



Remembering stories together: Social contagion and the moderating influence of disagreements in conversations[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although remembering often occurs with conversations, the effects of its pragmatics on memory are rarely examined. We studied the effect of two pragmatic factors: (1) the presence of disagreeing and (2) the level of participation in the disagreement. In the present study, each participant read a slightly different version of four stories, thereby allowing for the possibility of social contagion through the conversation. They then jointly recounted the stories. We coded for the presence or absence of disagreements, and whether a participant contributed to the disagreement. Three factors mediated social contagion: (a) the presence or absence of an overt disagreement; (b) whether or not a member of a conversational remembering participated actively in a disagreement; and (c) how well participants remembered the original material. Both the pragmatics of conversations and quality of memory are important factors moderating social contagion.

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Remembering has often been viewed as a discursive process (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; van Dijk, 1997). When remembering is a collaborative effort, as it often is, the discourse becomes a dialog, in which the process of remembering is distributed across multiple individuals (Blumen, Rajaram, & Henkel, 2013; Rajaram & Pererira-Pasarin, 2010; Sutton, Harris, Keil, & Barnier, 2010). One person in a conversation, for instance, might recollect a past event, which might evoke from another conversational participant a follow-up memory. When remembering is treated in this manner, its study becomes more than an analysis of internal retrieval processes and external retrieval cues. The cognitive pragmatics shaping the collaborative effort also matter (Bietti, 2012).

The collaborative effort involved in conversational remembering allows what one person in the conversation recounts to serve as a source for *updating* the memories of the other participants. We use as our theoretical framework for studying such updating Zwaan and Radvansky's (1998) situational model. In discussions of text comprehension, those employing situation models treat each piece of text as an instruction about how to construct a model of the

content of the text. For collaborative remembering, each utterance can also be viewed as an instruction about how to construct a model or representation of the past. This instruction is not only for the rememberers themselves, but for all participants. *Updating* occurs when each new utterance in a group recounting is interpreted and incorporated into an evolving model each person possesses of the to-be-recounted event. This evolving model becomes the long-term memory that guides subsequent remembering.

Two qualifications are needed: First, when people remember collaboratively, they are remembering a shared past and hence begin the process of remembering with an extant model, their existing memory. Unlike readers comprehending text, then, collaborative rememberers are not building a model from scratch, rather they are building on an already established model. Each participant in the collaborative effort may have a different model. The act of collaborative remembering involves bringing to mind elements of the extant models and, then, as a result of what is remembered by the group, updating each member's respective model.

Second, the utterances in collaborative remembering may include not just recollections, but also what Middleton and Edwards (1990) called discourse practices, such as metamemory comments and comments about how to proceed with the remembering, such as, "may be should try a little harder." These discourse practices can also be viewed as updating instructions.

We focus our concerns here on those instances in which updating leads to implanting misleading information into the evolving mnemonic models of conversational participants (Gabbert, Memon, Allan, & Wright, 2004; Loftus, 1975; Meade & Roediger,

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2002; Wright, Memon, Skagerberg, & Gabbert, 2009). Following Meade and Roediger (2002), we will refer to this updating as *social contagion*. From a situation model perspective, an utterance of misleading information by one participant in an act of conversational remembering can lead other participants to update their model with this misinformation. We are concerned here with the pragmatics underlying this updating. Just as pragmatics can affect how readers update their models of a passage of text, so also might pragmatics affect how participants in an act of collaborative remembering update their integrated model with “misleading” information (Allan, Midjord, Martin, & Gabbert, 2012).

At least two pragmatic features might affect the degree to which an evolving representation is updated with misleading information. The first is one of Middleton and Edwards's (1990) discourse practices: *disagreements*. While it is a common practice for collaborative participants to overtly disagree with a recollection of another participant within a conversation, the effect of these disagreements on subsequent memory has not been studied in depth (but see Walther et al., 2002). Nevertheless, with at least one caveat, we would expect that disagreement should act as a warning to participants. The effect of warnings on social contagion has been extensively investigated, usually in studies in which an experimenter warns all but one of the participants, for instance, of one participant's poor memory (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012; Meade & Roediger, 2002; Wright et al., 2009). The extant research suggests that warnings, and we are claiming here, disagreements, diminish the level of social contagion when participants have a good memory of the original material. They can actually increase the level of social contagion if participants' memory is poor (Muller & Hirst, 2010). Warnings – and by extension, disagreements – might be construed as instructions to participants not to update the evolving mnemonic model, or at least to do so cautiously. In order to comply with this instruction, participants might make an effort to monitor the accuracy of what other participants recount. When the participants' memory is good, the increased monitoring should increase the chance of distinguishing accurate from inaccurate memories and hence decrease the level of social contagion (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). On the other hand, when participants possess a poor memory, they may still attend carefully to what their untrustworthy colleague recollected, as instructed, but may now find it difficult to distinguish accurate from inaccurate memories. Consequently, they may unintentionally incorporate some of what their colleague says into their model, despite the warning, or, we assert, the disagreement.

Our one caveat to this account involves the second pragmatic factor we want to consider: *Participation*. Schober and Clark (1989) distinguished between *active participants* in a conversation and *overhearers*, that is, those who merely listen to others converse. They found that overhearers were less likely to comprehend what was being said than active participants. To state their findings in terms of situation models, if each utterance is viewed as an instruction, then participation affects the effectiveness of the instructions. Of course, in the case of Schober and Clark, the effect was on comprehension. Here we are interested in the way disagreements and participation might interact to affect the likelihood of social contagion. Will active participants in a disagreement treat misleading information differently from overhearers – participants who merely listen to the disagreement, without actively taking part in it?

An answer to the just posed question may again depend on the quality of participants' memory. On the one hand, if the listeners' memory for the original material is good, then they should be able to successfully identify the contested item as accurate or not and, in the presence of a disagreement, avoid incorporating new information into their evolving model. In such an instance, it should not matter whether listeners are active participants in a disagreement or overhearers. On the other hand, if the listeners' memory for the

original material is poor, they may find it difficult to discriminate accurate from inaccurate recollections, even when carefully attending to a speaker's recollections. For the overhearer, the situation is similar to the role of warnings described by Muller and Hirst (2010). As a result, disagreements observed by memory-impoverished overhearers should leave the level of social contagion unaffected, or even increase it. As for memory-impoverished actively participating listeners, they are clearly generating alternative recollections, or at least actively noting to themselves that the speaker's recollection is potentially wrong. Their overt commitment to the potential inaccuracy of another participant's memory might lead them to identify a speaker's recollection as “new” and, as a result, they may be less likely to evidence the effects of social contagion (see Walther et al., 2002, for a similar claim).

Thus, we predict:

- (1) When listeners have a good memory for the original material, disagreements should diminish social contagion, regardless of whether listeners are active participants or overhearers.
- (2) When listeners have a poor memory, disagreements should diminish social contagion only if listeners actively participate in the disagreements. If they are overhearers, the disagreements should have no effect or actually increase the level of social contagion.

We tested these predictions, using a methodology similar to Muller and Hirst (2010). Following a procedure developed by Bransford and Johnson (1973), Muller and Hirst manipulated memorability by presenting stories with or without a contextualizing picture. The stories were difficult to understand without the pictures and hence, without the pictures, were not memorable. Unlike Muller and Hirst, we did not supply any warnings. Rather we allowed disagreements in collaborative acts of remembering to emerge spontaneously.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Eighty students from Universidad de Belgrano participated in the study for course credit. Participants were divided in 20 groups of 4 members each. Each member of the group was unknown to one another. 76% of the participants were female; the mean age of the sample was 26.0 years ($SD = 4.2$).

1.2. Materials

The material was similar to that employed in Muller and Hirst (2010). The four short stories averaged 127 words (range: 117–133 words) and were written so that an accompanying picture made them easier to understand and hence memorize (see Fig. 1). Three were of our own devising; the fourth was a Spanish translation of a story found in Bransford and Johnson (1973).

We devised four versions of each story by changing specific details, referred to here as *critical details*. For example, one of the critical details that differed across the four versions of the story in Fig. 1 was whether the car was *abandoned*, *useless*, *wrecked* or *burnt*. There were 20 such sets of *critical items* across the four stories, though the number per story differed. Substituting one alternative critical item for another (e.g., *wrecked* for *burnt*) did not affect the flow or reasonableness of the original material, as verified by five independent judges. Seventy percent of the critical items were nouns, 20% adjectives, and 10% verbs. A female native Spanish speaker tape-recorded the stories.

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