectives which were used the most by the judges.

Results

The inter judge consensus is relatively good because the participants attributed, for each item, the same adjective in a large proportion (lower level of consensus: 71%, higher level of consensus: 92%).

Table 1. Items According to Linguistic Abstraction and Valence

Positive		Negative	
Abstract	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete
intelligent	understand quickly	emotional	don't keep emotions under control
authoritarian	give orders	absent minded	act without thinking
active	act with energy	naïve	quick to believe
dynamic	act with dynamism	vulnerable	people destabilize you easily
hard-working	work easily	unstable	often change your mind
ambitious	meet the challenges	shy	do not take any decisions
pleasant	give pleasure	hypocritical	do not say what you think
open-minded	tolerate diversity of opinions	boastful	boast
friendly	please others	annoying	annoy others
endearing	touch others	pretentious	brag
honest	respect law	lying	tell lies
sincere	tell what you think	petty	pay attention to insignificant detail

The Present Research

The purpose of this research was to observe the level of language abstraction used by participants to introduce themselves in a context of professional recruitment. More particularly, they have to choose the most appropriate expression describing their personality, on a bi-dimensional scale measuring the abstraction level.

Experiment

This study focused on the conditions in which self-presentation instructions affected the choice of abstraction level in language for job applicants. The hypothesis tested in this experiment was that, with positive instruction (i.e., to be recruited), participants' responses would be more abstract with positive items and more concrete with negative items. Conversely, we expected that the participants' responses would be more concrete with positive items and more abstract with negative ones when the instruction was negative (i.e., to not be recruited).

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

Eighty-five French undergraduate students in communication (75 women, 10 men, $M = 20.30$; $SD = 2.15$) participated in this study. They were randomly assigned one of the two experimental conditions (positive instruction vs. negative instruction) with 24 items (12 positive and 12 negative).

Dependent Variable

Participants were asked to indicate, on a scale, the expression they prefer to present themselves. Participants' responses to this bi-dimensional scale were averaged to obtain a global score of language abstraction for positive items and a global score for negative items.

Independent Variables

The type of instructions (to be recruited vs. not to be recruited) had been manipulated in a between-subjects design. The valence of the questionnaire items (positive vs. negative) constituted the second variable, in a within-subjects design.

Procedure and Material

According to the nature of the instruction (positive vs negative), participants were given a sheet of paper and instructed as follows:

“This study is interested in personality tests used in recruitment and investigates the way participants introduce themselves in questionnaires. We ask you to answer as if you were a job applicant” ... “You are looking

for a job and you are registered on a web site “onejoboneclick.com,” which allows you to submit your CV to be contacted by professional recruiters. One day, you receive an e-mail from a recruiter who tells you that you have been selected with five other candidates. As you have committed yourself when registering on this website, you have to answer the personality questions. The job profile and the salary is very interesting (vs. not interesting at all) and you want the job (vs. you don’t want the job). You must answer this personality test in order to get this job (vs. not to get this job), giving the best image (vs. the worst image) of yourself possible.”

After reading the instructions, the participants were asked to complete a bi-dimensional 5-points scale from -2 = concrete language (“In your opinion, you would say that you express your true feelings”) to +2 = abstract language (“In your opinion, you would say that you are a sincere person”). Twenty-four items were completed by the participants (12 positive and 12 negative). To avoid a presentation order effect, we counter-balanced the presentation of the items and the limits of the scale.

Results and Discussion

We analyzed the data via a 2 (type of instructions: to get the job vs. not to get the job) x 2 (valence of items: positive vs. negative) between-subjects ANOVA. The measure of language abstraction was recoded: A positive score indicates abstractness and a negative score concreteness.

The analysis revealed an interaction effect $F(1, 83) = 23.699$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .125$ and supported our hypothesis. In the positive instruction context, participants employed positive items at a higher level of abstractness (.725) than in the negative instruction context (-.190). Conversely, they used negative items at a higher level of concreteness (-.391) in the positive goal context than in the negative one (.079).

One of the novelties of this study was to manipulate the valence of instructions and to employ positive vs. negative descriptions. Beyond the ecological experimental design, this makes it possible to observe differences according to the descriptions’ valence. Results of this experiment indicate that participants utilized linguistic strategies to describe themselves in order to be seen as a good or bad candidate. They confirmed the existence of a preference for abstract positive descriptions or concrete negative descriptions when instructions were to give the best possible image and inversely when instructions were negative. The aim of the research was to show that the use of abstraction matches a normative behavior in the interpersonal context of recruitment. These results conform with a study by Assilaméhou and Testé (2013), which shows that LIB is a tool that speakers employ to present themselves in order to convey a lot of information

about them. In other words, participants use abstraction language in a motivational manner. In this experiment, manipulation of the goal allowed us to confirm that, according to the instructions given, job applicants choose the descriptions they think most appropriate. With Douglas, Sutton and McGarty (2008, p 206), we can say that speakers “know what they do, but not entirely how they do it.” If such behaviors can be strategic, studies show that people are not quite aware that they utilize a certain level of abstraction when they present themselves. Job applicants use more or less abstraction because it conveys more or less stable qualities. Abstract descriptions like traits are usually more informative about the person than concrete descriptions (Maass et al., 1989) and participants seem to understand it well. Otherwise, we know that the more abstract an expression is, the more extreme its connotation. For example, saying that “Jim is aggressive” is more negative than “Jim gives a punch.” We can assume it is the reason also why candidates prefer the abstract item to reinforce the good or bad impression they want to convey.

These linguistic strategies have been frequently highlighted in intergroup context, by using the Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB). This research has demonstrated that such strategies can also be effective in an interpersonal context, in which job applicants tend to achieve an individual goal. The findings of Rubini and Menegatti (2008) indicate that not only do hiring committees use language abstraction to achieve collective goals but also to fulfil individual ones.

However, we are aware of limitations in this study in terms of generalizing our results. First of all, the participants are not real job seekers but students, placed in the situation of fictitious job seekers. Although they have already been interviewed for jobs or university applications and, therefore, know some of the normative expectations of such a situation, it would be more appropriate to experiment in real hiring situations in order to increase the ecological validity of the study.

Moreover, the language strategies for manipulating abstraction proposed here may seem far removed from the true nature of the recruitment context, in which the applicant must try to maximize his or her chances of being hired. It should be remembered that the experimental paradigm of this study concerns the way in which participants complete an online personality questionnaire. It is, therefore, not a conversational situation usually encountered during job interviews but rather a preliminary selection stage, via questionnaires, as can be seen on dedicated sites (for example, LinkedIn). In fact, the answers are much more standardized. This is why we recommend extending the manipulation of these language strategies to face-to-face communication contexts. It would then be interesting to see whether a candidate prefers to present their shortcomings in a more concrete way (“I can take a long time to complete a job”) and their qualities in a more abstract way (“I am hard-working”) when asked to describe themselves in front of a future employer. A content analysis of the answers given by the candidates would allow

us to assess the presence of these language strategies in the discourse and to generalize their use in usual social recruitment situations.

However, we are also aware that such a situation always takes place in a relatively artificial setting, where not everyone expresses themselves as they would in everyday life. The individual then organizes their speech in such a way as to respond favorably to the expectations of their future employer. Understanding this issue will lead to the implementation of the right language strategy. Thus, talking about oneself and one's skills using traits that induce stable personality characteristics means knowing how to adapt and correctly perceive what is normatively prescribed in such a situation in order to correspond as closely as possible to it.

Linguistic abstraction provides an indicator of the speaker's value as a good candidate and has been used to influence audience too. Furthermore, research has shown that linguistic abstraction can affect the perception of the person being described (Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000). Given that this contribution has focused on the linguistic strategies employed by applicants in the context of recruitment, it would be interesting for future research to test the effect of self-presentation with abstract vs. concrete items on hiring committees. We could then verify if we would find the biased linguistic effect in a different paradigm. It would be also useful to manipulate instructions so that the participants present a member of ingroup vs. outgroup rather than themselves.

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