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Message Effects

In this chapter we will consider two theories of how the strength of a message influences the persuasion process. Message strength amplifies the effect of message discrepancy on attitude change. The strength of the message can range from 0 (for a weak message) to 1 (for a strong message). The strength of a message depends on both its content and the style with which it is delivered. The strength of message content increases with the extent to which (1) the message rebuts possible counterarguments, (2) presents arguments that bolster or support the message conclusion, and (3) contains emotion-evoking material appeals such as appeals that use fear and threat. The strength of message style depends on the language that sources choose for their messages. Intense language, opinionated language, and obscene language increase the stylistic strength of a message. We will also examine the effect of message strength on receiver evaluations of source.

Message Content

One-sided versus two-sided messages

A one-sided message is one that presents only the source's position on an issue. A two-sided message is one that presents the source's position *and* the position of possible opponents. Two-sided messages have generally been of two sorts, those that simply present their opponents' claims and those that refute their opponents' claims. Early research on message-sidedness showed that two-sided messages were more effective than one-sided messages, except when receivers were uneducated, unintelligent or uninformed on an issue; that is, the receivers would not have been able to think of the opposition arguments themselves. Recent research by Allen (1989), however, shows that the effectiveness of the two-sided message does not depend on the ability of receivers to muster counterarguments. Rather, the effectiveness of the two-sided message depends on whether it merely mentions the claims of the opponents or it actually refutes those claims. Two-sided messages that merely mention their opponent's arguments are less effective than the one-sided message. Two-sided messages that refute their opponents' arguments are more effective than the one-sided message.

Fear Appeals

The simplest model of fear appeals argues that fear appeals increase fear in receivers and that increased fear acts as a drive that is only satisfied by the elimination of the fear. If the source is successful, elimination of the fear response is linked to a particular recommendation contained in the persuasive message. This model was forwarded by Janis, and is known as the *drive model* of fear appeals. It posits a direct, linear relationship between fear and attitude change. Mongeau (1998) used meta-analysis to test two competing theories of how fear appeals influence attitude change and behavior change, including the drive model. The other theory was the two-factor theory of McGuire. Mongeau found that the results from his comprehensive analysis was consistent with the drive model shown in Figure 6.1, and did not support the two-factor

model. In the drive model, manipulated fear in the message increased perceived fear in receivers, and perceived fear increased attitude change, with attitude change increasing behavior change.

----- Insert Figure 6.1 about here -----

Despite the fact that the results of Mongeau's comprehensive review do not support the two-factor model, it remains popular. McGuire (1969) argues that fear appeals enhance attitude change by increasing message reception (attention and comprehension), but decrease attitude change by decreasing yielding. At low fear, the reception curve dominates and there is little motivation to receive the message, hence there is little attitude change. At high fear, the yielding curve dominates and there is substantial counterarguing that occurs, hence there is little attitude change. At moderate fear, an optimum balance of reception and yielding occurs, resulting in maximum attitude change. Other researchers have made similar curvilinear predictions. Janis and Feshback argued that receivers would not pay attention to high fear appeal messages. This might be either due to selective processes, such as selective exposure or selective perception, or due to counterarguing. Higbee argued that the high fear appeal messages were not as persuasive as moderate fear appeal messages because the high fear appeal messages contained arguments that were implausible. Mongeau's analysis found no support for any of the theories that predicted a curvilinear effect of fear on attitude change.

Information Processing Theory

In this section we consider four types of message strength effects: language intensity, specific language, opinionated language, and obscene language. Based on information processing theory, Hamilton (1998) proposed a general model of message strength effects.

Language Intensity

Language intensity was originally defined as the degree to which a source's language deviates from neutrality (Bowers, 1963). The underlying assumption is that language intensity increases the perceived extremity of the message. But that assumption does not tell us which language features contribute to perceived message extremity. Hamilton, Hunter, and Burgoon (1990) reviewed studies that manipulated language intensity and found that researchers really meant that highly intense language was language that is specific (that is, precise and graphic) and emotional. Thus, language that is specific and emotional tends to be perceived as more extreme. Sometimes researchers refer to language that lacks specificity as lexical imprecision, ambiguous language (words that allow two interpretations), vagueness (words that allow multiple interpretations), or equivocation (intentional use of ambiguity by sources).

The impact of specific language on source credibility and attitude change is shown in Figure 6.2. This model is based on data merged from Williams and Goss (1975) and Hamilton and Rendino (1987). Note that manipulated specificity has two opposing effects on evaluations of source competence. On the positive side, manipulated specificity increases assessed argument quality, and assessed argument quality increases

competence. On the negative side, manipulated specificity increases perceived message extremity, and extremity decreases source competence ratings. Perceived specificity has similar effects on evaluations of source trustworthiness and liking. On the positive side, perceived specificity increases argument quality, argument quality increases competence, and competence increases trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, in turn, increases liking of the source. On the negative side, perceived specificity increases attributions of source bias, and bias reduces trustworthiness and liking ratings. Finally, trustworthiness improves both the likeability of the source and postmessage agreement with the position advocated by the source.

----- Insert Figure 6.2 about here -----

The emotionality of language is the degree of affect expressed by the source's language, ranging from sedate to hysterical. The source of a message will associate the position advocated with positive affect and discrepant positions with negative affect.

Effect of intensity on evaluations of source. The effect of language intensity on receiver evaluations of the source is mediated by perceived language intensity, as shown in Figure 6.3. This model was based on data merged from meta-analysis (Hamilton, 1997), Hamilton and Stewart (1993), and Hamilton and Thompson (1994). Note how in each of these figures the processing stages (exposure, perception, orientation, goal-directed processing, causal attribution, and information integration) operate. Figure 6.3 shows the effect of language intensity on receiver evaluations of message, source, and topic. Note how the specificity model in Figure 6.2 differs from the language intensity model in Figure 6.3. Recall that intense language is both specific and emotionally intense. Thus, the model in Figure 6.2 does not include emotional intensity effects.

----- Insert Figures 6.3 about here -----

Opinionated language

Reactance theory, by Jack Brehm, is a theory about how people react if their attitudinal freedom is threatened. Most of the research on psychological reactance uses evaluative language from the source to threaten the attitudinal freedom of receivers. Typically, this evaluative language tells receivers that they have positive qualities (for instance, "those who agree with me are insightful") if they agree with the source and negative qualities (for instance, "only a fool would disagree with me") if they disagree with the source. Evaluative language is supposed to trigger reactance when receivers perceive that the source has insufficient justification for making such statements (the term insufficient justification is taken from cognitive dissonance theory, on which Brehm did earlier work). If the source has low knowledge on a topic, has ulterior motives, that is, has low credibility, then the evaluative language will appear unjustified, and psychological reactance will follow. Research by Hamilton (1998) found that a source who uses evaluative language will be perceived as assertive, so message strength will be enhanced; however, the evaluative source will also be perceived as arrogant (intolerant of others' opinions), reducing perceived source credibility. What Hamilton found was that evaluative language enhances credibility by increasing message strength, but decreases

credibility by increasing perceived arrogance. In the end, the impact of evaluative language on perceived credibility should be approximately zero. The prediction of zero effect by Hamilton is supported by the results from Brehm's own studies. In fact, the overall impact of evaluative language on attitude change appears to be zero. The effect of opinionated language on receiver evaluations of message, source, and topic is illustrated in Figure 6.4.

----- Insert Figure 6.4 about here -----

Obscene language

Obscene language, although rarely used in mediated persuasion attempts, is becoming more common. Obscene language is, however, often used in less formal, face-to-face persuasion attempts. Our culture has sanctioned the use of particular classes of words. In our culture there are three classes that are sanctioned: sexual, excretory, and religious obscenity. Sexual obscenity is taboo because many people view sex and procreation as a sacred or extremely private affair. To casually reference sex, or to link it to negative attitude objects is highly offensive to some people. Excretory obscenity is derived from a very different source. Many excretions of the body are viewed as unpleasant and have negative connotations. For instance, a misbehaving child might be associated with nasal mucus discharge, and called "a snot." A record album that does not live up to expectations might be associated with reverse peristalsis, and labeled "barfittious." A car that is constantly in need of repair might be associated with purging the bowels, and be called "A piece of shit." A "significant other" who has earned your disfavor might be associated with smelly, excess earwax, and be referred to as "dweeby." Finally, religious words can be obscene. These words are tied to Judeo-Christian edicts. For instance, many people find it offensive if the name of Jesus Christ is used idly. Off-hand mention of supreme beings or to the afterlife also tends to make many people uncomfortable.

Most cultures have taboo words. However, these cultures may have very different classes of obscene language. Some cultures consider certain animal names as taboo. This arose from hunting or animal worship. In fact, some cultures consider it very insulting to be called an animal name. For instance, someone might hurl an insult at you by calling you a "spiny hedgehog." In other cultures, the name of female relatives, like "mother-in-law" should not be uttered. Even mentioning the left hand is taboo in some cultures. This derives from the fact that the left hand was often used to deal with defecation in primitive societies, and the fact that left-handedness is seen as unusual, given that only about 10% of the population is left handed.

Cultural authority discourages the use of taboo words. If the sanctions were too severe, the word would vanish from the lexicon. In fact, most taboo words continue for generations, indicating that someone, somewhere must be using the words and passing down the tradition to their children. Most taboo words, especially in our culture, are used in informal contexts. If they are used in more formal contexts, they are less likely to evoke shock or disgust. In some states of our country, anachronistic laws are still on the books that can lead to the imprisonment of a person who uses an obscenity in a public place. Many radio and television call-in programs use a tape loop (this provides a five or

ten second delay in broadcast so that a censor can stand by to bleep any offending words) to avoid broadcasting offensive material. In fact, musicians have been very creative in their use of euphemisms, replacing references to sexual intercourse with words such as freakin', rockin', or dancin'. For instance, songs like Rick James *Superfreak*, Van Halen's *Dance the night away*, or Steve Miller's *Keep on rockin' me baby* take on a different meaning when the euphemisms are replaced by their true referents. Female singers sometimes choose to use the term "voice" if they want to refer to a man's genitalia. For example, in her scandalous *Like a Prayer* (particularly the commercial), Madonna sings of experiencing "your voice inside me." Pat Benetar has used similar language.

The basis for obscene language is word-magic. Taboo is concerned with supernaturally forbidden or improper behavior, although most societies deny the existence of magic. It is based on irrational thought -- a reaction to a particular word rather than the concept. Note that I can find language to refer to sex, any bodily excretion or Supreme Being without offending anyone. The magic in taboo conveys power. To utter the word invokes the power and magic.

It is the power of obscene words that makes them interesting for the study of persuasion. The uttering of an obscene word is an emotional act. Obscene words convey intensity, strong assertion. Yet obscene words violate taboo. This dual function of obscene words makes their effects more complex. Greater intensity should increase attitude change by enhancing message strength and perceived credibility. Obscenity should certainly increase attention to the message. If the source is attacking an authority figure who the audience dislikes, then obscenity could increase perceived similarity with the source, and perhaps even source likeability and credibility. In most cases, however, violation of taboo should lead to source derogation. So just what is the effect of obscenity on attitude change and source perception?

Obscenity and attitude change. Robert Bostrom has argued that there is a hierarchy of obscenity. Bostrom (1973) believes that sexual obscenity is the most offensive, followed by excretory obscenity, with religious obscenity the least offensive. On the whole, this may be true, but there are obviously individual differences that would be very important. A very religious person, for instance, might find religious obscenity much more offensive than a more moderately religious person. There has only been one study on the effect of obscenity on attitude change, so "the literature" is easy to review. Bostrom (1973) manipulated gender of speaker and obscenity. There were four levels of obscenity: sexual, excretory, religious, and none. He found that obscene language produced less attitude change than non-obscene language. In the three obscene conditions, however, there was an interesting pattern. For female speakers, offensiveness increased persuasion. For male speakers, offensiveness decreased persuasion. These means appear in the table below.

Table 6.1. Mean attitude change in six experimental conditions

	Obsceneness		
Speaker Gender	religious	excretory	sexual
Female	15.87	17.06	22.75
Male	13.19	11.31	4.25

Note. Larger numbers indicate more attitude change.

Obscenity and source perception. Three studies have been conducted to assess the impact of obscenity on perception of source. Bostrom (1973) found that the non-obscene source was more credible than the non-obscene source. Within the three obscenity conditions, the pattern generally matched the attitude change results (see the table below). Anthony Mulac was able to replicate some of the Bostrom (1973) findings. Mulac (1974) found that the non-obscene speaker was rated as higher in status than the obscene speaker. There was no difference in perceived source dynamism. The non-obscene message was better liked than the obscene message. Source gender and receiver gender did not matter, neither did the education level of the receiver. Hamilton (1989) was able to explain the drop in source credibility due to obscenity. This effect is shown in Figure 14. Hamilton noted that obscene language led receiver perceptions that the message was obscene. Perceived obscenity caused receivers to perceive the source as lewd, or perhaps more to the point receivers were disgusted with the source. Lewdness (or disgust) caused source derogation.

----- Insert Figure 6.5 about here -----

Table 2. Average Evaluations of Source in Six Experimental Conditions

	dynamism			competence			trustworthiness		
	religious	excretory	sexual	religious	excretory	sexual	religious	excretory	sexual
Female Speaker	22.56	21.12	23.75	20.12	17.38	20.06	17.38	15.37	16.00
Male Speaker	23.19	21.12	23.31	19.94	18.37	16.99	17.38	13.69	11.94

Note: The larger the mean, the more positive the rating.

The effect of obscenity on receiver evaluations of source can be summarized as follows. On all three source-evaluation dimensions, the results are generally similar to the attitude change results. That is, for male speakers obscenity decreases dynamism, competence and trustworthiness, whereas for female speakers, obscenity increases dynamism, competence and trustworthiness. Note that the religious obscenity means are too high for female sources on all three source-evaluation variables. On dynamism, the sexual obscenity mean is a little high for the male source. These means that are a little too high are most likely due to sampling error.

Summary of information processing effects. Hamilton (1998) used meta-analysis to explain the effect of particular types of message strength variables on receiver evaluations of source credibility. He found that personalizing the issue and message discrepancy had large negative effects on the use of strong language. That is, strong language had its most positive effect on ratings of competence and trustworthiness when the message was low in discrepancy and did not personalize the issue. The better the argument, the more positive the effect of intense (strong) language on competence and trustworthiness ratings. These effects are summarized in Figure 6.6.

----- Insert Figure 6.6 about here -----

Language Expectancy Theory

Beginning with his work on the unexpected persuasiveness of radicals such as Malcolm X in the 1960s, Michael Burgoon developed an expectancy theory of language effects. The theory is most fully articulated in two articles, Burgoon, Jones, and Stewart (1975) and Burgoon and Miller (1979). Expectancy effects are most easily observed on linguistic diversity variables. Bradac and his colleagues completed a program of research on the relationship between linguistic diversity and source perception. There are two types of linguistic diversity, lexical diversity and syntactic diversity. Lexical diversity concerns the degree of repetitiousness in word choice. Syntactic diversity concerns the degree of repetitiousness in the format of sentence construction. A number of writers, particularly Basil Bernstein, have argued that high lexical and syntactic diversity characterizes individuals of high social standing and good education, whereas low lexical and syntactic diversity characterize individuals of low social standing and poor education. Bernstein goes so far as to argue that upper class and lower class people use different codes when speaking. He calls upper class language elaborated code and lower class language restricted code. In the minds of most people, linguistic diversity and Socio-Intellectual-Status (SIS) may be correlated. Hence, people may come to expect high SIS speakers to use high-diversity language, and low SIS speakers to use low-diversity language. A high SIS speaker will fulfil receiver expectations by using high diversity language, and violate receiver expectations by using low diversity language. A low SIS speaker will fulfill receiver expectations by using low diversity language, and violate receiver expectations by using high diversity language. The two instances in which expectations are violated, however, may not be equivalent. The high SIS speaker using low diversity language will negatively violate expectations, whereas the low SIS speaker using high diversity language will positively violate expectations. Based on empirical research, Bradac concluded that lexical diversity but not syntactic diversity was related to receiver expectations.

Table 6.2. Expectancy theory predictions of linguistic diversity effects

	Linguistic Diversity	
Socio-Intellectual-Status	High	Low
High	Expectation Fulfilled	Expectation Violated (Negative)
Low	Expectation Violated (positive)	Expectation Fulfilled

Like reinforcement theory, expectancy theory (Burgoon, et al, 1975) proposes have a positive affective reaction to messages that agree with the receiver, and have a negative affective reaction to messages that disagree with the receiver. Thus, whether a message is congruent with or discrepant from receivers' positions will determine the receivers' affective reaction to the message. A message that is less discrepant than expected will be perceived more positively than a message that meets receiver expectations. This is known as a positive violation of expectations. Positive violations of expectations are supposed to enhance attitude change. A message that is more discrepant than expected will be perceived more negatively than a message that meets receiver expectations. This is known as a negative violation of expectations. Negative violations

of expectations are supposed to inhibit attitude change. If no violation of expectations is present (the message meets receiver expectations in terms of its discrepancy), then the underlying theory, reinforcement theory, is presumed operating.

Burgoon, et al (1975) predicted that males will deliver strong messages (high discrepancy), and females will deliver weak messages (low discrepancy) based on stereotypic socialization. Thus, low intensity language from a male source will be a positive violation of expectations, and attitude change should be enhanced. High intensity language from a female source should be a negative violation of expectations, inhibiting attitude change. Thus, for both male and female sources, low intensity language should result in more attitude change than high intensity language. Burgoon, et al (1975) did not find that low intensity language was superior to high intensity language. Instead, they found that males were more effective using high intensity language rather than low intensity language. Yet they concluded that the results supported expectancy theory.

Burgoon, et al (1975) predicted that high credibility sources deliver strong messages (high discrepancy), and low credibility sources deliver weak messages (low discrepancy). Thus, low intensity language from a high credibility source will be a positive violation of expectations, and attitude change should be enhanced. High intensity language from a low credibility source should be a negative violation of expectations, inhibiting attitude change. Thus, regardless of credibility, low intensity language should result in more attitude change than high intensity language. Burgoon, et al (1975) did find that low intensity language was superior to high intensity language, but the effect was incredibly small. They ignored these results, and interpreted the results on an obscure measure of attitude change -- a *latitude of acceptance* measure, that had failed them in several previous studies. The latitude of acceptance measure showed that males were more effective using high intensity language than low intensity language. This finding is not supported by the conventional attitude change data, the results on source credibility measures, and cannot be derived from expectancy theory. Other attempts to replicate the Burgoon, et al (1975) findings have failed (Hamilton, et al, 1991a, b).

Table 6.3. Expectancy theory predictions of language intensity effects by premessage source credibility

	Language Intensity	
Source Credibility	High	Low
High	Expectation Fulfilled	Expectation Violated (Positive)
Low	Expectation Violated (Negative)	Expectation Fulfilled

Table 6.4. Expectancy theory predictions of language intensity effects by source gender

	Language Intensity	
Source Gender	High	Low
Male	Expectation Fulfilled	Expectation Violated (Positive)
Female	Expectation Violated (Negative)	Expectation Fulfilled