How Language Signals Persuasion: Concrete and Abstract Language in Product Referrals From Consumers and Firms

Ale Smidts, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Gaby Schellekens, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands
Peeter Verlegh, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

We examined the impact of concrete and abstract language in product referrals from consumers and sales personnel on perceived persuasion knowledge. While language abstraction in referrals from other consumers has no effect on persuasion motives, more abstract (vs. concrete) language use from sales agents activated a perception of being persuaded.

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Look Who’s Talking: Linguistic Signaling in C2C and B2C Communication

Chairs: Gaby Schellekens, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands
Ann Kronrod, Michigan State University, USA

Peeter W.J. Verlegh, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Camiel Beukeboom, Vrije University Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Christian Burgers, Vrije University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Paper #2: Wii Will Rock You! The Role of Figurative Language in Word of Mouth.
Ann Kronrod, Michigan State University, USA
Shai Danziger, Tel-Aviv University, Israel

Gaby Schellekens, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands
Peeter W.J. Verlegh, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Ale Smidts, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Grant Packard, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
Sarah G. Moore, University of Alberta, Canada
Brent McFerran, University of Michigan, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumers and firms communicate their intentions through a variety of language uses. Instances of such language uses may be pronoun use (‘I/we will consider your complaint’), negation (‘It wasn’t expensive’), figurative language (‘It’s the Ferrari of vacuum cleaners’), or language abstraction (‘That perfume smells fresh/is nice’). Recently emerging work on linguistic behavior in marketing (Kronrod, Grinstein and Wathieu 2012a, 2012b; Moore 2012; Patrick and Hagvedt, 2010; Schellekens, Verlegh and Smidts 2010) has directed a spotlight to questions of language use and its effect in marketing communication.

The current session is, figuratively speaking, a ray of this spotlight. In this session we intend to make a difference, bringing a new breeze of research to the attention of our research community. We will present works, all of which investigate phenomena in marketing linguistics, hoping the session will stimulate wide discussion of consumers’ and firms’ talk and what effects it has. The papers in this session are all closely tied around language use of consumers and firms. All four deal with the question: how do variations in language use affect consumers?

Verlegh and Beukeboom investigate the effect of negation in WOM and find that consumers use negation (e.g. ‘it didn’t take long’) when they describe experiences inconsistent with their expectations; receivers of negation interpret this as a signal of unexpected product performance. Kronrod and Danziger examine the use of figurative language in communication originating from users (WOM) or firms (ads) and show how the source (WOM or ads) moderates the effect of figurative language on product evaluations and choice, for hedonic and utilitarian options. Schellekens, Verlegh and Smidts also compare WOM to firm communication and demonstrate that the use of abstract (vs. concrete) language in product referrals from sales agents activates more persuasion knowledge than when it comes from other consumers. Finally, Packard, Moore and McFerran find that when firm service agents use “I” rather than “you” or “we” in responding to customer inquiries and complaints, customer purchases increase up to one year after the interaction, due to elevated perceptions of the employee’s agency and empathy.

Together, the works in this session represent the growing interest in linguistic behavior of firms and consumers. The issues investigated in each of the papers have clear implications for consumers and marketers, as language is a natural component of almost any communication in marketing. Although these papers are tightly connected in their focus on language use in marketplace communication, they display variety of approaches and topics that will stimulate additional research into the role of language in marketing and consumer behavior. The combination of novel concept and a strongly increasing interest in linguistic issues in consumer behavior should warrant a wide interest for this session at ACR 2013.

A Negation Bias in Word of Mouth: How Negations Reveal and Maintain Expectancies about Brands and Products

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers like to talk about their product experiences with others. This word of mouth (WOM) can have a strong impact on product evaluations and sales (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006), both practitioners and academics have great interest in understanding its effects and underlying mechanisms. Although research on WOM has a long history, dating back to the seminal work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), academics have only recently begun to examine language use (Moore 2012; Schellekens, Verlegh & Smidts, 2010). Findings suggest that consumers implicitly reveal much information “in between the lines” of their WOM messages. Such formulation differences may for instance reveal speakers’ a priori brand expectations when they describe a product experience. Of particular interest is the use of negations. The Negation Bias (Beukeboom, Finkenauer & Wigboldus, 2010) demonstrates that negations usage (e.g., not stupid, rather than smart) is more pronounced when (stereotypic) expectancies are violated, compared to when expectancies are confirmed For instance, garbage men performing poorly on IQ-tests is stereotypically expected and likely described as “stupid”, for professors this would be unexpected and described as “not smart”. Importantly, negations lead message recipients to infer that the described experience was an exception, caused by situational circumstances (Beukeboom et al., 2010).

In two experiments, we examined the existence of a negation bias in WOM. We expect that negations are used more often in descriptions of expectancy inconsistent than consistent product experiences. We also expect that receivers can “decode” these implicit communications: a speaker’s use of negations leads the receiver to infer that the described experience is an exception to the rule. The use of negations in inconsistent situations will dampen the impact of WOM on receivers, serving to maintain a brand’s positive or negative reputation, even in the face of WOM disconfirming that reputation.
Experiment 1 examined whether people are more likely to use negations when they describe product experiences that are inconsistent (versus consistent) with their a priori brand expectations. Participants were presented with WOM vignettes that varied according to a mixed 2 (positive/negative brand expectation) x 2 (positive/negative experience) x 5 (vignettes) design. To manipulate expectations, we used pretested brands scoring either high or low on a focal attribute. For example, a customer received slow (versus fast) service in a Hilton (versus Ibis) Hotel. We created five vignettes for each condition. Each participant saw all five different vignettes within one condition. This was analyzed as a within-subjects factor.

Following Beukeboom et al. (2010), participants rated how well each experience was described by a negation or an affirmation (e.g., “the service was not fast/ slow”). After rating all five experiences, they were again presented on a separate page, and participants rated the expectedness of each experience.

A mixed model ANOVA revealed the predicted expectation x valence interaction, for both dependent variables (F(1,115)=9; p<.01): for positive experiences, negations were rated more applicable when participants held low (versus high) expectations, and for negative experiences, negations were rated less applicable when participants held low expectations. Effects were mediated (Hayes, 2012) by perceived expectedness: the less expected an experience, the more applicable participants rated the negations, and the less applicable they rated affirmations.

Experiment 2 examined whether a speaker’s use of negations indeed leads receivers to infer that the experience was unexpected. Participants (N=123) read a scenario in which a friend commented on his suitcase. This comment was varied in a 2 (valence: positive/negative) x 2 (description: negation/affirmation) between-subjects design. We measured participants’ inferences about (1) the expectedness of the experience, (2) the speaker’s surprise with the experience, (3) the speaker’s expectations before the experience, and (4) speaker evaluation of the experience.

As predicted, participants inferred that the experience was less expected and more surprising when the speaker used negations versus affirmations (both F(1,119)=4, p<.05). Interactions with valence were non-significant. For inferences about the speaker’s a priori expectations we do predict an interaction: negations in descriptions of negative experiences (“not fast”) signal a positive a priori expectation, but the opposite is true for positive experiences (“not slow”). Indeed, we found a (marginally) significant interaction (F(1,119)=3.55, p=.06): the effect was significant (p<.05) for negative experiences, and directionally consistent for positive experiences.

Importantly, we found no significant effects of negations on inferences about the speaker’s evaluations. After all, negations do not communicate whether an experience was positive or negative. They do, however, communicate whether it was (un)expected, and whether it confirmed the speaker’s expectations. In this manner, negations provide a subtle mechanism for communicating and maintaining brand reputations.

**Wii Will Rock You! The Role of Figurative Language in Word of Mouth**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Research in advertising has studied the persuasive effect of figurative language. Figurative language is the use of words and expressions to convey an additional connotation beyond that of their lexical meaning (Fogelin 1988). Instances of figurative language may be, among others, metaphor (The Ferrari of vacuum cleaners), word play (Don’t leave without a good buy), idiomatic expressions (My car’s a lemon), hyperbole (the service was a cell phone professor) or imitating sounds (This teacher is wrrrruff, meaning a tough teacher, or ouch!, meaning I was offended).

The common finding and general conviction is that figurative language evokes positive affect and attitudes across contexts (McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 2003; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009). In contrast, we suggest that figurative language in user generated content is effective only in certain contexts. We propose that this context sensitivity results from a difference in the conversational norms regarding advertising and consumer generated content. For example, consumers often perceive ads to be biased, persuasive attempts (Sweldens, Van Osselaer, and Janiszewski, 2010). By contrast, user-generated content is generally perceived as an objective sharing of opinions (Moore 2012; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010; Sen and Lerman 2007). Thus, conversational norms regarding persuasive text may include expectations for linguistic tactics and artful word play. Conversely, the norms of using figures of speech in user generated content may not be governed by a general expectation of the text to be persuasive, but rather of it to reflect a sincere opinion.

Because of these differences we suggest consumers have a different set of conversational norms and expectations regarding advertising and user generated content. Namely, it is typical for, and expected of, advertising communication to be exaggerated and emotionally intensified. Therefore, figurative language is generally normative for advertising (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Rotfeld and Torzoll 1980; Simonson and Holbrook 1993; Tonear and Fetscherin 2012; Xu and Wyer 2010). But user generated content is a form of natural language in interpersonal communication. Therefore language perception and language choice may be governed by considerations that differ from those in advertising, particularly in their crucial dependence on the context of conversation (Grice 1975; Schwarzwald 1996; Sperber and Wilson 1995).

We base our reasoning on psycholinguistic literature that demonstrates a positive link between emotional intensity and use of figurative language (Bryant and Gibbs 2002; Caillies and Butcher 2007; Russell and Moss 1998; Zemanova 2007). We then suggest hedonic and utilitarian consumption as contexts commonly associated with emotional and rational attitudes, respectively (e.g. Alba and Williams 2013; Chaudhuri and Ligas 2006; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Building on these literatures, we propose figurative language is more conversationally normative, and therefore more effective, in hedonic consumption than in utilitarian consumption. Following the reasoning whereby communication norms govern not only perception, but also language choice, we then test and find support for the prediction that consumers also use figurative language more in descriptions of hedonic consumption rather than utilitarian consumption.

In our studies we focus on the conditions that invoke the use of figurative language in consumption context and the conditions that increase the effectiveness of figurative language in WOM. In study 1 we contrast the effectiveness of figurative language in ads versus in WOM. Participants read a description of a hotel for either a business or a vacation purpose, which was presented as if taken from an ad or from a consumer review. The description was either figurative (e.g. “The service is like on a king’s reception) or literal (e.g. The service is very professional). Results comparing ads to reviews suggest it is conversationally normative for figurative language to be used in advertisements for both hedonic and utilitarian product descriptions, and therefore the effectiveness of figurative language is similar for both types of product. However, figurative language is less norma-
tive, and therefore less effective, in utilitarian product descriptions provided by consumers ($F(1,334) = 4.2, p < .05$).

In study 2 we examined the effects of figurative language on real consequential consumer decisions. After reading figurative or literal reviews of the same store, which contained both hedonic and utilitarian products, participants were asked to choose hedonic or utilitarian products as a reward for participation in the experiment. Participants who read reviews containing figurative language chose more hedonic products as prizes than participants who read reviews that did not contain figurative language ($t = 5.0, p < .001$).

Study 3 involves natural data analysis. We analyzed product review headlines from www.Amazon.com. We find higher frequency of figurative language in hedonic product reviews, compared with utilitarian product reviews ($F(1,21) = 15.8, p < .05$). Our analysis also shows that in reviews of hedonic products more extreme product evaluations employ more figurative language, while in reviews of utilitarian products review extremity does not moderate use of figurative language ($F_{(1,4) }= 18.4, p < .001$).

Finally, in study 4 participants use liquid soap for either a utilitarian purpose (washing a spoon) or a hedonic purpose (blowing bubbles) and compose reviews of the products. Linguistic analysis of the reviews shows higher figurativeness of reviews for the soap when used to blow bubbles ($t(1,88) = 2.12, p < .05$).

This work contributes to consumer research by exploring an underrepresented aspect of online consumer communication – use and effects of language. This work also contributes to research of communication and psycholinguistics by being the first to investigate the effect of figurative language in natural communication. Finally, we propose a new theoretical explanation for the link between figurativeness and emotion, introducing conversational norms.

### How Language Signals Persuasion: Concrete and Abstract Language in Product Referrals from Consumers and Firms

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Nowadays it’s becoming more difficult to detect if a product review or referral is made by another customer (without self-interest in advertising a product), or by someone with a commercial interest (advertisement, word-of-mouth marketing). Consider raving product reviews on Amazon.com or emails with product offerings from Facebook friends. What could be sincere word of mouth could also be a marketing scheme. One way to figure out the sincerity of the communication situation is to examine the language use in product referrals.

While psycholinguistics in marketing communication has received much attention from academics (for overview see Lowrey, 2007), language use in word of mouth only recently gained popularity (e.g., Moore, 2012). Building on the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), Schellekens et al. (2010) have studied the use and effects of abstract versus concrete language in word of mouth. According to this model, an event can be described at different levels of abstraction. For example, the low fuel consumption of the Toyota Prius may be described as “the Prius use little gas” (concrete) or “the Prius is eco-friendly” (abstract). The use of abstract language describes the information as general and stable (“traitlike”), while concrete descriptions contain verifiable information on product functioning. Schellekens et al. (2010) showed that receivers of word of mouth are receptive to the use of abstract versus concrete language. They found that senders of positive (negative) word of mouth were perceived to be more positive (negative) about a brand if they use more abstract language, and that consumers who receive word of mouth are persuaded more when the sender uses more abstract language. The current studies extend prior research on language abstraction and examine the role of communication setting (commercial vs. non-commercial). The studies suggest that communication setting moderates the impact of language abstraction on consumers through the activation of persuasion knowledge. Persuasion knowledge refers to consumers’ assumptions and beliefs about persuasion and marketers’ motives, strategies, and tactics (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

We argue that environmental cues in a communication setting can moderate the effect of language abstraction on persuasion knowledge of consumers, which in turn could affect product attitude and buying intention. More specifically, an environmental cue (e.g., advice giver has a sales motivation) could trigger consumers to be suspicious and attentive to persuasion cues. Since language can be used as a subtle mechanism to signal more information than the literal meaning of a message, suspicious consumers could scrutinize language use. Previous research showed that abstract (vs. concrete) descriptions are used more when trying to be persuasive (Schellekens, Verlegh & Smidts, 2012). Sales personnel is expected to try to convince customers to buy products and therefore might be expected to use more abstract (vs. concrete) language when describing products. Thus, positive product referrals framed abstractly (vs. concretely) from a sender with a commercial motive may be seen as more manipulative and incite more persuasion knowledge. On the contrary, without environmental cues indicating a commercial motive (i.e., word-of-mouth communication) we have no reason to expect a difference is the activated persuasion knowledge between abstract and concrete language use in referrals.

In Study 1, we manipulated the communication context (source of referral: commercial vs. non-commercial) and language abstraction of referral (concrete vs. abstract) between subject design. Participants read a scenario in which a person (“Sandra”) was shopping in a perfumery when she heard a referral about a new perfume (“Spring”). Half of the participants were told that this referral was given by a sales person, while the other half were told it was given by another customer. The product referral was either described concretely as “Spring smells fresh’ or abstractly as ‘Spring is a nice perfume’. The participants rated the goal of the communication from trying to (1) inform me about ‘Spring’ perfume to (9) persuade me into buying, and the interest of the speaker from (1) help Sandra to (9) own interest (Campbell, 1999; 2007). Next, participants indicated the speakers persuasion motives on four nine-point items ($r=.816$; not manipulative/manipulative, sincere/insincere, honest/dishonest, and not pushy/pushy (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

As predicted, when a sales agents describes a product referral abstractly (vs. concretely), this leads to inferring the speaker as trying to sell a product (7.34 vs. 6.23, $t(130)=6.04, p=.015$), serving his own interest (6.66 vs. 5.94, $t(130)=2.86, p=.10$), and having persuasion motives (i.e., being seen as more manipulative and pushy and less sincere and honest) (5.61 vs. 4.89, $t(130)=5.34, p=.022$). On the contrary, in line with our expectations the language abstraction of referrals from another customer has no effect on persuasion knowledge (all $r's<1$).

In study 2, we focused on the intervening construct, suspiciousness, which we activated by informing all participants that some of the product referrals of the study were written with a motive to be persuasive. We thus examined whether consumers who have a reason to be suspicious about the source of a referral associate the use of abstract (vs. concrete) language with a persuasion motive. We presented participants with five different product descriptions which were either abstract or concrete. For each description they were...
asked to indicate on a nine-point scale whether they thought that
the referral was given by (1) a friend or (9) a company agent. The
concrete description of the household appliance was for example
“this appliance works good” and the abstract version was “this appli-
cance is good”. As expected, abstract (vs. concrete) statements were
more strongly linked to salespeople than to friends (5.03 vs. 4.09,
F(1,46)=10.77, p<.01).

The present studies extend the prior work by Schellekens and
colleagues (2010), and show that the use of abstract language does
not necessarily lead to more persuasive referrals. The two stud-
ies show that the use of abstract language may trigger persuasion
knowledge, especially in commercial contexts. The findings add to
the growing body of knowledge on the impact of language on per-
suasion, and help us understand how language abstraction affects
consumers differently in different contexts. They also add the use
of (abstract) language to the list of factors that are known to activate
persuasion knowledge, which may provide fertile ground for future
research in this area.

Putting the Customer Second: Pronouns in Customer-
Firm Interactions

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent work has demonstrated the importance of specific word
use in influencing consumer behavior. This emerging body of work
has examined the impact of language use on consumer senders and
receivers of word of mouth (Moore 2012; Patrick and Hagvedt,
2010; Schellekens, Verlegh and Smidts 2010) and advertising (Sela,
Wheeler and Sarial-Abi 2012). Yet there is little work examining the
impact of firm employee language on consumers, particularly in the
case of service interactions.

Firms, however, are starting to pay attention to interaction con-
tent, particularly when it comes to training and evaluating front-line
employees. For example, Apple has “stop words” that employees are
prohibited from saying to customers (Chen 2011). In contrast, online
retailer Zappos does not have scripts for its agents, allowing each to
talk about a “personal emotional connection” with customers (Hsieh
2010). Despite their different philosophies on language use, both
Apple and Zappos recognize the importance of measuring and man-
aging what is said between customers and employees. In this vein,
we offer an empirical examination of the behavioral consequences
of language use in service interactions. While prior research on ser-
vice interactions often examines how actions taken by firm agents
(e.g. apologies, compensation; e.g. DeMatos et al. 2007; Rust and
Chung 2006) influence customer attitudes and/or behaviors, we are
unaware of research assessing how their words might affect the same
outcomes.

Our conceptual focus is on pronoun use, as pronouns are an
important psychological indicator (Pennebaker 2011) and have been
found to impact brand information processing (Bitner 1990; Sela et
al. 2010). Further, it is not clear which pronouns firm agents should
use in their interactions with customers. Managerial theory suggests
that firm agents should talk about “you” (the customer) in interac-
tions, thereby “putting the customer first” (Basch 2003, Evenson
2011). This tenet is corroborated by findings from linguistic psychol-
ogy that demonstrate “you” pronouns can convey a focus on and
desire to satisfy an interaction partner (e.g., Icke, Reidhead and Pat-
terson 1986).

In contrast, we predict that more self-centered firm agent lan-
guage—represented by heavier use of “I” pronouns—may be par-
icularly effective. Some support for this prediction comes from re-
search suggesting that “I” pronouns indicate agency (e.g., Ahearn
2001; Pennebaker 2011) and socially-shared concerns (i.e., empathy;
Campbell and Pennebaker 2003). Our research thus examines the impact of firm-agent use of “I” (vs. “you”) pronouns on customer
attitudes and behaviors, with perceived firm-agent agency and em-
pathy as potential mediators of this relationship. We leverage a lin-
guistic analysis package (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, and Francis
2007) that identifies the proportion of words used in 70 linguistic
and psychological categories, including pronoun sub-groups (e.g.,
the “I” sub-group includes “I’m”, “me”, “my”).

Study 1 examined which pronouns firms prioritize in practice.
We constructed two emails—a customer question and a complaint—
and sent these to a random sample (N = 20) of the top 100 Internet
retailers (https://www.internetretailer.com/top500). Consistent with
the tenet of “putting the customer first” we found, for example, that
while “you” pronouns appeared in 100% of firm responses, “I” pro-
pronouns were present in only a minority (27%). It appears that firm
agents indeed focus on the customer (vs. themselves) in these inter-
actions. But is this necessarily ideal?

In Study 2, a controlled experiment examined the impact of
firm agent pronoun use on customer satisfaction, with perceptions
of firm agent agency and empathy as mediators. Participants (N =
376) imagined they had engaged in one of eight versions of a cus-
tomer-firm interaction in a 2 (customer inquiry: complaint, question)
x 4 (firm response: 1, you, control) between-subjects design.
Versions of the firm response varied the preponderance of pronoun
use only, with no change in meaning. After reading the interaction,
participants reported their satisfaction with the interaction and their
perceptions of firm agent agency and empathy. Regardless of inter-
action type (question or complaint), the “I” condition resulted in
higher customer satisfaction than the “you”, “we”, or control condi-
tions. Bootstrap tests confirmed parallel mediation of the “I” effect
by participant perceptions of firm-agent agency and empathy.

In our third study, we leveraged a unique dataset from a large
online retailer to examine whether firm agent pronoun use has real
behavioral consequences. The data is comprised of over 1,100 unique
interactions (6,500 emails) between customers and firm agents over
a one-year period and includes each customer’s purchase data for a
one year period pre/post their interactions. Similar to our Study 1
findings, firm agent use of “you” pronouns was higher than the use
of “I” pronouns (91% vs. 28% of emails). More importantly, control-
ling for a large number of alternative explanations and covariates
(e.g., customer pronoun use, pre-interaction purchases, complaint
dummy, compensation dummy, # of emails in interaction, customer
anger, demographics), we found that firm agent use of “I” pronouns
(but not “you” or “we”) was linked to a significant increase in post-
interaction purchases at one-year and shorter time intervals.

This research opens the door to further examinations of lan-
guage use in customer-firm interactions. We show that while firms
appear to prioritize the customer through the use of “you” pronouns,
the use of “I” pronouns have a greater positive impact on customer
satisfaction and purchase behavior. Our analysis sheds light on how
firms might leverage the linguistic content of customer-firm commu-
nications (e.g. email, blogs, social networks, etc.) to improve their
use of language in these interactions, thereby enhancing customer
relationships.

1 We also assessed “we” pronouns as a third relevant pronoun group,
but refrain from extensive discussion of “we” here for brevity. Judge coding
found that over 98% of firm agent use of “we” referred to “firm + agent”, not
“firm + customer” or “agent + customer.” “We” was thus the primary non-
customer pronoun used by firm agents. “We” pronouns were ineffective in
relation to customer satisfaction (negative impact of “we” vs. “I”, null “we”
vs. control) and purchases (null or negative impact for “we”).
REFERENCES


