



## Case Report

It takes time (not money) to understand: Money reduces attentiveness to common ground in communication<sup>☆</sup>Leonie Reutner, Rainer Greifeneder<sup>\*</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Communication is a central part of social life. Successful communication requires going beyond the semantic meaning of words by being attentive to the interaction's common ground, that is, considering what actors know and believe to be mutually known about the situation. Drawing on previous literature suggesting that thoughts about money reduce social interaction whereas thoughts about time increase it, we propose that thinking about money compared to time reduces attentiveness towards the common ground. In support of this, we find that individuals who had been thinking about money compared to time were less likely to interpret two similar questions as distinct, even though asking the same question twice would be violating conversational norms (Study 1). Moreover, they were less likely to note ambiguity in a euphemistic description (Study 2), thus illustrating that lower attentiveness to the interaction's common ground can be a double-edged sword.

## 1. Introduction

Both time and money are resources that most people wish they had more of. Consequently, time and money often dominate our thoughts. How do these thoughts affect people? Recent research suggests that thinking about money reduces the desire and the likelihood to engage with others (Vohs, 2015; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008), whereas thinking about time has the opposite effect (Mogilner, 2010; Mogilner & Aaker, 2009). In other words, money compared to time reduces the *quantity* of interpersonal communication. Interestingly, however, little is known about how money and time influence the *quality* of communication, that is to say, how well speakers and listeners understand and respond to each other. An essential requirement for understanding and successfully responding to communication is to consider what actors know and believe to be mutually known about the social situation, which is referred to as “common ground” (Clark, 1985; Clark & Marshall, 1981). Taking common ground into account is important to disambiguate semantic content. To illustrate, the question “where do you live” will require a different answer depending on whether it is asked at a friend's party or during a trip abroad. Hence, beyond what is actually said in terms of semantics, taking common ground into account helps to understand what is actually meant (pragmatic understanding). Here we test the hypothesis that people who have been thinking about money compared

to time are less attentive to the common ground, and, as a result, are less likely to pick up on conversational subtleties. In what follows, we first provide the conversational background before delineating this specific hypothesis.

## 1.1. Semantics and pragmatics of communication

In today's interconnected world the understanding of language and the ability to successfully communicate has perhaps become more essential than ever. Sometimes communication is clear-cut and messages are unambiguous. Often, however, language is full of subtleties that require the recipient to go beyond the information given. As a result, a mere semantic understanding is often not sufficient. Instead a pragmatic interpretation is required to infer what the speaker actually means (Clark, 1985).

In order to understand pragmatic meaning, people follow a tacit set of conversational norms or maxims (Grice, 1975). This means that information is normally expected to be truthful (maxim of quality), complete but not redundant (maxim of quantity), relevant (maxim of relation), and concise (maxim of manner). However, these assumptions have to be interpreted with conversational context in mind (Wänke, 2007; Wänke & Reutner, 2009). What is the situation? What do I know about the other people involved? What do they know about me? This common ground, is the foundation upon which communication is built

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(Clark & Marshall, 1981). To illustrate, consider the following example: When asked, “how has your week been,” a person may focus on recounting successful meetings or stomach problems, depending on whether the boss or the doctor is asking the question. Though taking common ground into account can be relatively easy, it requires a minimum of attentiveness to the social situation.

What makes people more or less attentive to the common ground? One vital ingredient is being able to take the perspective of the other party in a conversation (Clark & Marshall, 1981; Clark & Murphy, 1982; Keysar, Barr, Balin, & Brauner, 2000). Someone who can put her- or himself in the shoes of their conversation partner is more likely to take that partner's situation, knowledge, and intentions into account, thereby attending to the common ground. Notably, there can be systematic variations in perspective taking between groups of people. For instance, perspective taking is more likely in people from collectivistic cultures where self-concepts are defined in terms of relationships compared to people from individualistic cultures where the self is often seen as separate from others (Wu & Keysar, 2007). People from collectivistic cultures are also more likely to process information in a more holistic and relational manner, taking context into account. In contrast, individuals from individualistic cultures have a general tendency for more analytical and abstract processing, which is less sensitive to contextual information (Choi, Koo, & Choi, 2007). In this vein, research has shown that individuals from collectivistic cultures are more attentive towards common ground when interpreting information compared to people from individualistic cultures (Haberstroh, Oyserman, Schwarz, Kühnen, & Ji, 2002). Put more simply, in societies where social relationships are essential, so is the need to understand communication.

Interestingly, “culture” can also be situationally induced (Oyserman, 2011; Oyserman & Lee, 2008), by activating self-related concepts of inter- or independence. Consequently, people for whom an interdependent self had been activated by circling first person plural pronouns “we”, “us”, “ourselves” in a text were more sensitive to conversational norms compared to people for whom the self in a social context had been activated by circling first person singular pronouns such as “I”, “me”, “myself” (Haberstroh et al., 2002). More concretely, interdependents were more likely to distinguish between two very similar questions (“how happy are you with your life?” and “how satisfied are you with your life?”) than independents. Presumably this is because they were more attentive to the common ground (“they already know that I am happy with my life”) and inferred that the second question must refer to something distinct from happiness—otherwise it would be redundant to ask or answer (maxim of quantity; Grice, 1975).

### 1.2. Time and money

How could thoughts about time and money influence attentiveness to the common ground? Although both are highly desirable resources, time and money are associated with vastly different things. Money as a resource is linked to status, power, and independence, whereas time as a resource is linked to leisure, good times, and socializing (Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Mogilner, 2010; Mogilner & Aaker, 2009). Presumably this is because money can be accumulated thereby increasing status, power, and independence, whereas time is a resource that can not be accumulated. Instead it inevitably runs out over the course of a life. This might lead individuals to want to spend this fleeting resource in a way that makes them most happy – with friends and family (Mogilner, 2010).

That these associations with the concepts of time and money have powerful consequences has been demonstrated in several studies in recent years (Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Mogilner, 2010; for a review see, Vohs, 2015). It has been shown that merely thinking about money increases focus on the self (Reutner & Wänke, 2013) and leads to more self-sufficient and independent behavior (Vohs et al., 2006). Money is linked to distance (Hansen, Kutzner, & Wänke, 2013), coldness

(Reutner, Hansen, & Greifeneder, 2015), a lack of empathy (Makellams & Blascovich, 2013), and a decrease in ethical behavior (Gino & Pierce, 2009). People who have thought about money actively disengage themselves from others by spending less time with other people and more time on their own (Mogilner, 2010; Vohs et al., 2006). Thinking about time on the other hand has somewhat opposite effects. People who have thought about time spend more time socializing (Mogilner, 2010) and show a decrease in self-serving and unethical behavior compared to people who had been thinking of control concepts or money (Gino & Mogilner, 2014).

In sum, thinking about money leads to a focus on the self as an independent individual and reduces interest in others whereas thinking about time leads to a focus on the self as an interdependent individual and increases interest in others. Combining these findings with the findings that a focus on independence, compared to a focus on interdependence, decreases attentiveness to the common ground in communication exchanges, we propose that activating thoughts about money, compared to thoughts about time, will lead to less attentiveness towards the common ground.

## 2. Overview of the present studies

We conducted two studies to test our prediction that activating thoughts about money leads to less attentiveness to the common ground than activating thoughts about time. In the first study we adapted a paradigm originally employed by Strack, Schwarz, and Wänke (1991). This paradigm has been shown to be sensitive to situational manipulations of the self as independent or interdependent individual (Haberstroh et al., 2002). In this paradigm participants are asked two highly similar questions about their lives, one about happiness and one about satisfaction. The idea is that, although individuals would normally not distinguish between the two concepts, the fact that both questions are asked indicates that separate concepts are assessed—or why else would a researcher ask two questions (maxim of quantity)? Whether participants distinguish between the two questions can be assessed by analyzing the correlation between the two: a high correlation presumably indicates that participants perceived the two questions as assessing the same concept, whereas a lower correlation presumably indicates that participants build on common ground and thus assumed that the researcher asked about different things (Schwarz, 1999; Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001; Strack et al., 1991). Against the background of our theoretical account, we thus hypothesized a lower correlation for time compared to money participants.

In Study 2, we aimed to show generalizability across paradigms and domains. In Study 1 the speaker's intention was to gather information, whereas in Study 2 he or she wishes to persuade. In a persuasion context the speakers need to be convincing, despite the fact that not all available information may be supportive of one's account. To the extent that lying is not an option (e.g., because it may be legally prosecuted, such as in the domain of advertising), persuaders may revert to techniques such as relying on euphemisms, that is, framing potential flaws as benefits. To illustrate, consider a dog shelter advertisement that describes a dog that is difficult to handle and is disobedient as having a “strong character.” To pick-up on these subtleties requires taking common ground (here: a persuasive context) into account. We therefore hypothesized that money participants would be less likely to pick-up on the negative meaning of a seemingly positive persuasive statement compared to time participants.

In these studies, we report all measures, manipulations and exclusions. All data is available upon request and retained for a minimum of five years after publication.

## 3. Study 1

In Study 1 we tested the hypothesis that time-participants compared to money-participants would distinguish more between two highly

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