Attitude change as a function of the number of words in which thoughts are expressed

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ABSTRACT

This research examines whether varying the number of words in which thoughts are expressed can influence subsequent evaluations. Across six studies, keeping the number of thoughts constant, we tested to what extent the length of the thoughts, the personal importance of the topic, and the extent of practice in short versus long thought expression influenced attitude change. In the first two studies, expressing thoughts in one word (vs. many words) led to less thought use when the topic was high in importance (Experiment 1) but to more thought use when topic was low in importance (Experiment 2). In a third study, the number of words used was manipulated along with the perceived importance of the experimental task. As predicted, expressing thoughts was perceived to be easier with one vs. many words when the task was low in importance but the opposite held when it was high in importance. In Experiment 4, attitudes were more influenced by thoughts when one word was used in a task that was framed to low importance task but many words were used on the task framed with high importance. Experiment 5 included a direct manipulation of ease and extended these results from a motivational framework to an ability setting by using a paradigm in which familiarity (based on prior training) interacted with thought length to affect attitudes. A final study replicated the key effect with more real-world materials, and extended the contribution from an experimental approach to testing process to a measurement approach to mediation.

Language affects social influence, with some ways of expressing arguments being more effective than others in convincing people (e.g., Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005; Holtgraves, 2010; Smith & Shaffer, 1995; see Petty & Briñol, 2015; Petty & Wegener, 1998, for reviews). Importantly, so far there has not been much research examining the potential impact on persuasion of the verbosity of one's thoughts as indexed by the number of words in which they are expressed. Yet, there are various situations in daily life where the number of words that can be used to express oneself are constrained in some way. A salient example for academics concerns journal submissions where there are restrictions that different journals have with respect to the length of abstracts or the word length of titles or articles. Indeed, many journals ask authors to identify their research using just five single key words. Some newspapers have limits on letters to the editor or on opinion pieces. Forms that we fill out on the internet can specify a maximum word or character length. Sometimes ideas need to be tagged or tweeted using a limited number of characters. Does encouraging expression of thoughts in shorter versus longer formats make a difference when it comes to

one's attitudes? Although research has examined the number of arguments presented (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) which is often confounded with number of words, in the current research our aim is to vary thought length holding the number of distinct ideas or arguments constant. Furthermore, although most prior research has focused on variations of arguments presented by others, the current research examines thoughts or arguments generated by the self.

Specifically, in the present research we propose that whether a given thought is expressed in one or many words can influence self-persuasion by affecting thought usage. Thus, the main objective of the current line of research is to examine a new language variable in persuasion: the length of a thought or the number of words used to express one's thoughts. We tested the importance of this novel variable examining the impact of these thoughts on attitudes. We examine both thoughts that are generated in response to message and those that are freely generated in the absence of a message.

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1. Persuasion as a function of thoughts

Research on persuasion suggests that persuasive messages can influence people's attitudes through both thoughtful and non-thoughtful routes (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When persuasion is thoughtful, attitudes depend on the thoughts people generate to messages or message topics. Although most work on persuasion focuses on messages that originate from other people, messages that people generate themselves can also be quite effective in producing attitude change (e.g., Briñol, McCaslin, & Petty, 2012). The persuasive effect of self-generated messages was shown in early research on role-playing. This literature demonstrated that individuals who generate arguments through role-playing (e.g., following instructions to convince a friend to quit smoking) are more persuaded than those who receive the same information passively (e.g., Janis & King, 1954). In this paradigm, active generation of a message was shown to be a successful strategy for producing attitude change in the direction of the self-generated arguments (Cialdini & Petty, 1981; Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983; Watts, 1967). This classic self-persuasion research shows that attitudes can change even without the explicit goal of changing the self. Similarly, the present research deals with the unintended persuasive consequences of generating thoughts on an issue.

The cognitive response approach to persuasion, as originally outlined by Greenwald (1968), holds that messages from others can be successful or not in producing attitude change depending on the thoughts that people generate to the message (for a comprehensive review, see Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981). This view essentially argues that people are persuaded (or resist persuasion) by virtue of their own thoughts rather than by learning the message per se, as had been argued by earlier learning theories (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). According to the elaboration likelihood model, the cognitive response approach operates primarily when people are motivated and able to generate thoughts about the persuasive message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In such circumstances, persuasive appeals that elicit thoughts that are primarily favorable toward a particular recommendation produce agreement (e.g., "if that new laundry detergent makes my clothes smell fresh, I'll be more popular"), whereas appeals that elicit thoughts that are primarily unfavorable toward the recommendation produce disagreement regardless of whether the message content is learned. According to this approach, then, virtually all high elaboration attitude change is ultimately self-persuasion in that even external messages are influential primarily because of the idiosyncratic favorable or unfavorable thoughts people have to the messages.

The present research examines thoughts generated in response to a persuasive message as well as thoughts generated when no message is presented. In each case, the question is whether varying the number of words in which people express their thoughts can influence the extent of persuasion. The first question one could ask would be: Which is more effective in producing persuasion – thoughts expressed with many words or using just one word? And, secondarily, why would thought length matter? In an initial investigation of thought length and persuasion, in order to have a reasonably impactful independent variable, we focused on using just one word to express an idea versus as many words as participants could generate. Before getting to the research, however, we outline why using either one or many words might be superior for persuasion.

2. Why multiple words could lead to more persuasive impact than one word

One could argue that it might generally be more effective to express thoughts using multiple words than to express thoughts using a single word. For example, people might put more effort into expressing thoughts when many words are needed. Among other things, this could be because the attention required for the construction of a coherent narrative, consideration of grammatical choices, and linkage of

sentences. If people put more effort into a thought task when it requires many words rather than a single word, this could increase the impact of the thoughts generated (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Briñol et al., 2012; Festinger & Carsmith, 1959). Another reason people might be more influenced by their thoughts when they are expressed in many versus a single word is that people often use length and amount as a signal of value (e.g., numerosity heuristic, Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Thus, people might reason that the longer the thoughts look, the more valuable they are.

Finally, because people are more familiar or practiced with expressing their thoughts in multiple words rather than a single word, this could make it be easier to do (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). As much prior research has shown, numerous variables associated with ease tend to make thoughts more impactful (Schwarz et al., 1991). For example, thoughts are used more when they are written in an easy to read font than a difficult one (Briñol, Petty, & Tormala, 2006) or when written with the dominant rather than the non-dominant hand (Briñol & Petty, 2003). Of course, it is likely that expressing thoughts in multiple words would be especially easy in situations for which people have more practice using many words such as when expressing thoughts on high relative to low importance topics and tasks. If the social norm (based on people's prior experience) was that one word is the best way to express thoughts that matter the most, then it could be more difficult (rather than easier) to come up with many words in these situations.

3. Why one word could lead to more persuasive impact than multiple words

Alternatively, one could argue that using a single word to express a thought could generally render those thoughts more impactful than using many words. One reason for this is that one word might convey a different meaning than many words. For example, expressing thoughts in one word might require more extreme terminology whereas using many words allows for moderation and nuance in expressing ideas (see Craig & Blankenship, 2011, for a review on linguistic extremity and persuasion). Alternatively, people might use more abstract and global terms when using one word than many. When using many words, people have more opportunity to include more concrete terms and specifications. If global language has more breadth, it might be more encompassing and appealing than the narrower and concrete implications of using many words. Furthermore, when people elaborate and invest significant amounts of time in expressing emotional thoughts (e.g., presumably using more words) the subsequent impact of those thoughts on judgments is sometimes attenuated either because the listed thoughts are accompanied by additional insights (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) or because they are accompanied by additional unwanted thoughts and ruminations (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Tormala, Falces, Briñol, & Petty, 2007).

Extremity, abstraction, and lower chances of unwanted thoughts are not the only possible reasons that using one (vs. many) words could be more persuasive when expressing thoughts. Ease is another reason. That is, as noted above, it is possible that at least in some situations, it may be easier to generate thoughts in one (vs. many) words. Indeed, in the initial line of work on ease of thought generation Schwarz et al. (1991) found that when participants were asked to rate their own assertiveness after generating relatively few (6) or many (12) examples of their own assertive behavior, the former led to greater ratings of assertiveness. In this now classic study, Schwarz and colleagues reasoned that people considered not only the content of thoughts that came to mind but also the ease with which the thoughts could be retrieved from memory, with few always being easier than many (see also Tormala, Petty, & Briñol, 2002; Tormala et al., 2007, for examples relevant to persuasion). Just as it is easier for people to generate fewer arguments, it may also be easier for them to express their thoughts in fewer words and because of this, the impact of thoughts expressed in one versus many words could be