Grammatical Subject, Base Rates, and Persuasion

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Four experiments show that for success claims, user-subjects, where users are the grammatical subject of a sentence (e.g., 90% of users succeed with this product), are more persuasive than product-subjects (e.g., this product succeeds for 90% of users), where the product is the grammatical subject. The opposite holds true for failure claims.

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Companies often make claims about the success rates of their products and/or the failure rates of competitors’ products. We examine whether changes in the grammatical subject used in these claims affect persuasion. Specifically, we differentiate between user-subjects, where users are the grammatical subject of the sentence, and product subjects, where the product is the grammatical subject of the sentence. For example, the success of a weight loss program can be presented either with a user-subject claim stating that “80% of participants succeed in reducing their excess weight” (Digitale 2010) or with a product-subject claim stating that “our program succeeds in reducing excess weight for 80% of participants.” Similarly, the failure of competitors’ sales training program can be presented with a user-subject claim stating that “75% of all participants in traditional sales training fail to learn anything” (Miller and Sinkovitz 2012) or with a product-subject claim stating that “Traditional sales training fails to teach anything for 75% of all participants.”

We empirically demonstrate that changes in the grammatical subject affect persuasion through a mediation chain that includes attribution of causality and optimism bias as mediators. Drawing on the linguistic literature (Fausey and Boroditsky 2010; McGlone et al. 2013), we suggest that user-subject claims lead to the causal attribution of success/failure to the users of the product rather than to the product’s characteristics.

Based on research on unrealistic optimism (Weinstein 1987), we predict that this difference in causal attribution affects peoples’ expectations about product performance. That is, situations perceived as more controllable can increase people’s expectation of outperforming others (Helweg-Larsen and Shepperd 2001; Weinstein 1987). Thus, user-subjects, which lead to causal attributions that are more controllable (i.e., performance depends on customers’ actions) should prompt more optimism, which results in the overestimation of success (e.g., I will be among those who succeed) and the underestimation of failure (e.g., I will not be among those who fail).

Following these predictions, the persuasiveness of different grammatical subjects should depend on whether claims are about success or failure. For success claims (e.g., 70% success rate), user-subject claims should be more persuasive (e.g., result in higher attitudes toward the product described) than product-subject claims, since greater optimism bias increases the perceived likelihood of personal success. For failure claims (e.g., 70% failure rate), user-subject claims should be less persuasive, resulting in less damaging attitudes toward the product described, since greater optimism bias decreases the perceived likelihood of personal failure.

We tested this prediction in four experiments. In Experiment 1, participants read a claim about the performance of two blenders (i.e., blender A and blender B) which manipulated both the type of claim and its grammatical subject, resulting in a 2 x 2 (claim type: success vs. failure) x (subject: user vs. product) between-subject design. Success claims reported that blender A performed better than blender B. In the user-subject condition, participants were informed that “50% of customers perform much better with blender A” whereas in the product-subject condition, participants were informed that “blender B performs much worse than blender A for 50% of customers.” The dependent variable was the choice between the two blenders. Results revealed a significant interaction effect. For success claims (e.g., Blender A performs better than Blender B), more participants chose Blender A in the user-subject condition than in the product-subject condition, hence showing that the user-subject was more persuasive. We explain this finding by suggesting that the optimism bias cued by the user-subject makes people believe they can do better than the average consumer, thus making them more likely to choose blender A. For failure claims (i.e., Blender B performs worse than Blender A), more participants chose Blender A in the product-subject condition than in the user-subject condition. Because the claim discredited the performance of blender B, this finding suggests that the user-subject was less persuasive than the product-subject (i.e., fewer [more] people chose Blender A[B]). We suggest that optimism bias cued by the user-subject makes people believe they are less likely to fail than the average consumer, thus resulting in an underestimation of possible failure for blender B.

Experiment 2 provides evidence for the underlying mechanism by testing the three-path mediation process (subject→causal attribution→optimism bias→attitudes) using the bootstrap procedure proposed by Hayes (2012, model 6). Experiment 3 replicates the subject effect with different base rates ranging from 15% to 85%. Finally, a field study conducted with Google AdWords shows that a success claim for an existing company resulted in a higher click-through-rate when presented with a user-subject, than with a product-subject.

This work makes several contributions. First, it contributes to research on linguistic framing (Patrick and Hagtvedt 2012) in a significant manner: Whereas most examples of verbal framing examine changes in specific words (e.g., 97% lean meat vs. 3% fat meat), our work examines changes in syntax, which can, in principle, be applied to a broader variety of marketing communications of product success and failure. Second, it contributes to research on causality. Previous work on causality suggests that product attributions are more persuasive because perceived to be more stable and thus more diagnostic of the product future performance (Folkes 1984). We show that under some conditions product attribution can be less persuasive than customer attribution, hence enriching our understanding of the effects of causal attribution on persuasion.


Miller, Marc and Jason Sinkovitz (2012), *Selling Is Dead: Moving Beyond Traditional Sales Roles and Practices To Revitalize Growth:* John Wiley & Sons.