Two Types of Language Bias in Word of Mouth

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In several studies we investigate the biased use of language abstraction in word of mouth. First, a linguistic expectancy bias in word of mouth is demonstrated, where expectancy congruent product information is communicated more abstractly than expectancy incongruent information. This finding is replicated with existing (rather than fictitious) brand attitudes, and in an open response format. Our final study demonstrates a second variant of this linguistic bias, in which consumers bias linguistic behavior to match the product attitudes that are held by the receiver of the word-of-mouth communication.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Product-related conversations, or word of mouth, form an important part of consumers’ responses to products and services. While the role of language in other areas of consumer behavior has received considerable attention (Luna and Peracchio 2005; Tavassoli 1999), there has been no research on the role of language in word of mouth. Language is fundamental to word of mouth and the study of language use could uncover fundamental psychological processes and gain insight in the context of word-of-mouth communication (Fiedler 2008).

To study the role of language in word of mouth, we made use of the framework provided by the Linguistic Category Model (Semin and Fiedler 1988). The linguistic category model has been used to study a variety of aspects of language use in interpersonal behavior. It distinguishes four categories of interpersonal terms based on the sentence verbs and predicates from the most concrete level (descriptive-action verbs) to the intermediate (interpretive-action verbs and state verbs) to the most abstract level (Adjectives).

The use of more abstract language increases the extent to which a description is informative about the subject, as well as increased temporal stability and perceived likelihood of repetition of the behavior that is being described (Semin and Fiedler 1988). In general, people are unaware of the level of abstraction they apply, and cannot access their reasons for choosing a certain level of abstraction (Franco and Maass 1996).

Research in social psychology has demonstrated a linguistic expectancy bias (Wigboldus, Semin and Spears 2000). That is, behavior is described more abstractly when it is congruent (rather than incongruent) with one’s expectations of the actor. Up till now, this bias has only been demonstrated with interpersonal behavior and has never been examined for communication about inanimate objects. Even though many of people’s daily conversations are about objects, such as product-related conversations. This paper intends to fill this gap and examines the linguistic expectancy bias in word of mouth. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, we will focus on the role of the receiver. In social psychology, language abstraction has mostly been studied in settings where participants are asked to describe the behavior of an actor (often depicted in a cartoon). In word-of-mouth communication, however, product experiences are communicated to another consumer. Research has frequently shown that receivers have a strong impact on the nature of word of mouth (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987). We therefore extend the concept of linguistic expectancy bias to include the perceived or inferred expectations of the receiver. We will show that a receiver’s attitude toward a product or brand will influence the abstraction level that is chosen by the sender of a word-of-mouth message. We label this phenomenon the “receiver linguistic expectancy bias”.

Experiment 1 demonstrates the linguistic expectancy bias in word of mouth. In the experiment the product attitudes about fictitious brands (positive vs. negative) and product experiences (positive vs. negative) were manipulated and the participants were asked how they would communicate the product experience to another person by choosing from several predetermined product descriptions according to the levels of the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Consistent with our hypotheses, study 1 revealed the linguistic expectancy bias in word of mouth: product experiences congruent to ones product opinion were communicated more abstractly, compared to expectancy incongruent experiences. More specifically, favorable product experiences were communicated more abstractly by participants with a positive product attitude compared to a negative attitude, and unfavorable experiences were communicated more concretely by participants with a positive compared to a negative product attitude. The findings of experiment 1 were replicated in two additional studies. The first one demonstrated the linguistic expectancy bias with existing brand attitudes (using actual brand names, such as Nike and Apple Ipod) and the second replication showed the linguistic bias with an open-ended response format as dependent variable, in which participants’ responses were coded according a schema developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988).

Experiment 2 demonstrates the receiver linguistic expectancy bias. It was expected that characteristics of receivers affect the language that senders use to describe their product experiences. We anticipate that people will use more abstract or more concrete language to accommodate the receiver’s expectations about a product.

In the experiment, the participants were asked to communicate a product experience to a receiver of whom they knew the product attitude. We found that positive experiences were communicated more abstractly when the receiver held a more favorable (vs. unfavorable) attitude of the product under consideration. Likewise, negative experiences were communicated more abstractly when receivers held a less favorable (vs. favorable) attitude of the product. This bias parallels the “classical” linguistic expectancy bias, but has its cause in a different source, namely the attitude of the receiving party.

Our research sheds new light on the oft-studied topic of word of mouth, by providing insights into the subtleties of product-related conversations. We provide a first application of the linguistic category model outside the context of (inter)personal behavior, and demonstrate a linguistic expectancy bias for inanimate objects. Secondly, we propose and demonstrate a receiver linguistic expectancy bias. Our studies show that language abstraction is responsive to the influence of the communication context: a communicator’s use of language abstraction is biased to fit the expectations of the receiver. Opportunities for future research are identified in the paper.

REFERENCES


