



FlashReport

Nonconscious priming of communication[☆]Martin J. Pickering^{*}, Janet F. McLean¹, Marina Krayeva

Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK



HIGHLIGHTS

- Two priming experiments investigated reading and communicating stories.
- Priming narrators with helpfulness related words lengthened reading time.
- Priming narrators with helpfulness related words improved retelling.
- Activation of the helpfulness concept influences message construction.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 December 2013

Revised 31 October 2014

Available online 5 January 2015

Keywords:

Communication

Nonconscious priming

Narrator

Addressee

ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether nonconscious priming can affect the communicative quality of narratives. In two experiments, narrators were primed with words associated with helpfulness or unhelpfulness, and then, in an apparently unrelated task, read and retold a short story to addressees. In Experiment 1, the narrator provided a spoken description, and we also manipulated whether the narrator retold the story to the addressee or to a microphone. In Experiment 2, the narrator provided a written description. In both experiments, narrators primed with helpful words took longer to read the story and provided retellings that were rated to be higher quality than narrators primed with unhelpful words. We propose that priming the concept of helpfulness influences the processes involved in message construction.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

People do not speak into a vacuum, but rather produce utterances for their addressees (e.g., Clark, 1996). In general, they care about the quality and accuracy of their utterances for their audience. But does their motivation to be communicatively effective vary? And to what extent can the incidental activation of social knowledge affect communication?

Communicative effectiveness is influenced by characteristics of the audience. For example, people speak differently to children versus adults (Glucksberg, Krauss, & Weisberg, 1966), native versus non-native speakers (Bortfeld & Brennan, 1997), or experts versus novices in a particular domain (e.g., Isaacs & Clark, 1987). They also produce clearer referring expressions when they believe that their addressee would not be able to identify a stimulus (Fussell & Krauss, 1992). In addition, they sometimes make sure that their utterances are not

unnecessarily ambiguous, for example reverting to a longer and clearer description of a novel object when describing it to a new addressee (e.g., Brennan & Clark, 1996) or producing syntactically disambiguated utterances (Haywood, Pickering, & Branigan, 2005). However, speakers are not always helpful in this way (e.g., Ferreira & Dell, 2000; Horton & Keysar, 1996). Accounts of when speakers are helpful tend to consider the effects of characteristics of the stimuli (what is being described), knowledge of addressees, and processing limitations – factors which tend to be relevant to cognitive theories of language use.

This research indicates that communicative effectiveness depends on social context. But it does not demonstrate what causes speakers to emphasize communicative effectiveness. Such choices can of course be under the conscious control of the speaker. For example, speakers modify their utterances when they become aware of the need to be more comprehensible. Thus, Horton and Gerrig (2002) had speakers describe arrays of picture cards to matchers who had previously discussed some of the cards with the speakers. The speakers described these cards differently than cards that they had not already discussed and became more aware of the importance of such adjustments as the experiment went on. They suggest that the decision about whether to emphasize intelligibility is a deliberate, conscious act that serves the goal of increasing the comprehensibility of an act of communication. This is compatible with traditional models of human behavior, which claim

[☆] We acknowledge the support of ESRC grant RES-062-23-0376.

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, 7 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, UK.

E-mail address: martin.pickering@ed.ac.uk (M.J. Pickering).

¹ Present address: Psychology, Abertay University.

that it is guided by explicit goals only (Bandura, 1986; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

But could speakers' choice of utterances be affected by implicit factors? Research in social psychology suggests that goals are not merely consciously selected but can be activated outside of awareness (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001; see Moskowitz, Li, & Kirk, 2004). Bargh et al. found that priming people to perform well or to cooperate had similar effects to explicitly providing them with that goal, and argued that priming specifically activated a goal concept (e.g., noting that the strength of the activation increased over time if the goal was not fulfilled). The priming manipulation involved participants unscrambling sentences involving words related to the relevant concept (e.g., helpfulness), and participants were unaware of the manipulation. Another study primed participants with the goal of earning money and showed that they then worked faster on an initial task so as to get to a second task that afforded the chance to earn money (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004). Similarly, priming the concept of egalitarianism has been shown to lead participants to implicitly inhibit social stereotypes (e.g., Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999; Moskowitz & Li, 2011). Even 18-month old infants engage in more helpful behavior following an affiliative prime (two dolls facing each other) than otherwise (Over & Carpenter, 2009).

Many studies have found that unconscious goal pursuit produces the same outcomes as conscious goal pursuit (Chartrand & Bargh, 1996; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; Dijksterhuis, Chartrand, & Aarts, 2007). However, there appear to be many mediators to effects of priming on goal pursuit (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2006). There is evidence that priming is enhanced when the primes are associated with positive affect, suggesting that priming stimuli are integrated with reward cues to motivate effortful behavior (Aarts, Custers, & Marien, 2008). However, the effects of priming also appear to be moderated by personality characteristics, such as relationship orientation (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Clark & Mills, 1979) and need for structure (Thompson, Roman, Moskowitz, Chaiken, & Bargh, 1994).

But few of these studies directly relate to communication and its effectiveness. This situation is perhaps surprising, given that the ways in which people communicate information to their audience can differ greatly in helpfulness. They can carefully work out which details are useful or relevant and carefully frame their utterances, or they can produce limited, barely relevant, or ambiguous descriptions. Moreover, communication depends on norms such as the Gricean maxims (Grice, 1975): Among other things, speakers are expected to convey the appropriate amount of information, to make their contribution relevant, and to avoid obscurity or ambiguity. Among other things, they are expected to be perspicuous. But the application of these maxims depends on the context, with speakers' decisions depending on what they judge to be important for current purposes (see Clark, 1996). We might therefore expect an assessment of appropriateness and perspicuity to be particularly dependent on a speaker's goals, which could in turn be strongly affected by implicit factors.

Theories of how people produce language assume that they first construct the message that they wish to convey, then convert that message into linguistic representations (concerned with grammar and sound), and finally articulate in a spoken or written form (see Levelt, 1989). At the first (*conceptualization*) stage, speakers or writers make a series of decisions about how much information to convey and the extent to which they should emphasize perspicuity. When their task is to retell a story, they have to decide how much attention to pay to understanding and remembering its details. If they have the goal of being highly informative and perspicuous, and hence are particularly concerned about detailed or accurate retelling, they will spend longer reading (and therefore assimilating) the story, and will therefore construct a more elaborate conceptual representation.

In this study we investigate whether nonconsciously priming the goal of helpfulness can lead to participants designing their utterances in a way that reflects their addressees' needs in a communication task.

We predict that narrators that have been primed to be helpful will be more sensitive to the needs of their listener when retelling a story. They should take more time to read the story and should produce a higher-quality retelling. Conversely, narrators that have been primed to be unhelpful will not be sensitive to the needs of their listener. They should take less time to read the story and produce lower-quality retelling. Experiment 1 involved spoken narration, whereas Experiment 2 involved written narration (and did not include a real addressee). In addition, Experiment 1 manipulated whether the narrator retold the story to a present addressee (who was able to provide feedback) or via a microphone. One possibility is that an addressee highlights the importance of successful communication and hence that communicative goals should be more powerful in the presence of an addressee. If so, the priming manipulation should have a stronger effect in the present-addressee condition than the microphone condition. But it is also possible that participants are similarly aware of the need to communicate whether the addressee is present or not. If so, the priming manipulation should be unaffected by the presence of an addressee.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Forty naïve participants (20 females) from the University of Edinburgh student community were paid to participate. All were native English speakers and reported having no reading or speaking difficulties.

Materials and procedure

Participants were paired with same-sex partners who they did not know and were randomly assigned the role of narrator or addressee. They were also randomly assigned to priming condition (helpful vs. unhelpful) and retelling condition (face-to-face vs. microphone). The experimenter was blind to priming condition.

The experimenter explained that the experiment consisted of two unrelated short studies and that the first study investigated “psycholinguistic decision-making processes” and involved a word-search puzzle (as in Bargh et al., 2001). Each participant was presented with a puzzle and was given 5 min to complete the task. Each puzzle consisted of a 10 × 10 matrix of letters and a list of 13 words, which were hidden in the matrix (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, in either direction). In the *helpful* condition, the narrator's puzzle contained eight words associated with helpfulness (*assistance, cooperate, friend, help, mutual, satisfy, support, useful*) and five neutral words (*building, green, lamp, staple, tree*). In the *unhelpful* condition, it contained eight words associated with unhelpfulness (*delay, difficulty, hindrance, lazy, obstruct, selfish, stop, inhibit*) and the same neutral words. The addressee's puzzle contained thirteen neutral words (*banana, flower, magazine, pencil, plant, table, theatre, turtle, building, green, lamp, staple, tree*). The narrator and addressee completed their word search puzzles at the same time and in the same room.

Participants were told that the second task was a test of their language ability, and that it was the narrator's job to read a story and retell it to the addressee, who would then retell the story again. They were informed that only the addressee's retelling would be marked for quality, in terms of how much it matched the original story. The story was abridged from a story used in Ratcliff and McKoon (1988) and was presented on a single sheet. The addressee then left the room and the experimenter told the narrator to take as much time as he or she needed to understand the story. The time taken to read the story was recorded manually by the experimenter. The narrator was not aware of the recording. Once the narrator had finished reading, the experimenter told the narrator how to retell the story. In the *face-to-face* condition, the addressee returned to the room and listened to the story. The addressee was given no specific instructions about providing feedback. In the *microphone* condition, the narrator retold the story to a digital recording

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7324715>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7324715>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)