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Politeness and the communication of uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity in language derives, in part, from the multiple motivations that underlie the choice to use any particular expression. The use of some lexical items, such as probability expressions and scalar terms, can be motivated by a desire to communicate uncertainty as well as a desire to be polite (i.e., manage face). Research has demonstrated that the interpretation of these items can be influenced by the existence of a potential politeness motive. In general, communications about negative events, relative to positive events, result in higher likelihood estimates whenever politeness can be discerned as a potential motive. With few exceptions, however, this research has focused only on the hearer. In the present research we focused on the dyad and examined whether speakers vary their messages as a function of politeness, and the effect that this has on subsequent judgments made by a recipient. In two experiments we presented participants with situations that varied in terms of face-threat and asked them how they would communicate potentially threatening information. Both experiments included a second set of participants who read these utterances and provided judgments as to the degree of uncertainty conveyed by the utterance. In both experiments, messages in the face-threatening condition conveyed greater uncertainty than messages in the non-face-threatening condition, and the probability estimates made by the second set of participants varied as a function of conveyed uncertainty. This research demonstrates that when examining speakers and hearers together, severe events may be judged less likely (rather than more likely), because speakers tend to hedge the certainty with which they communicate the information.

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1. Introduction

Ambiguity is an inescapable feature of language use. Consider, for example, a professor who says to a student "It's possible your paper is publishable". The professor may have said this because she thinks there is some degree of uncertainty regarding the manuscript's outcome. The professor might also have chosen this phrasing in order to soften her negative opinion, that is, she doesn't think the paper is really publishable. So how should the student interpret this utterance? Multiple motivations for the use of expressions such as "possible" are one major source of ambiguity, or imprecision, in linguistic communication. Recently, researchers have begun to examine how the interpersonal motivation to be polite, or manage face, can influence the manner in which uncertainty expressions (e.g., probability terms) will be interpreted (Bonnefon, Feeney, & De Neys, 2011). Most of this research, however, has focused on the hearer, that is, how the recipient of a mes-

sage will interpret a message as a function of face-threat. Rarely has the impact of this motivation on a speaker's linguistic choices been examined, and no one has yet examined senders and receivers within the same study; that is, how face management can influence how speakers phrase their utterances and how those utterances will then be interpreted. The purpose of the present research was to conduct some initial studies in this regard. As we demonstrate, considering the speaker and recipient together alters our understanding of the role of politeness in the communication of uncertainty.

1.1. The interpretation of verbal expressions of uncertainty

Research on verbal probability expressions suggests that their use is influenced by a variety of contextual factors; various characteristics of the outcome such as severity, base-rate, magnitude, and so on influence both the choice of which probability expression to use, as well as how these expressions are interpreted. For example, Patt and Schrag (2003) asked participants to choose a probability statement in order to convey a 10% likelihood of an event occurring when that event differed in terms of its outcome

severity (a hurricane vs. a snow storm). These participants chose expressions conveying greater likelihood for the more extreme outcome. However, when a separate group of participants were asked to provide probability estimates for these events that were described as unlikely to happen, they provided lower probability estimates for the more severe outcome. The authors suggest that people are aware that others tend to describe outcomes with more severe consequences as being more likely, and hence they adjust downward their interpretation of such expressions.

Patt and Schrag's (2003) probability estimation results are at odds with other research, however, largely because they confounded outcome severity and base rate (hurricanes are both more damaging and less frequent than snow storms) in their study. Other researchers have demonstrated that, other things being equal, people interpret probability statements as conveying a greater likelihood of occurrence for more frequent events (e.g., a slight chance of rain occurring in London) than for less frequent events (e.g., a slight chance of rain occurring in Madrid) (Wallsten, Fillenbaum, & Cox, 1986), an effect that occurs even when numerical estimates are provided (Windschitl & Weber, 1999). Base rates and severity are usually inversely correlated, and in research designed specifically to investigate this issue, Weber and Hilton (1990) observed both a base rate effect (infrequent events were estimated to be less likely to occur) and a severity effect (severe events were interpreted as more likely to occur). They were not, however, able to experimentally dissociate severity and base-rate. More recently, Harris and Corner (2011) were able to accomplish this by manipulating the severity of the consequences of an outcome (rather than the severity of the outcome itself). In three experiments they found results consistent with Weber and Hilton (1990), specifically, higher estimates of event likelihood for outcomes with more severe consequences than the same outcome with less severe consequences.

Multiple explanations for this severity bias have been proposed. It may reflect an asymmetric loss function whereby individuals err on the side of estimating greater likelihood for outcomes with more negative consequences (Weber, 1994). Another possibility, suggested by Vosgerau (2010; but see de Moliere & Harris, 2016), is that it may be a function of arousal misinterpretation. More severe events (as well as more positive events) are more arousing than neutral events, and this result in an elevation of the estimated likelihood of the outcome. Another possibility, and the one pursued in this research, is that there may be interpersonal motivations underlying the use of different uncertainty expressions, with corresponding effects on others' probability estimates.

1.2. Politeness and the interpretation of uncertainty

Speakers who want to communicate uncertainty will often use probability terms to do so. For example, with "It's possible I'll attend the conference" a speaker may be intentionally communicating a degree of uncertainty about attending an upcoming conference. However, there are other motivations for the use of probability expressions. In particular, probability expressions have been identified as one of several strategies for conveying politeness or managing face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness is a technical term referring to the many different linguistic (and nonlinguistic) strategies that interactants employ so as to manage one another's face. Face refers to a person's public persona (Goffman, 1967), and it is this public persona that is symbolically attended to with politeness. The most well-known theory of politeness – by Brown and Levinson (1987) – argues that potential threats to face abound during social interaction and that interactants will phrase their remarks in ways so as to manage face, both their own and their interlocutors'. In this view, probability expressions can function as hedges on assertions that might be face-threatening. Rather than saying "You'll never finish it in time" – an expression that might threaten the recipient's face – a speaker can hedge his or her opinion with "It's possible you won't finish it in time" or "You might not be able to finish it in time", and so on. The issue for the recipient, then, is to ascertain the intended meaning of the expression. Because there are multiple reasons for its use, there is a certain degree of ambiguity.

The existence of multiple potential motives plays a role in the interpretation of these expressions. For example, Bonnefon and Villejoubert (2006) asked participants to imagine that their family doctor told them they would "possibly" develop either deafness or insomnia in the upcoming year, after which they were asked to judge the doctor's estimate of that probability. Participants judged the probability of the more severe disease (deafness) to be significantly higher than the probability of the less severe disease (insomnia). Hence, the same probability word (possibly) was judged to communicate a higher probability when it involved a more severe condition (and hence more face-threatening situation). This is because participants judged the doctor to be using "possibly" as a face-management device significantly more frequently when the condition was deafness than when it was insomnia, and they adjusted their estimates accordingly. Note that in this case it is the hearer's face that is being threatened. The speaker's face can be threatened as well, and recognition that the speaker may be managing his or her own face can influence the interpretation of probability terms. In fact, research conducted by Juanchich, Sirota, and Butler (2012) suggests that speaker face management may be inferred more often than hearer face management.

A similar effect has been demonstrated with certain scalar expressions. Scalar expressions refer to words (e.g., some) that can be ordered on a scale with respect to their strength (e.g., some - all) (Levinson, 1983). It has been argued that the use of the weaker, more inclusive, term (e.g., some) implies that the stronger term (e.g., all) does not hold (Horn, 1984; Levinson, 1983). Hence, the scalar implicature for "some" is "some but not all." Bonnefon, Feeney, and Villejoubert (2009) examined the role of face management in the interpretation of the scalar quantifier "some" and demonstrated that face management can influence whether the scalar implicature (i.e., some but not all) is generated. Specifically, when a situation is face-threatening, people are less likely to draw a scalar implicature for "some" and instead assume that "some" is being used as a hedge to politely indicate "all". Consistent with this reasoning, Bonnefon et al. (2009) found that estimates of "some" in "Some people hated your party" were higher than estimates of "some" in "Some people enjoyed your party". It appears that people are using their awareness of face management to guide their interpretations; in the face threatening context people are assuming that "some" is being used in the service of face management as a means of softening a negative communication. More recently, Bonnefon, Dahl, and Holtgraves (2015) demonstrated that this effect varies as a function of the discourse context such that the effect is more pronounced when the scalar term is preceded by a brief silence, a dispreferred marker signaling that bad news is forthcoming.

Parallel results have been found for connectives. Just as scalar expressions can be ordered on a scale, so too can connectives such as 'or' and 'and.' Hence, the use of the disjunctive 'or' implicates that the conjunction 'and' does not hold, that is, that the exclusive interpretation is the intended interpretation. However, as with scalar expressions, these interpretations can be influenced by politeness considerations. Feeney and Bonnefon (2013) manipulated the content connected by "or" such that it was either positive or negative (i.e., face-threatening). They found that exclusive interpretations were significantly more likely for positive content than for negative content. When the content is negative, there is a