



The innuendo effect: Hearing the positive but inferring the negative

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ABSTRACT

Speakers can convey mixed impressions by providing only positive information. As a series of studies shows, when communicators omit information on a salient, relevant dimension of social perception, listeners make negative inferences about the target on that omitted dimension, despite directly receiving only positive information on another dimension (Studies 1 and 2a). These negative inferences mediated the effect of the innuendo manipulation on judgments about the target person's suitability for inclusion in one's group. Simulating communication, Study 2b participants read Study 2a's descriptions and showed this innuendo effect is stronger for descriptions of female as opposed to male targets in an academic domain. We discuss implications of innuendo for the communication and perpetuation of mixed impressions and their prevalence in descriptions of subordinate group members.

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Introduction

Imagine hearing someone described as follows: "Ryan seems like a fun-loving guy." If "fun-loving" Ryan applied to work with you, how well would you expect him to perform on the job? Now consider: "Molly is very gifted, hard-working, and passionate about her job." If "hard-working" Molly sat next to you at a social event, how much would you expect to enjoy chatting with her? Although objectively both descriptions contain only positive descriptors, in a given context they may serve to communicate a very different – even negative – impression. In both cases, you might hold low expectations, a result that could seem surprising given that the descriptions provided only positive information. We use the term *innuendo effect* to describe this tendency for individuals to draw negative inferences from positive descriptions that omit one of the two fundamental dimensions of social perception, warmth and competence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

When describing someone, as in other forms of communication, speakers are expected to follow maxims of quality and relation (Grice, 1975) by providing truthful and relevant information. A competing norm exists, however, when it comes to describing people, namely that speakers avoid maligning others. Speaking favorably of others may serve to preserve social harmony and protect the speaker's reputation, because work on trait transference shows that communicating negative impressions often reflects badly on the speaker (Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). To put it colloquially, the two competing norms are "Tell the truth, the whole truth, and

nothing but the truth," on the one hand, and "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all," on the other.

We propose that the innuendo effect allows speakers to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory communication norms when it comes to conveying negative information about others. Innuendo allows communicators to convey negative information on a contextually relevant dimension by conspicuously omitting information on that dimension. We predict that when listeners hear person descriptions that contain objectively positive content but fail to provide relevant information, they will make negative inferences on the omitted dimension about the person described. For instance, when warmth information is expected, giving a positive description only on competence should lead to negative inferences on warmth.

Research has shown that two fundamental dimensions underlie person perception (Abele, 2003; Russell & Fiske, 2008; Wojciszke, 1994; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Researchers use various names for these two dimensions, but Abele and Wojciszke (2007) have shown that regardless of names these pairs of dimensions all are similar. Following Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002), we call them *warmth* and *competence*. According to theorizing on person perception (e.g., Fiske et al., 2007; Wojciszke, 2005), these perceptual dimensions address the two fundamental questions that people need to answer when forming an impression about someone: "Are this person's intentions toward me good or bad?" (inferred warmth) and "Can this person carry out these intentions?" (inferred competence). Warmth and competence perceptions of others have been shown to explain 82% of the variance in general impressions of others (Wojciszke et al., 1998).

Models use these two fundamental dimensions of warmth and competence to map person perception (Russell & Fiske, 2008; Wojciszke, 1994; Wojciszke et al., 1998), and they consider the two

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dimensions orthogonal, creating four combinations of high or low warmth and high or low competence. Critically, perceivers can – and often do – form ambivalent or mixed impressions that include positive content on one dimension and negative content on the other. Mixed impressions are common both for individual targets, sometimes dubbed “sinful winners” or “competent jerks” and “virtuous losers” or “lovable fools” (Casario & Lobo, 2005; Wojciszke, 1994), and for societal group targets, such as “cold and competent” working professionals or the “warm and incompetent” elderly (Fiske et al., 2002). We consider these mixed impressions particularly interesting and aim to show that speakers subtly convey this kind of impression via innuendo.

If both warmth and competence are indeed fundamental to social perception (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Fiske et al., 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Wojciszke et al., 1998), what happens when communicators defy the Gricean relevance maxim and omit one dimension, while providing positive information on the other? Will listeners draw positive inferences, consistent with the classical halo effect? The halo effect, namely, the tendency to “think of a person in general as rather good or rather inferior and to color the judgment of the separate qualities by this feeling” (Thorndike, 1920, p. 25), is widely documented in person perception research (Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1989). The halo effect implies that providing positive information on one dimension should lead to positive inferences across the board.

Two recent lines of research, however, lead us to make the opposite prediction, anticipating an innuendo effect instead. Work on stereotyping by omission shows that although expression of the negative dimensions in mixed stereotypes of ethnic and national outgroups has decreased over the past 70 years, people increasingly omit rather than reverse the historically negative warmth and competence stereotypes (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2011). For example, modern samples describe African Americans (historically stereotyped as warm but incompetent) as “loud, loyal to family ties, talkative, very religious, musical” and Germans (historically seen as competent but cold) as “industrious, intelligent, methodical, scientifically-minded, efficient,” conspicuously omitting competence and warmth information, respectively. Moreover, speakers increasingly omit the negative warmth or competence information (and emphasize the positive information) when describing individual targets who display mixed behaviors (as opposed to only positive or only negative behaviors) and when presenting to more public audiences, an effect driven by self-presentation concerns (Bergsieker et al., 2011). Omission increases as social pressures mount for both individual and group targets, suggesting a strategic dimension to this phenomenon.

The second relevant line of research involves the compensation effect (Judd et al., 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Judd, & Nunes, 2009). This work establishes that people typically bias their impressions of both groups and individuals to preserve a negative, or hydraulic, relation between warmth and competence. When presented with two targets of ambiguous warmth – one competent and one incompetent – participants viewed the former as less competent but also warmer than the latter (Judd et al., 2005). The same compensation effect emerged for warmth: Participants perceived a target presented to be cold (vs. warm) as more competent. Notably, this compensation effect also impacts categories of language (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) used to describe a target. When presented with a competent and an incompetent target group, participants selected more abstract (i.e., generalizable) descriptions of pictures presenting cold behaviors for the competent group, and more abstract warm behaviors for the incompetent group (Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2011). Thus, this Language Expectancy Bias (Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000; Wigboldus, Spears, & Semin, 2005) provides more evidence supporting a compensation effect.

Perceivers may form mixed impressions of some individuals and groups more readily than others. Although societal ingroups tend to be seen as both warm and competent, outgroups and subordinate groups are frequently characterized as high on one dimension and low on the other (Fiske et al., 2002). For example, women, as targets of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), are more often than men the objects of mixed impressions. Benevolent sexism portrays some women as warm and caring but less competent than men, whereas hostile sexism portrays other women as competent but cold and calculating. Both strains of sexism thus express a mixed impression of women, and moreover, these stereotypic perceptions of women are widespread across cultures (Glick et al., 2000). Some data place housewives in the incompetent-and-warm quadrant of the Stereotype Content Model, while placing business women and feminists in the competent-and-cold quadrant (Fiske et al., 2002). Moreover, compared to childless working women, working mothers are perceived as warmer but also less competent, and are less likely to be hired, promoted, or trained (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). Working fathers, by contrast, are seen as warmer than childless men but do not suffer a perceived drop in competence or disparate treatment. Thus, if innuendo indeed conveys mixed impressions and if women are more readily typecast as high on one dimension and low on the other, we predict that innuendo should be especially effective when the person described is female. That is, the innuendo effect should be especially strong for high-warmth/low-competence mixed impressions, which parallel the stereotype attached to traditional women, the cultural default for women.

Overview

Study 1 tests for an innuendo effect by assessing whether participants draw negative inferences from a positive person description that covers only one dimension (i.e., warmth or competence). We designed Study 2a to replicate this innuendo effect and test for moderation by target gender. Finally, Study 2b simulates a communication process by having a new set of participants read and draw inferences from the descriptions written by Study 2a participants, to test whether listeners pick up on communicators' innuendo and whether target gender moderates this innuendo effect.

Study 1

We designed the first study to provide a basic test of the innuendo effect. Participants read a vignette in which peers described a target person in one of two contexts. Between participants, the description provided objectively positive information focused on warmth, competence, or the speakers' general impression of the target. The context was either social (a travel group) or work (an academic group), to make warmth versus competence salient, respectively. We expected the strongest innuendo effects (i.e., negative inferences on an unmentioned dimension) following a warmth description in the academic context and a competence description in the social context. In contrast, when the description matched the context (e.g., warmth description in the social context) we expected the innuendo effect to be either weaker or absent.

With respect to inclusion, we expected that statements containing innuendo would lower participants' estimation of the target's suitability for inclusion in their work or social group primarily because they evaluated him or her more negatively on whichever dimension – warmth or competence – was more salient in that particular context. Thus, we predicted that ratings on the salient (omitted) dimension would mediate the effect of the innuendo manipulation on the decision to accept the target as a group member. We theorized that, in general, people want to select fellow ingroup members who are both warm and competent – even when the specific context emphasizes one dimension over the other – meaning that

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