On the different uses of linguistic abstractness: from LIB to LEB and beyond

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Abstract

Linguistic abstractness has been shown to mediate persuasive and attributional effects of communication. The linguistic intergroup bias (LIB) refers to the tendency to describe positive ingroup and negative outgroup behaviors more abstractly than negative ingroup and positive outgroup behavior. Recently, the LIB was shown to reflect to a large extent a linguistic expectancy bias (LEB). Abstract language need not have an ingroup-serving function, but may be used to communicate expected information in a concise and condensed manner. The present research shows that the reverse may also be true. When the interaction goal is not merely to convey information that is shared anyway because it is typical of the communication target but to transmit unshared information (known to the communicator but new to the recipient), then it may be necessary to express (explain, teach, interpret) unexpected ideas or deviant attitudes in abstract, interpretive terms. The joint operation of both principles was demonstrated within the same experimental task. In communications about East Germans, more abstract predicates were used in typically East German domains (LEB). However, more abstract terms were also used when messages deviated from the recipient's prior attitude. A conceptual framework is proposed to integrate these findings. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Although language is an essentially interpersonal, socially regulated aspect of behavior, and a major module of social intelligence, it was long neglected in social psychology. Most textbooks do not devote a chapter to language or verbal communication. Only recently this 'muteness', or lack of interest in language, is giving way to intriguing demonstrations that social knowledge is partly wired into language. Language *per se*—as a knowledge store and as a conversational rule system—can have a strong and regular influence on communication outcomes, above and beyond individual communicators' intention.

To illustrate this point, consider how simply adhering to word meaning and rules of language use can inadvertently foster sexist stereotypes. For example, the writer of a novel can use different words

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to describe the very same behavior shown by a man or a woman, just to meet the stylistic requirement to find best-matching words (e.g. referring to a 'desperate man' but to a 'crying woman'). More or less disparaging words may be used to describe female behaviors ('hysterical' versus 'emotional') in an attempt to tune a message to the expectations of the recipient, or audience. The motive to be humorous may lead communicators to tell sexist jokes, or a well-motivated attempt to communicate concisely rather than circumstantially may foster the use of abstract traits ('silly', 'uncertain') as opposed to specific verbs ('to laugh', 'to hesitate'). Although the choice of words is driven by a purely cooperative motive to establish common ground with communication partners, language use may serve to maintain, distribute, and even to reinforce a sexist stereotype.

LEXICAL MEANING AND RULES OF LANGUAGE USE

To understand how language influences social cognition and behavior, it is important to recognize two complementary aspects. On one hand, the *lexical meanings* attached to words—the basic units of language—are the major vehicles for categorizations, evaluations, and attributions. However, on the other hand, the allocation of words to persons and objects is not fully determined. There is considerable latitude for describing the same persons and things in different terms. Which terms are used in which situation depends on strategic *rules of language use*. For example, depending on whether the communication partner is adult, child or baby, a stranger or an insider, high or low in education, whether communication is oral or written, under time pressure or in a relaxed setting, whether it takes place in the office, in a pub, in the bedroom, or on the Internet, the chosen words (or higher-order units) are likely to differ greatly. Regardless of whether such strategic changes in language use serve an informative function (being understood, transmitting information) or a social function (maintaining conversation, getting along with others, achieving influence), the choice of particular words may solicit rich inferences in communication partners that can go way beyond the communicator's primary intent.

Most approaches to language and social cognition involve the interplay between the above two aspects, lexical meaning and rules of language use. Vallacher and Wegner's (1987) action identification theory is concerned with the rules or conditions under which people define their own and others' actions in high-level, identity-relevant terms or in low-level, situation-specific ways. Wicklund and colleagues (Wicklund, 1986; Wicklund & Braun, 1987), just like Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon's (1986) terror management theory, assume that people who are 'incomplete', uncertain, or threatened resort to static person descriptors in an attempt to re-establish control and predictability. Within Higgins' (1981) communication game approach, communicators were shown to adjust the evaluative tone and the concreteness of their words to their communication partners' needs. Still other approaches (Gidron, Koehler, & Tversky, 1993; Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986; Hastie & Park, 1986; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Semin & Fiedler, 1991) are concerned with the amount of information needed to justify the ascription of stereotypical trait terms.

The Linguistic Intergroup Bias

Perhaps the most influential paradigm for investigating the joint impact of lexical meaning and strategic language use on social judgments and stereotypes is the linguistic intergroup bias (LIB; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; Karpinski & Von Hippel, 1996; Webster, Kruglanski, & Pattison, 1997; Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999), which is the starting point of the present

research. With reference to Semin and Fiedler's (1988, 1991) linguistic category model (LCM), the LIB refers to the fact that the predicates (verbs and adjectives) used to describe people and their behavior can vary in abstractness, with abstract terms (adjectives, state verbs) carrying more stable and global information than concrete terms (action verbs). In general, an abstract predicate gives more significance and attributional weight to verbal statements than a concrete predicate. The LIB arises as communication rules motivate the use of different words in language about ingroups and outgroups, resulting in a systematic intergroup bias. When language users talk (or write) about their ingroup, their descriptions of positive behaviors tend to be more abstract than descriptions of negative behaviors. Conversely, when talking about outgroups, they tend to raise negative utterances to an abstract level while downplaying positive behaviors at more concrete levels. Convergent evidence for the LIB—as a language style that supports strong inferences about positive ingroup and negative outgroup attributes—comes from numerous studies using various types of groups (ethnic, regional, professional, gender, etc.) and response formats (free verbalization or multiple word choice). For an up-to-date review, the reader is referred to Maass (1999).

Again, the LIB illustrates the interplay of both aspects: (a) Rules of language use call for different abstractness levels in descriptions of ingroup and outgroups. (b) Because abstract and concrete words differ in their propensity to elicit internal attributions to traits and dispositions, ingroups and outgroups are affected by differentially elicited inferences. In this way, Whorfian (1956) and Gricean (1975) elements (i.e. lexical meaning and communication rules) jointly explain the influence of language on intergroup discrimination. Given that many stereotypes are acquired through communicated second-hand information, rather than direct contact, the importance of this influence should not be underestimated.

LIB or LEB?

The first plausible interpretation of the LIB was in terms of an ingroup-serving bias in line with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity approach. However, very soon, a slightly different interpretation was proposed, based on the merely informational distinction between expected and unexpected behaviors (cf. Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, & Sherman, 1992). Using abstract words for positive ingroup behaviors and for negative outgroup behaviors may not reflect a motive to favor the ingroup or to harm the outgroup, but a communication rule to describe abstractly what can be expected, and to describe in more concrete detail what is unexpected or unknown—much in line with Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity. After all, desirability (motivational) and expectedness (informational) are normally confounded. Most people most of the time hold more positive expectations about ingroups than outgroups.

Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, and Stahlberg (1995) used the following rationale to disentangle both factors. They asked participants from North and South Italy to describe North Italians and South Italians in different behavioral domains. They reasoned that even though North Italians will expect that North Italians exhibit more positive attributes than Southerners, they will nevertheless concede that the ingroup is more negative than the outgroup on at least some exceptional attributes. In fact, pretesting revealed that such exceptional attributes exist. There was general consensus that North Italians have their assets (industriousness, emancipation) and their deficits (materialism, intolerance), just like South Italians have positive (hospitality, warmth/friendliness) as well as negative attributes (sexism, intrusiveness). Based on these pretested attribute dimensions, it was then found that North Italians' tendency to describe their own assets and the South Italians' deficits abstractly only held for expected domains (e.g. industriousness and sexism). In contrast, for those exceptional trait dimensions for which negative ingroup behaviors and positive outgroup behaviors were expected, a reversal was obtained. Group-serving but unexpected statements were formulated in *less* abstract terms.

Thus, the LIB ('linguistic intergroup bias') may have been a misnomer; it may be more appropriate to refer to a LEB ('linguistic expectancy bias'). Although an ingroup-serving component may of course contribute to the bias (cf. Maass et al., 1995), subsequent research provided further support for expectedness as the major factor (Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000). Despite such growing evidence for a LEB, its theoretical status is not quite clear. One problem is that it arose as an *ad-hoc* account of an empirical pattern originally understood as a LIB. Although plausible, the LEB account is not derived from a well-established communication law that expected information is generally communicated abstractly.

Is There an Anti-LEB as Well?

The disputability of this *ad-hoc* assumption is highlighted by the fact that anecdotal and experimental evidence exists to the contrary. Sometimes abstract, attributionally strong language is used to lend weight to novel and unexpected things. This is particularly so when the focus is not merely on *reporting* atypical things but on *explaining* and helping a communication partner to interpret and understand something unexpected or new (e.g. 'zero-level communication'). For example, when warning a naive person that a stranger is dangerous, or when writing a review about an unknown applicant's abilities, communicators would not remain at a low level of concrete, merely descriptive language. Rather, they presumably use plenty of interpretive, dispositional terms that entail attributional inferences and evaluations, although, or just because, the information they convey is new and unexpected for the recipient.

The assumption of an unqualified positive correlation between expectedness and abstractness is also at variance with a notable theory advanced by Wicklund and colleagues (Wicklund, 1986; Wicklund & Braun, 1987, 1990). Accordingly, novices who are unexperienced or 'incomplete' in a knowledge domain prefer abstract, trait-like person descriptors. For instance, students of law who are still in the process of learning about the profession of lawyers would more often refer to static, trait-like properties of lawyers than experienced professionals (serving a 'symbolic self-completion' function).

Thus, everyday experience as well as experimental evidence suggests that the communication rule proposed to explain the LEB—that abstract terms are for expected rather than unexpected information—may not be universal, or require refinement.

Different Types of Expectedness

Perhaps, at a more refined level of analysis, different aspects of expectedness may call for different communication rules. In the present investigation, we introduce an operational distinction between two aspects of expectedness that is related to the aforementioned distinction of reporting and explaining. This can be illustrated as follows. Given a *communicator C* wants to convey information about a *target person T* to a *recipient R*. One type of expectedness arises when the behaviors being communicated vary in typicality for the target person T. In this case, descriptions of expected or schema-consistent behaviors allow for more abstractness than reports of unexpected or schema-inconsistent behaviors. In the extreme case, behaviors may be so strange that communicator C has no choice but to resort to purely descriptive language, because no appropriate abstract terms can be selected if understanding is lacking. This operational definition of expectedness, which refers to the fit between behaviors and prior knowledge about the target T and which appears to underlie most LEB experiments, implies common ground (Clark, 1985) shared by communicators (C) and recipients (R)

and can thus be termed *CG-expectedness*.[1] Both C and R share the appraisal of T's behavior as expected or unexpected.

A different situation exists when C not merely *reports* but *explains* T's behavior to R. There is a discrepancy between C and R such that R does not know or understand part of the information that C already knows or understands. C's communication task is to help R to interpret and understand T's behaviors. Part of this task is to provide R with suitable interpretations of T's behavior, which calls for abstract, interpretive terms (e.g., traits and states that go beyond concrete factual reports). In this asymmetric situation, we are concerned with *R-expectedness*, which is defined relative to the recipient R's prior knowledge, or beliefs and attitudes. Note that one special case of explaining is convincing. R may not be fully ignorant but may simply not believe in particular attributes of T's. Then C's explanation task amounts to influencing R's beliefs or attitudes. Like explaining and interpreting, influencing R's opinions may also call for strong, trait-like descriptors and meaningful attributions.

We do not claim that the above distinction of two sources of expectancies is exhaustive. Different communication settings may create still other types of expectancies. Nevertheless, the two possibilities contrasted in the present investigation should be sufficient to highlight that lexical meanings and communication rules interact in more complex and flexible ways than suggested in previous LIB and LEB research. Specifically, we attempt to demonstrate two opposite findings within the same communications elicited in the same experimental setting: Abstractness should increase with CG-expectedness (i.e. common ground between C and R concerning T's behaviors) but decrease with R-expectedness (i.e. similar knowledge level or opinions in R as in C). Specifically, communicators should use more abstract terms when reporting typical, CG-expected behaviors than when reporting atypical, CG-unexpected behaviors. At the same time, however, abstractness should be higher for R-unexpected than for R-expected information when the task entails explaining something new to R.

METHOD

Overview and Design

The purpose of this experiment was to demonstrate both a LEB and an 'Anti-LEB' within the same experimental design. Both factors, CG-expectedness and R-expectedness, were manipulated within participants, to rule out confounds and interactions with different participants' prior expectancies. All participants were asked to write up a message about East German people for a Swede named Eskil Onshagen. Thus, participants were asked to take the communicator role C, Eskil was the recipient R, and East German people were the target of communication, T.[2] To manipulate CG-expectedness, participants were instructed to address eight different topics referring to four typical and four atypical attributes of East German people. A normal LEB could be predicted such that more abstract language should be used in typical than atypical domains. R-expectedness was operationalized in terms of attitudinal consistency. The recipient Eskil was introduced as a person who either liked or disliked

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[1]Because stereotypes emerge as speakers and listeners share the same expectancies, it should be obvious that common ground is particularly evident in the field of social stereotypes. But tuning the levels of abstractness is not the only possible way of establishing common ground. Other aspects may contribute to finding common ground, such as evaluative statements, nonverbal behavior, clothing style, etc.

[2]Originally, we used slightly different cover stories about Eskil who was said to have spent either an entire year or only a few conference days in East Germany. This variation of prior recipient knowledge did not have any effect on dependent variables and will thus be ignored.

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East Germans, and the eight topics of communication included desirable aspects (e.g. sense of community) as well as undesirable aspects (e.g. dealing with foreigners). To explain attitude-inconsistent aspects of East Germans' behavior to Eskil might require more abstract, interpretive terms than to explain what is already in line with Eskil's prior attitude.

This resulted in a 2 (Recipient Attitude toward East Germans: positive versus negative) $\times$ 2 (Typicality of domains: typical versus atypical) $\times$ 2 (Valence of domain: positive versus negative) factorial design in which the last two factors were varied within participants.

Participants

Seventy-five students of the Universities of Heidelberg and Trier took part in the experiment. They received 7 DM (approximately €3.50) for their participation.

Materials

Participants received a booklet ostensibly compiled by a Swede called Eskil Onshagen. On the first page he introduced himself as a Swedish ethnology graduate student interested in habits and characteristics of East Germans. Within the introduction he asked participants to answer several questions for his diploma thesis concerning East Germans. In order to create a personal atmosphere and strengthen the relationship between the participant and the recipient of their communication, the booklet included a grayscale photograph of the fictitious recipient, Eskil Onshagen. Integrated in his introduction was the between-participants manipulation of Eskil's attitude towards East German people (positive versus negative). Eskil revealed his personal attitude towards East Germans by referring vaguely, either positively or negatively, to attributes of East Germans that he had encountered during his visit or stay and that were not described in greater detail. To make his attitude more explicit, Eskil stated that due to his personal experience he had come to 'embosom' or 'not really embosom' East Germans in general. The recipient Eskil Onshagen (R) was intentionally chosen to be a foreigner, in order to preclude tactical or censored communication that might distort an intra-German discourse of East–West affairs. Note that in this task context, R was neither an ingroup nor an outgroup member. Moreover, using a foreigner for R implies that the communication is not confined to merely reporting shared information but may also include explaining information formerly unknown to R.

Additionally, the booklet contained several biographical questions, the central part with the eight topics or stereotype domains, and two questions on participants' personal attitudes towards East Germans. Pretesting of West German students had yielded eight topics, or content domains, of the stereotype of East Germans. Half of these topics were positive in valence, the other half were negative. Positive content domains were sense of community, dealing with fellow citizens, family/partnership, and dealing with deprivations, whereas negative content domains were attitude to work, dealing with foreigners, satisfaction with life, and relation to former German Democratic Republic. Domain Valence, thus, constituted the first repeated-measures factor.

Participants were asked to write down their impressions of East Germans in all content domains, preferably in elementary sentences. The instruction, written from Eskil's perspective in the first person, read as follows: 'I would like to learn from you which typical behaviors or properties East Germans show; for other domains I am interested in atypical behaviors or properties. Sometimes the answers might be difficult. Nevertheless I would like you to indicate what seems to be most appropriate answers. Please use several complete sentences to convey your opinion.'

Participants were asked to list typical East German behaviors or characteristics in half of the content domains and atypical behaviors or characteristics in the other half. Altogether, the communication encompassed two blocks, one of four typical and one block of four atypical domains. Within each subset of four, two were positive and two were negative in valence, according to the pretest, so that the Domain Valence and Typicality factors were crossed. Furthermore, the order of positive and negative domains within each block of four typical (atypical) domains was balanced. Half of the participants worked on the typical topics before the atypical topics, whereas the reverse order was used for the other half.

Only after handing in the questionnaire to the experimenter, participants were informed about the cover story via an information sheet. A manipulation check for Eskil's alleged attitude towards East Germans (1 = negative, 7 = positive) followed. The manipulation check was administered after debriefing to avoid demands and suspicion. Ethical problems involved in the deception were discussed and care was taken to give participants full insight.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to the four conditions. They were all run in individual sessions. Three participants had to be excluded from data analyses because they turned out to be East Germans.

Participants were told that the current research was part of a Swedish ethnology student's thesis that was coordinated by the University of Stockholm but conducted by ethnology departments of German universities. They were also informed that they would be asked to fill out a questionnaire about several issues on which the experimenter did not have more detailed knowledge because he was only conducting the research on behalf of Eskil Onshagen. During the entire session, the experimenter tried to appear rather uninvolved to support the assumption that all questionnaire responses were addressed at Eskil Onshagen, rather than the experimenter. After reading Eskil's instructions and completing all questions, participants were thanked, debriefed, handed out their rewards, and dismissed. The whole session took approximately 30 minutes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coding

All verbal descriptions were segmented at the proposition or elementary sentence level. As in previous studies (Fiedler, Semin, & Koppetsch, 1991; Semin & Fiedler, 1989; Schmid & Fiedler, 1998), each sentence was coded by three independent coders for two dependent variables: sentence valence (-1 = negative, 0 = neutral, $+1$ = positive) and linguistic abstractness, using a four-level code for the four word classes (of increasing abstractness) of the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988):

1 = Descriptive Action Verbs (DAV): tickle, telephone, smile, shake hands
2 = Interpretive Action Verbs (IAV): help, hinder, insult, delights
3 = State Verbs (SV): admire, hate, abhor, like
4 = Adjectives (ADJ): gentle, aggressive, courageous, mean

Specific coding rules (Schmid, Fiedler, & Semin, 'Coding rules for the Linguistic Category Model', unpublished manuscript, 2001) are available from the authors. Some minor variations of the coding rules had to be introduced in order to deal with the peculiarities of the present study. As participants

sometimes ignored precise instructions, such as 'answer in whole sentences' or 'write down something (a) typical', it was necessary to take into account only those sentences that conformed with the experimental prescriptions. Not only sentences with East Germans as subject were coded, but any proposition referring to East Germans was included. The inter-coder agreement, determined by average intraclass-correlations, amounts to $r = 0.92$ and $r = 0.92$, for abstractness and valence, respectively. Within each participant, we calculated the mean abstractness level (on the 1 to 4 scale) and the mean valence rating (on the scale ranging from -1 to $+1$) across all sentences belonging to the same condition for the data analysis (e.g. all sentences referring to typical versus atypical topics).

Hypotheses

To recapitulate the expectations guiding the present research, the common-ground principle implies that a comparison of typical and atypical behavior descriptions should produce the well-known LEB effect, with more abstract words chosen for typical than for atypical descriptions. This should be evident in a main effect for the impact of the typicality factor on abstractness scores. Moreover, provided that participants comply with the typicality instruction, this typicality main effect should not be qualified by the other factors, domain valence and the recipient's prior expectancy. However, with respect to R-expectancy, abstractness scores should also reflect an interaction of the valence of domains with Eskil's attitude. More specifically, when the valence of domain is incongruent with Eskil's attitude, that is, when bridging an attitudinal gap becomes part of the communication task, participants should have to use more abstract, high-implication words to convey something new or discrepant about East Germans. When, however, the valence of the domain is congruent with Eskil's attitude, no strong words are needed and abstractness scores can therefore be expected to be lower as congruent conditions represent common ground.

Regarding the other dependent variable, sentence valence, a main effect of Domain Valence could of course be predicted, affording a check on the valence manipulation based on pilot testing. Besides, we tentatively expected a significant main effect of receiver attitude, in that communications directed at a recipient with a favorable attitude towards East Germany should tend to be more positive than communications directed at a recipient who dislikes East Germans. Such a motivational effect on the evaluative tone of the communication, which can be derived from Zajonc's (1960) notion of cognitive tuning, would exist independently of the impact on abstractness of common ground and social influence attempts, thus helping to set the present findings apart from other effects (such as LIB or cognitive tuning).

Manipulation Check

The manipulation of Eskil's attitude towards East Germans was clearly recognized, resulting in markedly diverging attitude rating of 5.78 for the Positive-Attitude Condition as compared with 1.72 for the Negative-Attitude Condition ($d = 3.33$), on the 7-point scale, $t(70) = 14.2$, $p < 0.001$.

Valence of Communication

Turning to the two dependent measures resulting from the coding of the verbal data, the evaluative tone of sentences affords a further manipulation check for the Domain Valence factor. Indeed, the mean valence of coded sentences was significantly higher for Content Domains selected to suggest positive attributes of East Germans (0.20) than for negative Content Domains (-0.26). In a two-

factorial Domain Valence × Recipient Attitude ANOVA, this difference is reflected in a huge Domain Valence main effect, $F(1, 70) = 53.30$, $p < 0.001$.

The only other significant finding in the analysis of valence scores reflects a cognitive-tuning effect. Messages were more positive ($+0.08$) when the recipient was supposed to have a positive attitude than when the recipient attitude was negative (-0.13), resulting in a Recipient Attitude main effect, $F(1, 70) = 6.56$, $p < 0.013$. Apparently, the motive to please the communication partner, or to attune the message to his affective perspective, was strong enough to moderate the communicators' own evaluative tone. Given this demonstration that participants were obviously motivated to bias their verbal messages towards the recipient's attitude, the question is whether this motivational factor also influenced the level of abstractness.

Abstractness of Communication

The same two-factorial ANOVA (as for valence scores) conducted on the 72 participants' abstractness scores did not indicate such a main effect of Recipient Attitude, $F(1, 68) < 1$.[3] Thus, the motive to please Eskil, or to create a desired impression, did not influence the abstractness of communications. Within the present task setting, then, there is no evidence for motivational influences on abstractness.

However, in a Typicality × Recipient Attitude ANOVA[4] a highly significant main effect for typicality, $F(1, 61) = 20.01$, $p < 0.001$, reflects a LEB stronger than in previous studies. Descriptions of typical behaviors (3.05) were substantially more abstract than descriptions of atypical behaviors (2.68). This finding (see Figure 1) lends support to the impact of the common-ground principle underlying CG-expectedness. Accordingly, more abstract words were used when shared stereotypical knowledge provided common ground than when atypical information required more specific descriptions.

Having corroborated the importance of common ground, in line with previous LEB findings, the crucial question that remains to be addressed is whether deviating expectancies held by R also affect the abstractness of language use. According to this principle of R-expectedness, a different aspect of expectedness—namely, whether messages diverge from R's prior attitude, or status quo—should have a reverse effect on abstractness. A message that diverges from the recipient's prior perspective requires
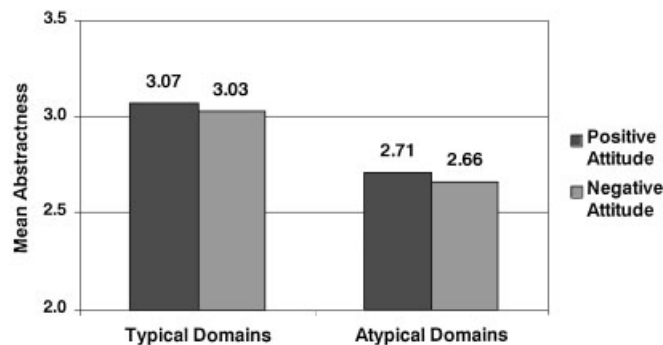

Figure 1. Mean abstractness level as a function of typicality and recipient attitude

[3]Since mean abstractness and mean sentence valence where coded and analyzed separately, the degrees of freedom for abstractness ($df = 68$) and sentence valence ($df = 70$) differed slightly, due to independent missing values.
[4]As missing data decreased degrees of freedom, a three-factorial Typicality × Domain Valence × Attitude ANOVA had to be replaced by two-factorial ANOVAs for the separate calculation of Typicality and Domain Valence effects. In order to do so, we averaged the conditions of the respective collapsed factor.
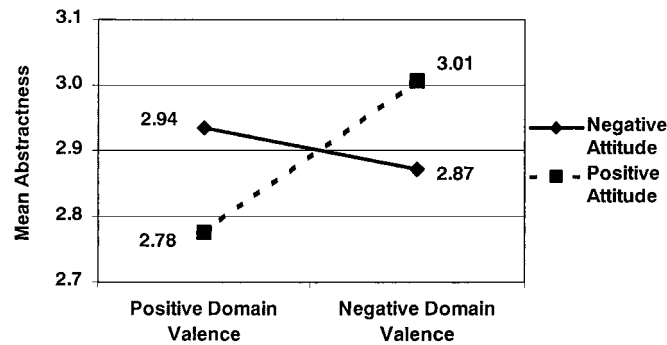
Figure 2.   Mean abstractness level as a function of recipient attitude and the positive versus negative valence of the domain

stronger, high implication words than a message that merely reinstates R's current point of view. As abstract, interpretive words are needed to convey strong implications, this means that discrepant, attitude-incongruent statements have to be more abstract than attitude-congruent statements.

In fact, the Recipient Attitude × Domain Valence interaction, $F(1, 68) = 4.78$, $p < 0.05$, as illustrated in Figure 2, is consistent with this line of reasoning. When conversing about negative domains, participants addressed Eskil in more abstract terms when his attitude was positive rather than negative. In contrast, for positive domains, participants used more abstract words when the recipient's attitude was negative rather than positive. In other words, more abstract words were required to attain a communicative influence in a communication partner with a discrepant attitude. As participants had to transmit unexpected information (from Eskil's attitudinal point of view), this discrepancy could only be bridged by interpretive high-implication terms. In contrast, less abstractness was required when the communication merely reinstated an attitude already held by the recipient and underlined behaviors that were expected from Eskil's viewpoint in terms of R-expectedness.

Could this pattern be explained, alternatively, as a normal LEB? One might conjecture that most West German participants themselves held negative attitudes towards East German targets, who constitute an outgroup as it were. Negative behavior can then be assumed to be expected and positive behaviors unexpected. A normal LEB could thus explain the more abstract language used to describe negative (i.e. expected) than positive (i.e. unexpected) behaviors *when* the recipient's attitude is positive (see Figure 2). However, such an alternative explanation in terms of a normal LEB does not work when the recipient attitude is negative. To explain the entire pattern, it is again necessary to take R-expectedness (i.e. R's attitude) in account, in addition to CG-expectedness. Furthermore, such an attempt to construct an alternative explanation based on a normal LEB presupposes generally negative attitudes of West German participants. There is no support for this premise as the average attitude is even slightly positive ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.2$ on a scale from 1 = negative to 7 = positive). Moreover, the interaction depicted in Figure 2 is not due to participants holding a negative attitude but, if anything, more pronounced for participants holding a positive attitude of East Germans. We refrain from analyzing these subgroup differences more closely, however, because communicator attributes were confounded with the manipulated attitude attributed to Eskil.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This article began with a deliberate attempt to locate and motivate the present study in a historical overview of recent research on language and social cognition. After a long period of language neglect

in social psychology, some promising theory developments have recently shown that lexical knowledge and rules of language use can contribute a lot to our understanding of social-cognitive phenomena, such as attribution (Fiedler & Semin, 1992), stereotyping (Hamilton et al., 1992; Maass, 1999), and intergroup affairs (Fiedler & Schmid, 2001; Maass, 1999). However, although the findings resulting from these approaches are intriguing and relevant to practical issues, theoretical explanations were often based on *ad-hoc* interpretations of plausible empirical results rather than a comprehensive theory of the language-cognition interface.

This basically empiristic status of theorizing was illustrated with reference to the linguistic intergroup bias (LIB) and its recent reframing as a linguistic expectancy bias (LEB). The original studies of this intriguing phenomenon had suggested a motivational explanation; after all, raising descriptions of positive ingroup and negative outgroup behaviors to abstract language levels serves to enhance the ingroup. Although plausible and within the general tone of the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this interpretation had to be qualified in the light of subsequent studies. What had appeared to be an ingroup-serving bias was mainly, or to a considerable extent, an expectancy bias. Language users can resort to abstract words to express expected information and only have to go into concrete details when the information to be communicated is unexpected. Because most people expect positive ingroup and negative outgroup behaviors, expectedness is confounded with an ingroup-serving tendency, and the original LIB may to an unknown degree reflect a LEB.

We reasoned that the LEB may itself represent an empirical ad-hoc generalization of intriguing findings, in the absence of an explicit theory linking expectedness to abstractness. Although it seems perfectly correct to assume that expected things can be expressed abstractly whereas unexpected things must be explained in detail—consistent with Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity—upon reflection this does not seem to tell the whole story. There are good reasons to believe in the opposite as well. Sometimes, we need to use strong and abstract words such as traits to persuade someone of a new belief not formerly held; conversely, we refrain from strong and abstract words when the discussion partner already holds the position advanced in the communication. For instance, when writing a personal review to convince a personnel manager of an applicant's skills and to induce a positive impression of that applicant, more abstract trait words are required than when the personnel manager already holds a very positive impression.

Both assumptions need not contradict each other. They may coexist within a refined theory of language use. As communication can serve different functions—merely reporting something shared by C and R or explaining something known to C but unknown to R—different types of expectedness call for differential use of abstract language. With regard to CG-expectedness, abstract language can render communications short and economical, helping C to get rid of many unnecessary details when there is common ground. But with regard to R-expectedness, abstract words also carry more weight and interpretive meaning than concrete words, thus supporting C's task to explain something new to R. Both functions make sense within the same communication rule, namely, Grice's maxim of quantity—to avoid being redundant but to be as informative as necessary.

In the present experiment, we obtained supporting evidence for both predictions, or functions of abstractness, within the same communication task. On the one hand, communications about people from East Germany were more abstract for behaviors that were typical of East Germany than for atypical behaviors. This finding corresponds to the LEB and the notion that typical or CG-expected things can be expressed in abstract terms. On the other hand, we also found that more abstract, high-influence words were used when the communication task entailed conveying R-unexpected opinions that deviated from the recipient's attitude towards East Germans. Thus, when communicating positive information to a recipient holding a negative attitude or negative information to a recipient holding a positive attitude, more abstract words were required than when the message was congruent with the

recipient's prior attitude.[5] To repeat, both effects are not incompatible but combine additively. Using different abstractness levels for typical and atypical behavioral domains (CG-extectedness) leaves sufficient latitude for language users to modulate their language use strategically, as a function of the recipient's attitude (R-expectedness).

The two opposite variants of expectedness effects were both independent of a cognitive-tuning effect (McCann & Higgins, 1992; Zajonc, 1960) as manifested in the valence of verbal descriptions. More positive connotations and less negative connotations were used when the recipient's alleged attitude towards East Germans was positive than when his attitude was negative. However, this motivational bias was independent from the impact of expectedness on abstractness of language— further corroborating the interpretation that the expectedness influence is not primarily motivational.

Altogether, we believe that the findings reported here suggest a further step towards a more comprehensive theory of language use that is sorely needed to understand the interplay of such intriguing phenomena as the LIB, the LEB or the cognitive-tuning effect. As we have seen, abstract language may subserve different functions, depending on whether the current communication goal is dominated by common ground or by strategies to adapt to recipients' prior knowledge or opinions. Future research may figure out still other functions. In any case, an important part of the present article's message is that supplementing the exciting empirical findings with a comprehensive theoretical basis could greatly benefit the recently flourishing research on language and social cognition.

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[5]An intriguing task for future research would be to investigate how recipients respond to appropriate and to inflated abstractness used to convey discrepant attitudes. A related question is how bystanders, or witnesses of communication, react to variation in abstractness.

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