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Receivers' Expectations for Abstract Versus Concrete Construal

Conversational Relevance as a Determinant of Construal Level

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How does conversational context shape the construal level of future events? According to construal-level theory, temporally distant events are construed more abstractly than close events due to an association between distance and construal level. The authors have argued that *situated conversational relevancies* determine construal level and therefore that construal level is flexible and determined in situ. Building on research that examined construal level in a language-production paradigm, this research examined the *recipient's expectations* for abstract versus concrete messages. Results supported the hypotheses that although temporal distance information should direct construal expectancies when shared knowledge information is not salient, social rules dictate that when salient, shared knowledge information determines construal level, overriding temporal distance. These findings support the reciprocal nature of conversational relevance and the symmetry between language production and reception.

Keywords: *construal level; conversational relevance; shared knowledge; socially situated cognition; linguistic abstraction*

We construe events in our lives in many different ways. One such dimension on which construal can be examined is *construal level*: High-level or abstract construals represent an event in terms of its general or global features, whereas low-level or concrete construals represent its local details and specific features. For

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example, a future vacation could be construed more abstractly as “providing a chance to relax and unwind” or more concretely as “packing some good books to read.” Different construal levels have different psychological implications because they draw attention to the very same event in different ways (Stapel & Semin, 2007). In the above example, abstract construal draws attention to the general reasons and goals behind the event, whereas concrete construal focuses attention on the specific actions involved in realizing the event (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

What determines the level at which we construe events? Recently, a prominent answer to this question was given by construal-level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003; see Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007, for a review). According to CLT, construal level is determined by the psychological distance perceived between the self and the event or object being construed, where distance may be temporal, social, spatial, or hypothetical (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Results across a number of studies show that distant events are construed more abstractly than close events (see Liberman et al., 2007, for a review). The majority of research has examined the influence of temporal distance on construal. Temporal distance to events in the future has been shown to affect construal in terms of object classification (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002), behavior consistency, causal attribution (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003), and construal of actions (Liberman & Trope, 1998). For instance, Liberman and Trope (1998, Study 1) had participants describe a series of activities, imagining that they would engage in the activity either *tomorrow* (near future) or *next year* (distant future). The open-ended responses were coded as fitting a more abstract, high-level construal or more concrete, low-level construal. For example, for the activity “reading a science book,” the descriptions “broadening my horizons” and “flipping pages” are more abstract versus concrete construals, respectively (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

The account advanced to explain the relationship between construal level and distance is one of association. It is argued that the pattern of association—abstract representation of distant events and more concrete representation of near events—is based on a heuristic that has developed out of repeated experience of having more knowledge about events that are closer in time. We have argued for a different explanation of how construal level is determined (A. E. Clark & Semin, 2007). Although such an association is well supported in the literature, our construal of events does not occur in a vacuum but takes place in a social context as socially situated action. We construe events for particular purposes and in a specific context. Thus situated factors present in any given situation are also likely to determine whether the construal of a future event is more abstract (e.g., “I need to relax and unwind”) or more concrete (e.g., “I need to pack my suitcase”).

Situating Construal in a Social Context

Social action needs to be flexible in order to be adaptive to the changing demands of different contexts. Consequently, our *construal* of events is also flexible and adaptive:

Construal is a *functional response* to the demands of a situation. Such a perspective on social cognition as adaptive action places our approach to construal firmly under the umbrella of *socially situated* cognition (see Semin & Smith, 2002; Smith & Semin, 2004). It follows that an understanding of how people construe events must be based on an examination of the phenomenon in the context in which it is functional (Semin, in press). If we are to examine construal level in terms of how events are construed in *language*, then we must examine language *use*, a primary site of which is conversation. Obviously, intrapsychological cognitive and motivational factors also contribute to the shape of construal as illustrated by the research literature on the linguistic intergroup bias (see Maass, 1999, and Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007, reviews). The research we report here focuses on the contribution of interpsychological or social-level factors in shaping construal level.

Construal Level in Conversation

A conversational context places particular demands on construal. Contributions to a conversation must be meaningful and understandable to conversational partners in order that they build a shared understanding of the topic at hand (H. H. Clark, 1996; H. H. Clark & Brennan, 1991). Furthermore, communication is inherently cooperative and collaborative. Grice's (1975) cooperative principle has been central to this discussion. According to Grice, to enter into conversation is to enter a social contract, entailing that one's contributions will be informative, truthful, relevant, and unambiguous. These four commitments are the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, respectively, and exist as socially shared knowledge. Relevance theory (Wilson & Sperber, 2004), which has its roots in Grice's original work, claims that all cognition can be understood as operating on a relevance criterion: that cognition automatically tunes to what is relevant at any given moment. According to this theory, therefore, relevance is the optimal principle.

Central to understanding the *relevance* of possible contributions to conversation is shared knowledge; information that is shared and assumed to be shared by both partners in communication (H. H. Clark, 1996; see Krauss & Fussell, 1996, for a review). Research has shown that communicators make assumptions of shared knowledge and tailor their messages accordingly: In other words, relevance considerations take place against a backdrop of shared knowledge. For example, it has been shown that when shared knowledge is assumed present, conversational partners take fewer conversational turns to ground new information and use a greater number of proper nouns and figurative language in their messages (e.g., Fussell & Krauss, 1989; Isaacs & Clark, 1987). The specific content of the message is also affected: When communicators are aware that their audience already knows one subset of the total information, they will include more of the other subset in their communicated message (e.g., Slugoski, Lalljee, Lamb, & Ginsburg, 1993). Although these findings suggest that relevance concerns influence the process of conversation and its content,

the influence of relevance concerns upon construal level has not, to our knowledge, been examined.

How might shared knowledge influence the construal level of new messages? In previous research, we have examined how different conversational contexts affect the construal level of messages that communicators send to recipients (A. E. Clark & Semin, 2007). In this research, the temporal distance of the event in question (close vs. distant) and the type of shared knowledge between conversational partners (present, absent, unspecified) were manipulated orthogonally to create different conversational contexts for talking about a future event. The prediction was that when the shared-knowledge status of the conversational partner was unspecified (providing a control condition for the shared-knowledge variable), then the temporal distance of the event would influence construal level, but that when shared-knowledge information was salient, that this informational cue would direct construal level. Thus, we predicted that the level of construal would shift across different conversational contexts as a function of the different relevancies of abstractness and concreteness, where information about the temporal distance of the event and a receiver's shared knowledge of the event would influence these relevancies. Although we predicted that both informational cues would affect construal level, it was predicted that the shared-knowledge cue would have greater influence, overriding the effect of temporal distance information, in conversational contexts.

The findings supported these predictions. When only the temporal distance information was salient, close events were construed more concretely than distant events. Although this is in line with the predictions based on construal level theory, our argument was derived somewhat differently. According to a socially situated perspective, in general, people attend increasingly to the detailed features of any event as the temporal proximity of an event increases. This is simply because an event acquires increased situated meaning in terms of the salient actions that have to be engaged in order to realize an event. Thus, with increasing temporal proximity, the relevance of concreteness should increase the closer the event is in time.

When communicators also had information about their communication partner's shared knowledge of the event, however, findings were quite different. We found that when there is awareness of the degree of shared knowledge (its presence or absence on a given topic), then there are additional social constraints on relevance as the message must have relevance against this background of shared knowledge. Specifically, our results showed that when a communication partner had no shared knowledge of the event in question, construal level was relatively abstract, regardless of the temporal distance of the event; whereas when shared knowledge was present, construal became more concrete. This supported our argument that the relevancies of concreteness and abstractness change as a function of shared knowledge and that the presence of shared-knowledge information provided a further social constraint on conversational relevance, affecting construal level over and above temporal distance information.

If a communication partner does not share any knowledge, then the relevant task is to deploy an abstract strategy in order to present the gist of the event that will convey meaning in general and global terms. In contrast, if both communication partners share knowledge about the event already, then drawing attention to the specifics becomes more relevant as this provides a way to build on the general framework that is already known. In this way, the presence or absence of shared knowledge has specific implications for the relative relevance of concreteness and abstractness.

Although this previous research has focused on language production—how communicators shape messages for their audience—language *reception* has not been examined. If we are to understand conversation as a jointly negotiated activity (e.g., H. H. Clark, 1996), however, it is crucial to also see evidence for conversational relevance on the side of *language reception*.

The Current Research

Conversations are reciprocal in nature: What is said and understood is codetermined by both parties involved. Conversations are highly coordinated activities in which both communication partners jointly define what is meaningful and relevant on any given topic, and thus relevance is determined by both communicator and receiver alike (H. H. Clark, 1996; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Therefore, we argue that the situated-relevance demands that operate on a sender's production of the message also operate on receivers' expectations of what they will hear about the topic at hand. This hypothesis of symmetry between production and reception is at issue in the current research and, if supported, will provide evidence for the reciprocal grounding of situated relevance. Moreover, such evidence would introduce a more situated conceptual framework for construal level than its current theoretical location, namely, an associative relationship between distance and construal level, which does not address the adaptive nature of cognition and construal.

The aim of the current study was therefore to examine the reciprocal nature of the *conversational relevance hypothesis*, because conversational assumptions are grounded on an interchangeability of perspectives assumption—namely, what is relevant for the speaker must be relevant for the listener, and thus there should be some symmetry between production and reception. From this perspective, we examined whether conversation partners who will hear about an event from another person have the complementary expectations for construal relevance as their “language producing” counterparts.

Specifically, the current study examined the influence of temporal distance and shared knowledge on the construal level of future events as *expected by a receiver*. Specifically, it was hypothesized that although temporal distance information should direct construal expectancies in the absence of shared-knowledge information (in

line with CLT), when shared-knowledge information between the communication partners is available, the extent of shared-knowledge information should determine construal level over and above temporal distance information as it has greater salience for conversational relevance.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 103 volunteers at the VU University Amsterdam (59.2% female) aged between 17 and 30 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.51$ years). Each participant received 50 Euro cents as payment.¹ The study consisted of a 2 (temporal distance: close vs. distant) $\times$ 3 shared knowledge (present vs. absent vs. unspecified [control]) $\times$ 2 (presentation order) mixed design with the last factor being within-subjects.

Construction and Testing of the Texts

Two texts about the same event—a vacation to Mexico—were constructed (see the appendix). One was written as if answering a general “why” question, emphasizing the goals and reasons behind the vacation. The second answered the “how” question and emphasized the specific, concrete details involved in making the event happen. The extent to which the texts varied in abstraction level was examined in a small pilot study. Results from 22 participants (12 female) indicated that the abstract version provided significantly more why information (about the goals for and reasons why this person is going on the vacation) than the concrete version, $F(1, 20) = 17.16$, $p < .01$, $\chi^2 = .46$ ($M_{\text{abstract}} = 6.00$, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 3.36$), which provided significantly more how information (about the details of what is being done to help make the vacation take place) than the abstract version, $F(1, 20) = 22.69$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2 = .53$ ($M_{\text{abstract}} = 2.09$, $M_{\text{concrete}} = 5.27$). Results on two further questions indicated that the two texts were seen as equally interesting (in terms of information about a vacation) and that the person describing his or her vacation was equally positive about the vacation across the two texts.

The abstraction level of the texts was also determined in relation to the level of linguistic abstraction using the linguistic category model (LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988). The interpersonal predicates appearing in the text were coded by an expert coder trained in the LCM. Coding showed that the interpersonal predicates used in the concrete version were predominantly action verbs, whereas the abstract version contained predominantly verbs of state. The predicates used to express the how and why aspects of an event therefore showed a clear difference in predicate type (and therefore linguistic abstraction), with how aspects being best represented by action verbs (more concrete) and why aspects by verbs of state (more abstract).²

Materials and Procedure

Participants were informed that the research was examining expectations of how people talk about future events. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine having a conversation in which their conversation partner tells them about an upcoming event in their lives. The shared-knowledge manipulation was then introduced via a description of the conversation partner. The presence of shared knowledge was invoked by talking to a friend they see and speak to frequently and who knows about the future event already. The absence of shared knowledge was invoked by talking to a friend they have not seen for some time and who does not know about the event. In the control condition, where the status of shared knowledge was unspecified, the communication partner was a person previously unknown whom they meet and start talking to. The temporal distance manipulation followed, specifying that the vacation would take place next week (close condition) or next year (distant condition). Participants were told they would read two short excerpts from a conversation in which this person talks about his or her vacation next week (or next year). It was explained that the two excerpts were from two different conversations this person had with two different people, one of whom—they were to imagine—was them. The participants' task was to select the one they thought was most likely to have been part of their conversation. This binary choice formed the dependent measure.³

The final questions comprised manipulation checks on temporal distance and shared knowledge. The first was a free-response question that asked when the event was to take place (see Note 1). Two questions designed to assess the amount of shared knowledge perceived between communicators were "How well do you and this friend (person) know about the things that are going on in each other's lives in general?" and "How much did this friend (person) already know about the event you talked about?" Responses to both questions were made on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all well/nothing at all*, 7 = *very well/a lot*).

Results

Check on Shared Knowledge

A 2 (temporal distance) $\times$ 3 (shared-knowledge condition) between-participants MANOVA was performed on the two shared-knowledge checks. Results indicated a significant main effect of shared-knowledge condition on both general and specific shared-knowledge (SK) checks as the only significant effect, $F_{\text{general SK}}(2, 97) = 442.17$, $p < .001$; $F_{\text{specific SK}}(2, 97) = 324.74$, $p < .001$; neither the main effect of temporal distance ($F_s < 1.36$) nor the interaction effect were significant ($F_s < 1$). For the measure of general shared knowledge, means across the three conditions showed that a more general shared knowledge was perceived with a friend they saw often

(shared knowledge present condition) than a friend they had not seen for some time or someone they had just met (shared knowledge absent), and the control condition (stranger) showed the least amount of shared knowledge; $M_{SK\text{ present}} = 6.12$, $M_{SK\text{ absent}} = 2.19$, $M_{\text{control}} = 1.21$. Post hoc Scheffé tests indicated that all differences between all three groups were significant. For the specific shared-knowledge check, the means showed a similar pattern ($M_{SK\text{ present}} = 6.00$, $M_{SK\text{ absent}} = 1.48$, $M_{\text{control}} = 1.39$), with all differences between conditions being significant except between the shared knowledge absent and control conditions. Therefore, the friend not seen for some time and the control condition were viewed as similar in terms of perceived amount of knowledge of the vacation event.

Regression Analyses

Logistic regression analyses were performed on the probability of choosing the abstract version, where both independent variables and their interaction term were effect-coded dummy variables. As we predicted, a specific pattern of means, planned comparisons provided the most appropriate form of analysis. Specifically, we predicted a preference for the concrete version when temporal distance was close and shared knowledge unspecified, and in both shared-knowledge-present conditions irrespective of temporal distance. A preference for the abstract version was predicted in the temporal distance condition when shared knowledge was unspecified, and in both shared-knowledge-absent conditions irrespective of temporal distance. Prior to reporting the planned comparisons, we first report the overall test within which the specific comparisons will be examined.

Results of the overall regression model indicated that the model fits the data at greater than chance levels, $\chi^2(5) = 25.67$, $p < .001$. The main effect for temporal distance showed a trend toward significance, Wald's $\chi^2(1) = 2.97$, $p = .08$, and the main effect for communication partner was significant, Wald's $\chi^2(2) = 10.88$, $p < .001$. These results were qualified by a marginally significant interaction effect involving both variables, Wald's $\chi^2(2) = 1.09$, $p = .058$. Examination of the pattern of frequencies supported precisely the pattern we predicted (see Figure 1): When any shared knowledge with a communication partner is not salient (control condition), then there is a difference in story choice depending on whether the event was next week or next year, specifically, that the probability of choosing the abstract story is higher for next year than next week.⁴ This probability of choosing an abstract story, however, drops when there is a shared-knowledge context present with someone with whom you talk regularly, regardless of the temporal distance. In contrast, this probability increases when you *lack* of shared knowledge with an interlocutor is salient.

Based on the interaction effect and the frequencies supporting the predicted pattern, we tested the predicted pattern using two methods of a priori tests (note that each planned comparison is tested within the same overall analysis; the degrees of freedom remain the same). A first planned comparison tested the three cells expected

Figure 1
Probability of Choosing the Abstract Construal

to show a preference for concrete information against the three cells expected to show a preference for the abstract version. The analysis indicated that the contrast was significant, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.36$, $p < .05$, Exp (B) = 1.62.

The predicted pattern was then examined in two separate planned contrasts that tested the two expected main effects, namely, that the temporal distance main effect would hold in the control condition, and in that condition only, and that there would be a significant difference in preferred abstraction level between the two specific communication partner conditions. Both contrasts show a significant result, although the first result is only marginal: contrast 1 Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.59$, $p = .058$, Exp (B) = 4.00; contrast 2 Wald $\chi^2(1) = 12.68$, $p < .001$, Exp (B) = .29.

Discussion

Overall, these results provide support for a situated-relevance perspective on construal level: Construal expectancies shift across different conversational contexts as a function of the relative salience of the temporal distance and shared-knowledge information. Specifically, construal expectancies responded to temporal distance when shared knowledge was not salient and to shared knowledge when this was

made salient to the participant, supporting the prediction that shared-knowledge information would have a stronger influence on conversational relevance, thus overriding the influence of temporal distance information when it was salient. When shared-knowledge information was not made salient, however, construal expectancies were directed by temporal distance information as predicted.

The results for the temporal distance effect when shared knowledge was not salient, however, indicated only weak support for our hypothesis. Based on our previous findings (A. E. Clark & Semin, 2007) and the robust findings supporting CLT, this was surprising. A possible explanation is that describing the communication partner as a previously unknown person—a stranger—did not reduce the salience of shared knowledge as we had hoped. Indeed, in other research (A. E. Clark & Semin, 2007) we have described the communication partner as simply “a friend,” without further elaboration, to provide a control condition, rather than a stranger, and have found clear effects of temporal distance determining construal in that context. The communication partner as a stranger may have invoked other cues that somehow reduced the salience of the temporal distance cue. This therefore raises questions of how other dimensions of specific social relationships may impact construal level, and further work in this area is needed. It is also possible that recipients are somewhat less vigilant in forming expectations of messages than senders are in shaping them for their specific recipients, although more research would also be needed to pursue this possibility.

The reported findings lend support to the general conversational relevance hypothesis by furnishing evidence for the symmetry of relevance in message production and reception. Conversations are joint projects (H. H. Clark, 1996), and as such, relevance is codefined by language producers and receivers alike. This study has examined recipients’ expectations of construal and thus extends our earlier research on language production (A. E. Clark & Semin, 2007), providing convergent evidence for our conversational relevance hypothesis by showing a reciprocal relationship between production and reception outcomes. In line with the proposed conversational relevance hypothesis, it was shown that the construal expectancies displayed a pattern as a function of the context in precisely the same way as construals produced by communicators. This logical symmetry between processes of production and reception provides a useful way of grounding a socially situated approach to construal level, as the meaning of social actions are determined jointly by producer and recipient, actor and audience.

In supporting the idea that level of construal is determined in response to situated demands on social action, the present findings have implications for CLT. According to CLT, construal level is determined by psychological distance because distance (proximal versus distant) is associated with distinctive mental representations defined by their level, local or global, concrete or abstract, respectively. The relatively static nature of this postulated association, however, makes it difficult to predict how *various* and *multiple* dimensions or cues could influence construal at any one time—for example, temporal distance and shared knowledge, or temporal distance

and spatial distance. In such cases of multiple distance/proximity combinations, the question arises, Which dimension of the multiple distance dimensions would influence construal in the final instance? The situated functional approach advanced here provides a more flexible theoretical ground to come to terms with such dynamic combinations. In this research, the concept of situated conversational relevance allowed for relatively clear prediction of the relative salience of various potential influences on construal that may be available in the environment (e.g., temporal distance and shared-knowledge information). Although this account is by no means well developed, it does provide a way to conceptualize construal as flexible and adaptive to the requirements of each new situation.

The research presented here has focused on the social processes influencing construal. Construal level is, however, likely to be influenced by both *social* and *psychological* influences in any given context. Although the mechanism of a mental association is definitely intrapsychological, there is little attention in CLT research to date to motivational and cognitive influences on construal level. Psychological processes underlying construal-level biases in language use have received much attention in the explanation of the linguistic intergroup bias (e.g., Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). Future research may therefore further develop how both intrapsychological and interpsychological processes influence construal level in interaction.

The current findings not only draw attention to the need to examine construal in a social context, where social-level processes play a role in determining the relevance of abstractness and concreteness, but also to the potential for many situations bringing multiple influences on construal level. If construal is understood as a functional response to the demands of the situation, then this provides a way to conceptualize how construal is determined by multiple and possibly conflicting cues. This research has focused on how conversational contexts create demands on the relative relevance of concreteness and abstractness and how the construal level of a message can be seen as an adaptive response to these pressures. Specifically, we have focused on the receiver's expectations for construal level, and the findings have shown how these reflect the same pattern as displayed by language producers. This symmetry supports the notion that conversational relevance is determined jointly by sender and receiver, as conversations are highly coordinated social activities.

Appendix

Abstract and Concrete Texts

Abstract/why version: answers the question "Why are you going on vacation?"

I feel like a long vacation, somewhere far away. I love to travel. Mexico has places where I can relax and also see some amazing natural landscapes. That's why I choose Mexico as the destination. There are great beaches and many important cultural sites

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

and a huge variety in natural landscapes. I love visiting new places and being able to get out and discover the country. I love the adventure of it all. But I also find it enjoyable to just lie on the beach! I like to dive as well and Mexico has some first class diving sites. I hope I get a chance to improve my Spanish while I'm there.

Concrete/how version: answers the question "How are things going with preparing for you vacation?"

I'm going to dig out all my summer clothes as it will be nice and hot there. I'm going to take lots of books to read while I lie on the beach. I'll pack a couple of long ones! I bought a big memory card for my camera which will be handy. And I already have a few bits of diving gear that I'll take with me. Then I won't have to hire them when I am there. My travel guide has information about how to get to the diving sites and it seems pretty straightforward. I just have to buy the tickets and do the booking when I get there. I'm also going to read over my notes from my Spanish course.

Notes

1. Six participants gave an incorrect response to the temporal distance manipulation check in which they had to respond either "next week" or "next year" (or the corresponding dates) to an open-ended question asking when the event was to take place. These were excluded from the analysis on the basis of having misunderstood the instructions.

2. This is consistent with verbs of state constituting more motive language, referring to unobservable states, and therefore being more abstract, where action verbs refer strictly to observable actions, with a clearly definable beginning and end and therefore being more concrete.

3. This binary measure was deemed most appropriate as communicators and recipients make a discrete choice in terms of their presentation or request of information.

4. These mean probabilities for choosing an abstract versus concrete construal for near versus distant events in time in the control condition are comparable to those reported by Liberman and Trope (1998, Study 1, part 2), where participants had to choose between a concrete and abstract formulation of an activity.

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