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The impact of linguistically biased messages of involved receivers

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Summary

In Chapter 1, an overview is given of the relevant literature for this thesis. We made clear that language plays an important role in social life. The language we use is influenced by our social environment, and our language use also influences this social environment (e.g., Semin, 2001). This bi-directional link between the social environment and language is obviously manifested in the Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB, e.g., Maass et al., 1989). The LIB shows that people use different levels of abstraction to describe positive or negative behaviors of in-group or out-group members: Positive in-group and negative out-group behavior's are described in abstract terms, whereas positive out-group and negative in-group behavior's are described in concrete terms. The same biased language use does occur at an interpersonal level (e.g., Maass et al., 1995; Semin et al., 2003; Taris, 1999).

The research on this linguistically biased language so far has mainly focused on how a message is strategically composed and on the psychological processes responsible for the production of this biased language use. Although the occurrence of the LIB seems to be an implicit and very subtle phenomenon that escapes conscious access (Franco & Maass, 1996, 1999; Von Hippel et al., 1997), more recent research showed that this linguistically biased language use is moderated by the communicative context in general and by recipient characteristics in particular (e.g., Douglas & McGarty, 2001, 2002; Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Rubini & Sigall, 2002; Semin et al., 2003; Wigboldus et al., 2005). This suggests that these biased messages are also used strategically to influence the receiver of the message.

Considerable research has been done showing that these biased messages indeed influence a receiver. For example, these biased messages influence the inferences receivers make about the dispositionality or situationality of the behavior (Werkman et al., 1999; Wigboldus et al., 2000, Wigboldus et al., 2006) and people are able to deduce the interpersonal distance between the sender and the person

being described on the basis of the linguistic abstraction level of the message (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). This research on the impact of biased messages has used receivers who were not the same as the actor being described in the message. In our view, an important unanswered question is what the impact is of these linguistically biased messages for an *involved* receiver, namely a receiver who is also the person being described in the message. To our knowledge, this question has never been examined in the research on the LIB. The aim of the research in this dissertation was to fill this missing link in the research on linguistically biased language use.

In Chapter 2, a study is presented in which participants received a linguistically biased message in which they received feedback on their own socially (ir)responsible behavior. The sender of the message was another unknown participant. We examined the communicative impact of these biased messages on the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender of the message. Participants reported more interpersonal proximity to a sender of a positive abstract message than to a sender of a positive concrete message and reported more proximity to a sender of a negative abstract message than to a sender of a negative concrete message. This research constitutes an important step in showing that receiving a linguistically biased message about one's own behavior regulates the interpersonal distance to the sender as perceived by the receiver.

In Chapter 3 we extended the findings reported in Chapter 2 by demonstrating this interpersonal distance effect in two different experimentally induced performance tasks, which ascertained the generality and robustness of the phenomenon under examination and addressed some of the shortcomings of the study described in Chapter 2. We showed that a positive abstract compared to a positive concrete message lead to increased perceived proximity to the sender, while a negative abstract compared to a negative concrete message lead to perceived distance. Moreover, in the second study we additionally investigated whether this effect is manifested only in interpersonal contexts by controlling the

message source. In half of the conditions, a person delivered the message about performance to the performing target and in the other half of the conditions the same message was delivered via a computer. When a computer transmitted the message, we did not find an effect of the message. The effect of the message on the perceived interpersonal distance thus seems to be limited to an interpersonal communication setting and is not a general phenomenon.

In the studies described in Chapter 4, the central question was in which types of relationships, receivers are sensitive for the subtle differences in language use in the sender's message. In the studies described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we used an unknown sender. In this situation, the chances are high that the subtle variations in linguistic abstraction influence the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender of the message, since the message is the only source of information to infer interpersonal proximity or distance to the sender. This is not necessarily the case when the sender and the receiver have a well-established relationship. Although even when the sender and the receiver have a well-established relationship, there might be conditions in which the receiver is sensitive for subtle differences in language use, for example when the sender and the receiver are enemies. In the first study, we found that when the sender and the receiver are 'enemies' or do not know each other, the message influences the interpersonal distance to the sender, but not when they are friends. In the second study, we showed that receiving a linguistically biased message influences the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender if the sender had power over the receiver, but not when the receiver had power over the sender. In this last situation, receiving a linguistically biased message is not interpreted in terms of liking but in terms of sliming.

In Chapter 5, a final study is presented in which we examined whether linguistically biased feedback on one task influences the performance on a subsequent second task. Participants did a task on which they received linguistically biased feedback, either from the computer (an impersonal communication context)

or from the experimenter (an interpersonal communication context). We measured their performance on a second task and their motivation to perform well on this second task. The results showed that receiving negative abstract compared to negative concrete feedback lead to lower performance in an interpersonal communication context and to higher performance in an impersonal communication context. No effects were found in the positive conditions. Importantly, the effect of feedback on performance was mediated by motivation suggesting that the feedback influences the motivation to perform. This study expands the implications of the linguistic biases from the mere inferential domain to a quasi-behavioral one, namely performance.

In sum, we showed that receiving linguistically biased messages about one's own behavior does have an impact upon the receiver in two important domains: receiving biased messages influences the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender and has consequences for the performance on a subsequent task. This was demonstrated in different feedback domains: feedback on their (ir)responsible social behavior (Study 2.1), feedback on their cooperation with others (Study 3.1), feedback on their performance on test battery that measured their intellectual and academic abilities (Study 3.2, Study 4.1, Study 4.2, and Study 5.1) and in different communication forms: written feedback (Study 2.1, Study 5.1), feedback generated by a computer (Study 3.2, and Study 5.1), personal feedback via the computer (Study 3.1), and spoken feedback (Study 3.2). Although the effects we found were small, the fact that we demonstrated its occurrence in different domains and in different communication forms shows the robustness and the generality of the phenomenon under investigation.

Moreover, in Study 3.2, Study 4.1, Study 4.2, and Study 5.1 we found important moderators that underline the social nature of language. It is not simply the message that influences the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender and the performance on a subsequent task, but it is the message attached to a person that leads to the effects we found. When the same message was sent by the

computer, we did not find an effect on perceived interpersonal distance and we found a reversed effect on the performance on a subsequent task. In the studies reported in Chapter 4, we also showed that the effect of the message on the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender depends on the social context. When the sender was a friend or had no power over the receiver, we did not find any effects of the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender, whereas we found these effects when the sender and receiver did not know each other or when the sender was the receiver's enemy. This underlines the function of language in different contexts.