A hotel that is not bad isn't good. The effects of valence framing and expectation in online reviews on text, reviewer and product appreciation

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Abstract

In online hotel reviews, reviewers use both direct and indirect positive and negative evaluations (e.g. 'good', 'not bad', 'bad', 'not good'). In four studies, we examined the effects of these wording alternatives. In Study 1, participants rated hotel reviews that were manipulated with respect to the wording. In positive reviews, direct evaluations ('good') received higher evaluations than indirect wordings ('not bad'). In negative reviews, however, no such difference was observed between direct and indirect expressions ('not good'/'bad'). These results apply to evaluations of the hotel, text and reviewer alike. Study 2 showed that this pattern of results generalizes to restaurant reviews. To investigate an underlying cause for the effects in Study 1 and 2, we manipulated participants' a priori expectation of the attitude object (hotel) in two subsequent studies. The lack of an interaction effect between the wording and expectation manipulations shows that the pattern of results may be attributed to Verbal Politeness: wordings like 'not bad' convey a weakened meaning as compared to 'good', whereas the use of 'not good' instead of 'bad' is interpreted as expressing the same evaluation, albeit in a more polite way.
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1. Introduction

Before booking a hotel, more and more people consult online reviews (e.g. Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Ye et al., 2009). Via these sources of Electronic Word of Mouth (Litvin et al., 2008), they check if earlier costumers found the service 'good' and the rooms 'comfortable'. If this is the case, they are likely to form a positive attitude and book a room. However, if earlier customers described the service as 'bad' and the rooms as 'uncomfortable', they will continue their search for better options (Ye et al., 2009; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009).

But what happens when the service is described as 'not good' or when the rooms are deemed 'not uncomfortable'? Do these indirect descriptions evoke other impressions than their direct counterparts? And does the wording affect the review reader's judgment of the product that is reviewed as well as the text and its writer in equal ways? These questions have been investigated in the experiments presented in this article. Therefore, the current research provides insight into the effects of direct and indirect positive and negative language in a realistic language use setting in which evaluative descriptions are in abundance.

1.1. Framing

Often, a situation can be described in both positive terms (e.g. 'this medical treatment has a 50% success rate') and negative terms (e.g. 'this medical treatment has a 50% failure rate'). These alternative wordings are logically equivalent: they describe the same reality. Yet, the positive or negative frame in which information is presented influences our response with regards to the evaluation we make or decision we take. For example, subjects rate the medical treatment as more effective and they are more likely to recommend the treatment to others when it is described as having a '50% success rate' rather than a '50% failure rate' (Levin et al., 1988).

The medical treatment example above concerns a specific type of framing that Levin et al. (1998) call attribute framing: the framing of one object or event characteristic (i.e. the treatment) in evaluatively positive (i.e. success) or negative (i.e. failure) terms.[2] Attribute framing has typically been investigated in studies that look at effects in single occurrences, that is, one frame manipulation per stimulus. In addition, the framing manipulation often concerns contrary antonyms to which proportions can be assigned, such as percentages of success (Levin et al., 1988), or mutually exclusive antonyms, comparing such things as 'survival' versus 'mortality' rates (Marteau, 1989). The main outcome of these studies is a valence-consistent shift (Levin et al., 1998): the selection of a positive frame (e.g. a description of a percentage of 'success' or 'survival' rates) leads to more favorable evaluations than a negative frame (e.g. a description of a percentage of 'failure' or 'mortality' rates).

1.2. Why people choose one frame over the other frame

After the initial observation that frame choice influences interpretation, the question arises when and why people select a particular frame in speech or text production. In various experiments (e.g. McKenzie and Nelson, 2003; Sher and McKenzie, 2009), the choice of a particular frame has been shown to reveal speakers' reference points. The reference point, or baseline, as termed by Langacker (2008), is the starting point that serves as the background to the situation described. In positive/negative pairs, usually one of the two poles serves as the relatively neutral reference point and is the most commonly used frame in speech production (Tribushinina, 2008). For example, when one wants to ask about someone's achievements in the last five tennis matches, the more neutral question is 'How many tennis matches did you win?', rather than 'How many tennis matches did you lose?' (see also Horn, 1989). Hence, the 'winning' frame is in this case the more neutral frame, which is used by default. However, there may be situations in which another reference point becomes salient in the discourse. Experiments demonstrating that reference points are important in determining frame production choices, usually focus on such situations.

For example, in a study by McKenzie and Nelson (2003), speakers had to describe a 4-ounce cup filled to the 2-ounce line either when the cup was previously empty (condition 1), or when the cup had been full (condition 2). Across conditions, the 'half full' frame was chosen more often than the 'half empty' frame. This seems to suggest that 'half full' is the default frame to use. In addition to the general preference for 'half full', the cup was more often described as 'half full' when it was previously empty, but as 'half empty' when it had previously been full. Hence, the frame chosen depends on which proportion has increased/decreased. This indicates that speakers tailor their frames to a salient reference point in a discourse context, e.g. how the proportion has changed as compared to a previous situation (see also Sher and McKenzie, 2009).

Similar results have been found in a series of experiments by Holleman and Pander Maat (2009). In one of their studies, participants had to describe the results of a tennis player who had a good (condition 1) versus a bad (condition 2) year. When speakers knew the tennis player experienced a 'good year', they talked about the number of matches won. However, when speakers were informed that the tennis player had a 'bad year', they more often mentioned the number of matches lost. This shows that reference points may also include speakers' opinions: the direction of the frame corresponds with the object evaluation. This principle is called Argumentative Orientation (Holleman and Pander Maat, 2009).

1.3. Why responses are influenced by valence frames

Sher and McKenzie (2006) tie the observations for frame production and frame interpretation together. They argue that the effects found in frame interpretation can be explained from listeners inferring the speaker's reference point from their description. This is what they call information leakage: while ostensibly equivalent descriptions in frames can be logically equivalent, they need not be informationally equivalent, because the choice of frame 'leaks' information about the

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[2] Levin et al. (1998) distinguish two other types of framing in addition to attribute framing: risky choice framing and goal framing. In risky choice framing ''the outcomes of a potential choice involving options differing in level of risk are described in different ways'' (p. 150). This is the type of framing investigated in the famous framing studies by Kahneman and Tversky (e.g. 1979, 1984). In goal framing the goal of an action or behavior is framed in different ways (e.g. Banks et al., 1995). We refer to Levin et al. (1998) for a further definition and examples of these different types of framing.