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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS

LORENA GIL DE MONTES
University of the Basque Country

GÜN R. SEMIN
Free University Amsterdam

JOSE F. VALENCIA
University of the Basque Country

Two studies were designed to investigate how the type of interdependence (cooperative vs. competitive) between a speaker and a recipient influences communicators' descriptions of positive and negative target behaviors. The target-addressee relationship was a positive one in the first study. It was expected that speakers in the cooperative condition would describe positive target behaviors in a more abstract way, whereas in the competitive condition, negative target behaviors would be described in a more abstract way. In the second study, the addressee-target relationship was negative. Here we expected that the positive target behaviors would be described more concretely in the cooperation condition, whereas the reverse pattern was predicted in the competition condition. The results broadly supported these predictions. The implications of these findings for the linguistic intergroup bias are described.

Keywords: *Linguistic Category Model; LIB; Interdependence*

Language constitutes the dominant medium by which we maintain, service, foster, and support our social relationships. The language we use for such purposes has many properties, some of which are more evident and accessible and others that are more tacit (Polanyi, 1967) and

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less easily accessed. One such subtle property is to be found in the types of predicates that people use in communication and the relative frequency with which they use them. There is now a substantial literature showing that the relative use of interpersonal verbs and adjectives in the compositions of messages (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1989) is not only diagnostic of the types of psychological processes that drive message composition (e.g., Maass, 1999) but also informative about the type of impact such messages are likely to have upon the inferences that recipients of such messages are likely to draw (e.g., Semin & de Poot, 1997).

The studies reported in this article were designed to examine how people modify the implicit properties of their language use (their relative use of different predicates in a message) to regulate their relationships. Thus, the issue under investigation is how speakers differentially use predicates in their construction of messages with a view of regulating their relationship with their addressees. As we shall argue in some detail later, speakers modulate their messages with the goal of reaching consistency between their attitudes toward an addressee and this addressee's attitudes toward a person (target) who is the subject of the communication. Prior to going to the specifics of the current research, we shall briefly provide some relevant background research that is related to the issues we address here.

One research domain in which message structure has been systematically analyzed by Anne Maass and her colleagues (e.g., Maass, 1999; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) is the linguistic intergroup bias (LIB). This research has investigated the interplay between *intrapersonal processes* (cognitive and motivational) *and the linguistic structure of message* in the context of stereotype maintenance and transmission. Briefly, the research on the LIB has shown that members of in- and out-groups adopt specific linguistic strategies to communicate about positive and negative behaviors performed by members of their own and an out-group. It has been demonstrated that when in-group members perform positive behaviors (e.g., helping somebody) and out-group members perform negative behaviors (e.g., hitting somebody), then the corresponding messages to communicate about these behaviors are constructed by the use of abstract predicates (e.g., adjectives such as helpful, aggressive). These types of predicates are assumed to convey to the recipient of such a message that the behavior in question is due to an enduring dispositional quality rather than transient or circumstantial reasons. Further, when in-group members perform negative behaviors and out-group members perform positive behaviors, then these are more likely to be represented by the use of concrete predicates (e.g., verbs of action such as to help or to hit). This type of concrete message structure conveys the impression to a recipient of such a message that the event is due to transient contextual circumstances and not to some enduring properties.

Research by Semin and de Poot (1997) has shown that such differences in message abstraction mediate recipients' inferences systematically. Concrete messages lead to situational inferences, and abstract messages lead to dispositional ones. The same findings have been obtained more recently by Wigboldus, Semin, and Spears (2000) who have experimentally examined the impact of stereotypic messages varying in abstraction on addressees' inferences. They have shown that the message structure leads recipients to draw precisely the types of inferences that the abstraction level of the message suggests. Moreover, they have also shown that the abstraction level of a message is responsible for the mediation of these inferences.

The linguistic intergroup bias (LIB) is assumed to be driven by two distinctive processes (Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996; Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995). One is *motivational* and is derived from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The argument is that when an in-group's identity is threatened, then a positive in-group image is maintained even when there may be disconfirming evidence. This image maintenance is achieved by structuring the message abstractly or concretely in the conditions outlined earlier. The main source of support for the LIB comes from studies in intergroup settings where the in-group's identity is threatened (e.g., Franco & Maass, 1996; Maass, et al. 1989; Maass et al., 1996; Maass, Corvino, & Arcuri, 1994; Valencia, Gil de Montes, Arruti, & Carbonell, 1997; Valencia, Gil de Montes, Sansinenea, & Erdozia, 1998).

The second process responsible for this phenomenon is assumed to be a *cognitive* one. Maass and her colleagues (Maass et al., 1995) argued that expectancy-consistent behaviors are described at a higher level of abstraction than expectancy-inconsistent ones. The reasoning for this is derived from the notion that unexpected or inconsistent behaviors are perceived as an exception to a general rule (Maurer, Park, & Rothbart, 1995; Rothbart & John, 1985). This finds its linguistic expression in the use of concrete terms. In contrast, expected behaviors refer to more stable and typical properties and are more diagnostic. They are described in terms that are more abstract. Research findings to date have provided support for this second process (Maass et al., 1995; Maass et al., 1996; Rubini & Semin, 1994), showing that stereotype-consistent behaviors are described at a more abstract level than stereotype-inconsistent behaviors. Moreover, this process is shown to operate not only in an intergroup context but also at an individual level (Maass et al., 1995). This latter finding suggests that the cognitive account for the LIB is a more general expectancy-driven phenomenon.

In this research, abstraction level has been quantified by the use of the *linguistic category model* (LCM) (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). The LCM is designed to identify the general cognitive functions of various linguistic devices (predicates), namely, interpersonal verbs and

adjectives. The model furnishes the means to investigate the properties of message structure and thereby interface psychological processes underlying message production, message structure, and message comprehension (Semin, 2000). The LCM makes a distinction between four different levels of abstraction. These categories are, respectively: *Descriptive-action verbs* that are the most concrete terms. These are used to convey a noninterpretive description of a single, observable event (e.g., "A hits B"). *Interpretive-action verbs* also describe a specific event but are more abstract in that they refer to a general class of behaviors and not a specific concrete behavior (e.g., "A hurts B"). *State verbs* constitute the next category in degree of abstraction and describe an emotional state and not a specific event (e.g., "A hates B"). The most abstract predicates are *adjectives* (e.g., "A is aggressive"). Adjectives generalize across specific events and objects and describe only the subject (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Diverse research strands have examined the communication context in terms of the types of speaker-addressee relationships. This research has shown that whereas cooperative relationships lead to convergence, competitive or adversarial ones are likely to lead to divergence, whereby what precisely diverges or converges depends on the different objectives pursued in these studies (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1984; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Turner, 1981). Deutsch (1949, 1953), for instance, related cooperative and competitive communication goals to a convergence of attitudes between transmitters and recipients in the former condition and divergence between both in the latter. Similarly, communication accommodation theory (e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1991) is another instance of how cooperative and competitive relationships influence convergence or divergence as indicated by changes in the interlocutor's accent or language (e.g., Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Giles & Smith, 1979; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). This research suggests that in multilingual contexts, a cooperative or competitive relationship between interlocutors influences accent and language use, which are taken as indicators of attitudes. Similarly, speech divergence is found to be pronounced in intergroup contexts when the speaker expects competitive interactions with out-group members (e.g., Doise, Sinclair, & Bourhis, 1976; Taylor, & Royer, 1979) or when out-group members are known to hold negative attitudes toward the transmitter's group (Bourhis, Giles, Leyens, & Tajfel, 1979). In contrast to divergence, a number of communicative acts and styles are used to reduce differences, such as speech rate, pausal phenomena, utterance length, but also smiling, gaze, and so on. These are strategies by which individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviors.

The divergence or convergence of messages is also demonstrated in studies that show that a transmitter takes into account a recipient's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge when formulating a message (e.g., Clark & Carlson, 1982; Fussell & Kraus, 1989a, 1989b; McCann &

Higgins, 1992). This theme is also reflected in the classic research line on "saying is believing" initiated by Higgins and Rholes (1978). In these studies, speakers' relationships were experimentally shaped to promote positive self-presentation or intimacy to a listener. This research has shown how the interdependence between communicator and recipient influences not only the message people write but also how formulating such messages shapes their beliefs. Essentially, these and other studies (Higgins & McCann, 1984; Higgins, McCann, & Fondacaro, 1982; McCann, Higgins, & Fondacaro, 1991) showed that participants distort their messages in a way that is consistent with an audience's attitudes. Moreover, their impressions are shown to be evaluatively consistent with the content of their message as measured after a time lapse.

In the present studies, we aim at analyzing how communicators shape their messages in interdependent contexts. Several hypotheses may be derived from research done using the linguistic abstraction measure and concretely from the studies about the linguistic intergroup bias. Specifically, it was expected that cooperative situations would be characterized by convergent communicative patterns between speaker and addressee, whereas competitive situations would lead communicators to divergent communicative patterns. In the first study, transmitters were provided with information about a target liked by the recipient. It was expected that when the transmitter wishes to cooperate with the addressee, convergent communicative patterns arise, so that a positive image of the target liked by the addressee is transmitted. Thus, the target's positive behavior is likely to be described in a more abstract way than the target's negative behavior. In this way, the communicator treats the target's positive features as stable and dispositional. The reverse pattern is likely to occur in the competition situation, in which a negative image of the target liked by the addressee is transmitted. Thus, the target's positive behaviors are expected to be described in a more concrete way than negative behaviors.

In the second study presented herein, a modification was introduced—in contrast to the first study—such that the target's relationship with the addressee was told to be negative. When the transmitter cooperates with the addressee, convergent communicative patterns are likely to arise. In consequence, the speaker transmits a negative image of the target disliked by the cooperation partner and recipient. Therefore, the target's negative behaviors are likely to be described more abstractly than the target's positive behaviors. In this way, the negative behavior is described as if it were the target's negative dispositional feature. In this study as well, the reverse pattern is expected for the competition condition. The target's positive behaviors would be more abstractly described than the negative behaviors.

Two possible psychological mechanisms could explain these hypotheses: cognitive processes and motivational processes. On the one hand,

earlier principles of cognitive consistency (e.g., Heider, 1958) would suggest that the communicator strives for a consistency in the language he or she uses. Thus, the communicator is likely to consider the whole constellation of attitudes held among listener, target, and himself or herself when the message is created. On the other hand, a motivational perspective would suggest that communicators use language to achieve goals. The communicator's goals in the context of these studies are determined by the interdependent task. Thus, from this point of view, the communicator in the cooperation task is likely to use language to transmit a convergent attitude to the cooperation partner, whereas in the competition task the communicator is likely to use language so as to hinder the partner's objectives.

STUDY 1

In this experiment, speakers were given information about the positive or negative behaviors of a target person who was liked by the addressee. Thus, we introduced a target person who was positively related to the addressee. The speaker-listener relationship as defined by the task (cooperation vs. competition) is expected to influence how an uninvolved target's behavior is linguistically represented. Hence, we would expect the structure of the message about the target to differ as a function of whether the speaker-addressee relationship is a cooperative or a competitive one. In the cooperative task condition, we expected positive behaviors to be reported more abstractly and negative behaviors more concretely. In contrast, in the competition task condition, it was expected that positive behaviors are more concretely described than negative behaviors.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Forty-seven Spanish students from the University of the Basque Country participated in this study. Participants were recruited on campus and received 1000 Pesetas (6 Euro) for their participation. All participants were assigned randomly to conditions.

DESIGN AND MANIPULATION OF THE VARIABLES

The study consisted of a 2 task-interdependence (cooperation vs. competition) by 2 valence of target's behavior (positive vs. negative) factorial design. The main dependent variable was the level of linguistic abstraction.

The manipulation of the interdependent relationship (cooperative vs. competitive). The strategic task-interdependence manipulation (cooperation vs. competition) was an integral part of the introduction of the experiment. These instructions were as follows:

> In the main part of this study, you will be working with a person in another room. The person whom you will be collaborating (competing) with in this task is already waiting for you. You will join this person as soon as you complete a preliminary questionnaire. Let me briefly explain what will happen then. You are expected to answer a series of questions in a task similar to Trivial Pursuit. When you join your partner (opponent), you will receive specific instructions (app. 500 words or one page and a half of text) that you will need to read. These instructions will provide you with subtle clues about how to answer a set of ten questions similar to those found in Trivial Pursuit. Then, you will have five minutes to plan with your partner (on your own) how you both ("both" not mentioned) are going to answer the questions after reading the text. After that you have three minutes time in total to answer all the questions (to answer the questions before your opponent does).
>
> You will receive an extra amount of money if you answer all the questions correctly (before your opponent). If however, you can't answer the questions correctly within three minutes (before your opponent), then we shall ask you to complete a questionnaire about why you think you failed to complete this task. Completing this questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes.
>
> We know from earlier studies that it is unlikely for you to answer all the questions successfully without collaborating with your partner (unless you work in a competitive manner). Moreover, we also know that your success in this task does not depend on your skills or general knowledge alone but on your joint performance (. . . on your performance as compared to your opponent). It is therefore important to plan how to collaborate (compete) with your partner.

Furthermore, the questionnaires that the participants received consistently referred either to the "partner" or the "opponent" in the respective task-interdependence conditions (cooperation vs. competition).

Subsequently, they were informed that the experimenter would provide them with some information about their partner. Concretely, they were informed that their partner had participated in a previous study in which he or she had provided information about people he or she liked. Supposedly, the experimenter had chosen one of these events, and he had had them drawn by a cartoonist. Participants were shown this cartoon and asked to write down why they thought the target might have behaved as shown in the cartoon. They were provided with 10 lines of space.

The manipulation of the valence of the target's behavior (positive vs. negative). In order to select a cartoon representing a positive and negative behavior that did not vary as a function of expectancies and stereotypicality, we piloted a number of cartoons for valence and judged

typicality. The final four that were chosen (positive—a person embracing somebody or a person chatting happily with somebody, and negative—a person hitting somebody or a person gossiping about somebody) were found to differ significantly on valence, $F(1, 10) = 36.00, p < .001$. The positive events were judged more positively ($M = 6.00$) than the negative ones ($M = 2.40$).

Dependent variables. The two task-interdependence manipulation questions were identical regarding whether speaker and partner's objectives were in conflict and whether they had compatible objectives. Additionally, we asked how speakers would evaluate the partner ($1 = $ *negative*; $7 = $ *positive*).

The valence of target's behavior was measured by asking the following questions: (a) How would you evaluate the target in general? (b) How would you evaluate the event drawn in the cartoon? (c) How would you evaluate the target based on the event drawn in the cartoon? (d) How do you think you partner (opponent) evaluates the event? (e) How do you think your partner (opponent) evaluates the target based on the event shown in the cartoon? *Negative* (1) and *positive* (7) anchored the scale ends.

The abstraction level of each description was coded according to the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). All verbs and adjectives appearing in active sentences involving the target person in the role of sentence subject were coded. Interrater reliability between two independent coders was high (Cohen's kappa = .74). From this, the linguistic abstraction index for each message was derived (Semin & Fiedler, 1989). For each subject, this index is calculated in terms of the sum of descriptive action verbs, the sum of interpretative action verbs multiplied by 2, state verbs multiplied by 3, and the sum of adjectives multiplied by 4. The result was divided by the total number of terms used (see Semin & Fiedler, 1989). Additionally, the valence of the predicates (verbs and adjectives) was also coded (positive, neutral, and negative) (Cohen's kappa = .85).

PROCEDURE

The experiment was run in groups of 10 people. When they entered the laboratory, participants were informed that they would be engaging with a partner in a task that would involve cooperation (or competition) for its successful completion. Afterwards, they were given specific instructions about the task they would have to engage in. Then, they were shown a cartoon representing a positive (negative) behavior of a target liked by their partner. They were asked to write down why they thought this event might have come about once they were informed that their partners would read their descriptions before engaging in the task.

RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Effectiveness of the task-interdependence manipulation. The two relevant variables (perceived conflict of interest and perceived compatibility of objectives) were examined in a 2 (task-interdependence: cooperation vs. competition) by 2 (valence of target's behavior: positive vs. negative) MANOVA. The multivariate effect of task interdependence was significant, confirming the effectiveness of this manipulation, $F(2, 41) = 8.65$, $p < .001$. Of the respective univariate, the first was not significant, and the second one was, $F(1, 43) = 16.99$, $p < .001$. Participants in the cooperation condition judged their objectives as highly compatible ($M = 5.63$), whereas those in the competition condition regarded their objectives as less compatible ($M = 3.59$). Additionally, the speakers evaluation of the partner showed only a main effect due to task interdependence, $F(1, 43) = 12.14$, $p < .001$. The partner was judged more positively in the cooperation condition ($M = 4.96$) than the competition condition ($M = 3.96$).

Valence of target's behavior. The three dependent measures that were formulated from the participants' perspective [(a) How would you evaluate the target in general? (b) How would you evaluate the event drawn in the cartoon? (c) How would you evaluate the target based on the event drawn in the cartoon?] were reduced to one scale (Cronbach's alpha = .88). The 2 (task-interdependence: cooperation vs. competition) by 2 (valence of target's behavior: positive vs. negative) ANOVA yielded the expected main effect for valence, $F(1, 43) = 23.62$, $p < .001$. The positive behaviors gave rise to positive evaluations ($M = 5.29$) and negative behaviors were judged more negatively ($M = 3.27$).

The same analysis for how the partner is judged to evaluate the event in the cartoon gave rise to only a significant main effect due to valence, $F(1, 43) = 16.24$, $p < .001$. Negative behaviors received a more negative rating ($M = 3.19$) and positive ones a more positive rating ($M = 5.34$).

ABSTRACTION LEVEL OF MESSAGE

Abstraction level was analyzed as a function of task interdependence and valence of target's behavior. Both were between-participants variables. The predicted two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 43) = 9.58$, $p < .005$ (see Table 1). As expected, negative target behaviors were described more abstractly in the competition condition ($M = 2.40$) than the cooperation condition ($M = 1.92$), $F(1, 43) = 8.89$, $p < .005$. The difference for positive behaviors showed a weak trend in the

Table 1

Mean Level of Linguistic Abstraction as a Function of Task Interdependence and Valence of Target's Behavior (Study 1)

Valence of Target's Behavior	Interdependence	
	Cooperation	Competition
Positive		
M	2.21	2.02
SD	.39	.40
n	13	13
Negative		
M	1.92	2.4
SD	.31	.37
n	11	10

expected direction, $F(1, 43) = 1.73$. Moreover, in the competition condition, positive behaviors were described more concretely ($M = 2.02$) than negative behaviors ($M = 2.40$), $F(1, 43) = 6.01$, $p < .02$. Finally, the same comparison within the cooperation condition showed a trend in the expected direction, $F(1, 43) = 3.68$, $p < .07$. Positive target behaviors were more abstract ($M = 2.21$) than negative ones ($M = 1.92$). This overall pattern lends support to the hypothesis that the abstraction level of a message varied systematically as a function of the valence of the target's behavior and task interdependence.

MEAN PROPORTION OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE TERMS

An ANOVA with the proportion of positive and negative terms as a within-participants variable and task interdependence (cooperation vs. competition) and valence of target's behavior (positive vs. negative) as between-participants variables yielded an interaction between task interdependence and use of positive versus negative terms, $F(1, 43) = 7.43$, $p < .01$, and another interaction between behavior valence and the use of positive and negative terms, $F(1, 43) = 23.25$, $p < .001$. Participants in the cooperation condition used more positive terms ($M = .39$) than negative terms ($M = .17$), $F(1, 23) = 9.009$, $p < .01$. In contrast, participants in the competition condition used more negative terms ($M = .31$) than those in the cooperation condition ($M = .17$), $F(1, 45) = 5.389$, $p < .05$. The second interaction between behavior valence and the use of positive and negative terms suggested that participants used more positive terms to describe the positive behaviors ($M = .44$) than negative behaviors ($M = .22$), $F(2, 42) = 5.809$, $p < .001$. They also used more negative terms to describe the negative behaviors ($M = .37$) than positive behaviors ($M = .13$), $F(2, 42) = 3.135$, $p < .06$.

POSSIBLE COVARIATES OF ABSTRACTION LEVEL

Finally, we examined whether the systematic differences for message structure (abstraction level) covaried with the proportion of positive and negative terms in messages. Therefore, the proportion of positive terms and the proportion of negative terms were included in the main analysis concerning linguistic abstraction. Introducing the proportion of positive terms and the proportion of negative terms as covariates did not alter the significant interaction on linguistic abstraction, $F(1, 42) = 7.409$, $p < .01$, and $F(1, 42) = 7.840$, $p < .01$, respectively.

DISCUSSION AND STUDY 2

The results of the first study show that messages are communicated concretely to cooperative partners when the target's behavior is negative and abstractly when the behaviors of the target are positive. The reverse pattern was observed in the competitive task context. Positive target behaviors were communicated concretely, and negative target behaviors were communicated abstractly. Interestingly, the covariates (proportion of positive and negative terms) did not influence this overall pattern.

We next turned to the question, how easy it is to modulate such structural properties of language? In order to examine this, we conducted a second study. This study was identical to Study 1 in every respect but the relationship between the target and the speaker's partner. In this case, participants were told that it was well known that their partner *disliked* the target about whom they were to receive some information. This reversal of the target-communication partner relationship, from one that is based on liking to one that is based on disliking, allowed us to test the flexibility of strategic language use. In this particular experiment, we predicted precisely the reverse pattern of message structure to the one we obtained in Study 1. In the cooperation condition, we expected positive behaviors of a target disliked by the partner to be represented more concretely. In contrast, we expected negative target behavior to be described more abstractly. The opposite pattern was predicted for the competition condition. Positive target behaviors were expected to be described abstractly and negative behaviors more concretely. Because the link between communication partner and the target is now a negative one, the function of the message is reversed from what it was in the previous experiment in which communication partner and target were positively linked.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Forty-four Spanish students from the University of the Basque Country participated in this study. Participants were recruited on campus and received 1000 Pesetas (6 Euro) for their participation. All participants were assigned randomly to conditions.

DESIGN AND MANIPULATION OF THE VARIABLES

The study consisted of a 2 task-interdependence (cooperation vs. competition) by 2 valence of target's behavior (positive vs. negative) factorial design. The main dependent variable was the level of linguistic abstraction.

The manipulation of the interdependent relationship (cooperative vs. competitive). It was the same as in Study 1. The only difference was that on the cartoon that participants were shown, a behavior performed by a target *disliked* by their partner was represented.

Thus, after the task they had to engage in was described, they were informed that the experimenter would provide them with some information about their partner. They were informed that their partner had participated in a previous study in which he or she had provided information of people he or she *disliked*. It was mentioned that the experimenter had chosen one of these events and that she had had them drawn by a cartoonist. Participants were shown this cartoon and asked to write down why they thought the target might have behaved as shown in the cartoon. They were provided with 10 lines of space.

The manipulation of the valence of the target's behavior (positive vs. negative). The same cartoons representing positive and negative behaviors as those shown in Study 1 were used.

Dependent variables. The manipulation check questions and the measurement of the valence of target behavior were identical. The abstraction level of the message had a Cohen's kappa of .80. The kappa corresponding to the proportion of positive, neutral, and negative terms in the message was .82.

PROCEDURE

The procedure used in Study 2 was the same as that used in Study 1. Thus, the study was run in groups of approximately 10 people. Participants were told that they would be engaging in a task with a partner

that would involve cooperation (or competition) for its successful completion. Then, the task was described in terms of cooperation or competition relationships. Afterwards, they were shown a cartoon representing a positive (negative) behavior of a target *disliked* by their partner. The partner's negative attitude toward the target was the only difference from Study 1. Finally, as in Study 1, participants were asked to write down why they thought this event might have come about once they were informed that their partners would read their descriptions before engaging in the task.

RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Effectiveness of the task-interdependence manipulation. The two relevant variables (perceived conflict of interest and perceived compatibility of objectives) were examined in a 2 (task-interdependence: cooperation vs. competition) by 2 (valence of target's behavior: positive vs. negative) MANOVA. The multivariate effect of task interdependence was significant, confirming the effectiveness of this manipulation, $F(2, 38) = 11.80$, $p < .001$. Both univariate Fs $(1, 38)$ were significant. The first was 20.8 and the second one was 13.06; both p's were less than .001. Participants in the cooperation condition judged their objectives as highly compatible ($M = 5.36$), whereas those in the competition condition regarded their objectives as less compatible ($M = 3.43$). Participants in the cooperation condition saw a lower conflict of interest ($M = 1.91$) whereas those in a competition condition saw a higher conflict of interest ($M = 4.00$). Finally, the speaker's evaluation of the partner showed only a trend due to task interdependence, $F(1, 38) = 3.64$, $p < .07$. The partner was judged more positively in the cooperation condition ($M = 4.77$) than the competition condition ($M = 4.27$).

Valence of target's behavior. The three dependent measures that were formulated from the participants' perspective [(a) How would you evaluate the target in general? (b) How would you evaluate the event drawn in the cartoon? (c) How would you evaluate the target based on the event drawn in the cartoon?] were reduced to one scale (Cronbach's alpha = 82). The 2 (task-interdependence: cooperation vs. competition) by 2 (valence of target's behavior: positive vs. negative) ANOVA yielded the expected main effect for valence, $F(1, 40) = 31.65$, $p < .001$. Positive behaviors were evaluated more positively ($M = 4.24$) than negative behaviors ($M = 2.04$).

The same analysis for how the partner is judged to evaluate the event in the cartoon was significant for valence, $F(1, 40) = 9.27, p < .005$.

Table 2

Mean Level of Linguistic Abstraction as a Function of Task Interdependence and Valence of Target's Behavior (Study 2)

	Interdependence	
Valence of Target's Behavior	Cooperation	Competition
Positive		
M	1.90	2.48
SD	.26	.33
n	10	8
Negative		
M	2.47	2.32
SD	.46	.50
n	12	14

Negative behaviors received a more negative rating ($M = 2.12$) than positive ones ($M = 3.67$).

ABSTRACTION LEVEL OF MESSAGE

Abstraction level was analyzed as a function of task interdependence and target behavior valence. Both were between-participants variables. The predicted two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 40) = 8.01$, $p < .01$. As can be observed in Table 2, positive target behaviors showed a significant difference in the expected direction, $F(1, 40) = 8.71$, $p < .005$. The abstraction level for positive behaviors in the cooperation condition was lower ($M = 1.90$) than in the competition condition ($M = 2.48$). Negative target behaviors were not described more abstractly in the competition condition ($M = 2.32$) than in the cooperation condition ($M = 2.47$), $F(1, 40) = < 1.0$.

As expected, within the cooperation condition negative target behaviors were more abstract ($M = 2.47$) than positive behaviors ($M = 1.90$), $F(1, 40) = 10.13$, $p < .003$. In the competition condition, no difference was found between the abstraction level of positive and negative behaviors, $F(1, 40) = < 1.0$. The abstraction level outcomes were as expected with the exception of the abstraction level for negative behaviors in the competition condition.

MEAN PROPORTION OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE TERMS

An ANOVA with the proportion of positive and negative terms as a within-participants variable and task interdependence (cooperation vs. competition) and valence of target's behavior (positive vs. negative) as between-participants variables yielded an interaction between valence of target's behavior and use of positive versus negative terms,

$F(1, 40) = 23.46, p < .001$. Positive terms were more frequently used to describe positive ($M = .36$) than negative behaviors ($M = .21$), $F(1, 40) = 6.642, p < .05$, whereas negative terms were more frequently used to describe negative ($M = .50$) than positive behaviors ($M = .19$), $F(1, 40) = 29.252, p < .001$.

POSSIBLE COVARIATES OF ABSTRACTION LEVEL

In this study, the possible covariation effect of the proportion of positive and negative terms on linguistic abstraction was also tested. As in the previous study, neither the use of positive terms, $F(1, 39) = 13.730$, $p < .001$, nor the use of negative terms, $F(1, 39) = 4.696, p < .05$, affected significantly the main interaction on linguistic abstraction.

DISCUSSION

The pattern of outcomes of this study is broadly in line with our predictions. When a target who is *disliked* by the listener performs a positive behavior, this behavior is communicated more concretely to the partner in a cooperative context and more abstractly in a competitive context. The communicator thus signals to the partner with whom she is expected to cooperate that the positive target behavior is situationally influenced. If, however, the relationship between the communicator and partner is *competitive*, then the message structure is abstract. The message implies "You don't like the target, but the target has enduring positive qualities." In the case of negative behaviors, the communicator represents it abstractly to the partner with whom she expected to *cooperate*. The message is "You don't like the target and the target's negative behavior is due to enduring qualities." The unexpected outcome is in the cell that constitutes the communication of negative target behaviors where speaker and partner stand in a competitive constellation. We predicted that the message structure would be concrete, whereas it is abstract.

This is an unexpected outcome. We think that this may have been due to the rather complex nature of the task confronting the speaker-participant. This becomes clearer if we contrast the conditions of the first and second experiments. Consider the first experiment. Here, there was a positive "like" link between target and the communication partner. Thus, the perspective that participants had to take upon the target was no different from the one that they had to take to their communication partner. Partner and target behaviors have the same perspective and meaning. In the second experiment, the situation is more complex. To represent the target's behavior strategically requires first taking into account a negative link between partner and target. This is

relatively easy in the cooperation condition. Here the task objective is shared (winning), and the operative principle is simply "a friend's enemy is also my enemy." In other words, the relationship is "balanced" (e.g., Heider, 1958). The situation in the competition condition is more complicated. This is even more so in the condition in which we have the unexpected outcome, namely, when a target behaves negatively and is disliked by the partner to whom the speaker stands in a competitive relationship. This situation entails a triple negation. The speaker's relationship to the partner is negative (competition). The partner's link to the target is negative (dislike). Finally, the target's behavior is negative. We think that the number of perspective shifts that this condition requires may have contributed to the unexpected outcome in this cell. Indeed, as Heider (1958) noted, although it is possible to specify balance and imbalance in triadic relations, "the case of the three negative relations is somewhat ambiguous" (p. 203; see also Newcomb, 1968).

The studies described in this article suggest that people modulate tacit features of their language as a function of the constraints provided by the communication context (Semin, 2000). In the first study, participants were told that the relationship between listener and target was a positive one. When the speaker and the listener are in a cooperation situation, the speaker uses a more abstract language to describe the target's positive behavior and a more concrete language to describe the target's negative behaviors. In contrast, when both are in a competition context, the speaker is likely to use a more abstract language to describe the target's negative behaviors. The use of abstract language is likely to be interpreted as characterizing the target's dispositional features, as emphasizing the stability of the target's behavior and meaning that is likely to reoccur.

In the second study, the relationship established between listener and target was negative. Speakers were informed that the listener disliked the target. In this case, the cooperation context made the speaker describe the target's negative behaviors in a more abstract way than its positive behaviors, ensuring in this way that these behaviors were attributed to the target's personality. The general linguistic patterns that emerge from these studies have a particular function, namely, the regulation of the speaker-listener relationship. Several studies suggested in similar ways that speakers tend to accommodate their language to their listeners (Clark & Carlson, 1982; Higgins & Rholes, 1978).

One can consider two different types of processes, namely, cognitive or motivational ones, as driving these outcomes. From a cognitive point of view, the results may be explained according to balance theory (Heider, 1958). The studies reported manipulated experimentally triadic relationships between a speaker, a listener, and a target. First, the context of the relationship between speaker and listener was either
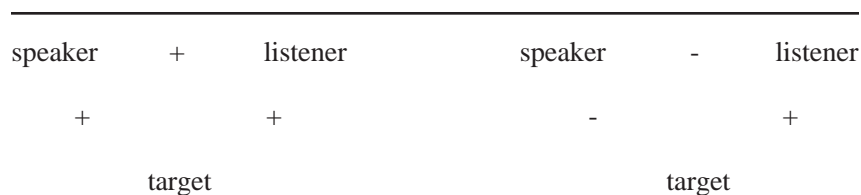
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speaker	+	listener	speaker	-	listener
+		+	-		+
	target			target	

Figure 1: **Attitude Links Among Speaker, Listener, and Target in Study 1 (Co-operation and Competition Conditions), Characterized by the Positive Relationship Between Listener and Target.**

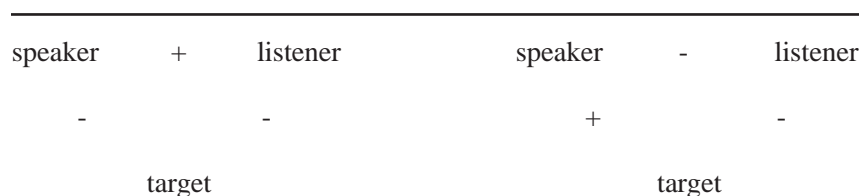| speaker	+	listener	speaker	-	listener
-		-	+		-
	target			target	

Figure 2: **Attitude Links Among Speaker, Listener, and Target in Study 2 (Co-operation and Competition Conditions), Characterized by the Negative Relationship Between Listener and Target.**

a cooperative one or a competitive one. Generally, a cooperation relationship implies a positive attitude toward the partner, whereas competition induces a negative attitude toward the partner. Furthermore, the studies also manipulated the relationship between the target and the listener (positive vs. negative) as well as the valence of the target's behaviors. Thus, in the first study the constellation of relationships may be represented as shown in Figure 1.

In the first study, the relationship between the listener and the target is a positive one. When the speaker holds a positive attitude toward the listener—as in the cooperation situation—then the speaker is likely to convey a desirable image of the target by describing its positive behaviors more abstractly than its negative behaviors. In contrast, when the speaker holds a negative attitude toward the partner (competition condition), then the speaker is likely to convey a negative image of the target by describing its negative behaviors more abstractly. Now, let us consider the second study. Here, the listener stands in a negative relationship to the target. In this case, the overall relationship constellations in the triad are likely to be as seen in Figure 2.

In the second study, in which the listener holds a negative attitude toward the target, the speaker represents the target's negative behaviors in a more abstract way when speaker and listener are in a positive relationship. In contrast, when the speaker stands in a negative relationship to the listener, then the speaker is expected to convey a

positive image about the target by describing the targets' positive behav-iors more abstractly than the negative behaviors. This last attitude constellation has been interpreted as unusual or difficult because it is complex, as the speaker has to deal with a triple negation (Newcomb, 1968).

This is the possible cognitive account of the systematic data we obtained in the two studies reported here. This interpretation shows the complex way in which attitudes and communication interact with each other. In this account, language use serves the goal of reaching a consistency between speaker's, addressee's and a target's "attitudes."

Let us now turn to a motivational account of the same results. Language use has been understood as a goal-directed behavior (Higgins, 1981; Searle, 1969; Semin, 2000). People use language strategically to obtain a goal, and in the present studies, this goal is induced by the cooperation or competition context. Because speakers are informed in these studies that their messages will be read by their cooperating or competing partners, their goal can be considered as one concerned with promoting (in the cooperation condition) or hindering (in the competition condition) their partner's performance in the task. Thus, in the first study, when they are told that the listener likes the target, the speaker is likely to transmit a positive image about it in the cooperation condition but not in the competition condition. This way, speakers are likely to use language strategically to communicate their positive attitude toward the target in the cooperation condition or their negative attitude toward it in the competition condition. In the second study, speakers also know that their descriptions will be read by the cooperation or competition partners before engaging in their tasks. In this study, participants were told that the partner had a negative relationship with the target. Thus, to promote their cooperation goals, speakers transmit a negative image about the target (by describing the target's negative behaviors in a more abstract way). In contrast, when speakers communicate to hinder their partner's objectives in the competition condition, they transmit a positive image about the target by characterizing their positive behaviors in a more abstract way.

Which of these two explanations constitutes a more privileged account for the data we have reported? If positive or negative attitudes were responsible for the mediation of the cognitive balance account, then this may have been reflected in the relative use of positive versus negative words. This would mean either of two things. One, we would have expected a third-level interaction between task-induced interdependence, the valence of target behavior, and proportion of positive and negative words used. We do not obtain such a third-level interaction. Second, one could argue that if linguistic abstraction is mediated by attitude, then the proportion of positive to negative words when entered as a covariate in the ANOVA should diminish to entirely eliminate the significant interaction. Indeed, this does not happen.

Thus, we come to entertain the possibility of a motivational explanation for the pattern of outcomes we have obtained in the two studies. Recently, Semin, Gil de Montes, and Valencia (2003) showed that systematic variations in the linguistic properties of messages only occur if participants expect that a message has a function (the addressee will actually read it). However, when the message has no communicative function, because participants are told nobody will read it, the message does not show any systematic variation in its linguistic properties. These results suggest that language use is strategic and responsive to social (i.e., communicative) contexts, namely goals. This study suggests that when people are communicating to their partners, they are pursuing strategic goals to influence their behavior, and when such a goal is removed, then the systematic linguistic biases disappear. The current results appear to be consistent with these findings and, taken together, enhance the plausibility of a motivational explanation for the pattern of results we have reported here. In line with the studies carried out by Higgins and his colleagues (e.g., Higgins & McCann, 1984), the results of the studies suggest that language is used as the means for achieving the communicator's goals, such as maintaining, fostering, or hindering a relationship with a cooperative or competitive partner.

What do these considerations suggest more specifically? The frequency of positive and negative terms in messages would appear to be the result of an evaluation process regarding the target that is driven exclusively by the task interdependence (cooperation vs. competition). In contrast, the systematic variations in linguistic abstraction seem to suggest that these variations are the result of a more complex set of processes, regarding affect, cognition, goals, and so on. Moreover, results obtained from different studies suggest that whereas linguistic abstraction is monitored tacitly (Polanyi, 1967) or implicitly (Franco & Maass, 1996; von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1997), the use of positive and negative terms is probably monitored more explicitly.

The current studies have several implications for research about the linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, 1999). First, although the research on the linguistic intergroup bias has advanced our knowledge about the interface between cognitive and motivational processes and strategic language use, this research has remained focused on explaining individual-centered processes, rather than examining how the relationship between a speaker and a listener shapes the structure of a message. Indeed, it is difficult to understand what a message means without knowing something about its recipient and the goal for which the message was crafted. Finally, we argue that the function of the linguistic abstraction patterns obtained in the two studies reported here differs substantially from the function that messages are regarded to serve in the research on linguistic intergroup bias. Although the function of the linguistic intergroup bias is regarded to be the maintenance and transmission of stereotypes, the function of the linguistic patterns

obtained here has to do with the regulation of a relationship with a partner. The function of the language used by the speakers is to reach coherence or consistency in communication, as well as maximize the goals of a speaker.

Finally, the current findings and approach raise a number of further research questions regarding how *recipients* of messages deal with what they read or hear given the communication context and the nature of their relationship to a speaker. One of the interesting questions is whether recipients of such messages actually do draw the inferences intended by the message structure. Are they differentially sensitive to drawing these inferences as a function of whether the message is structured to facilitate or frustrate their objectives? Are there other psychological implications of such messages in terms of, for instance, their emotional or motivational consequences for the addressee? Indeed, it would be also interesting to examine the message impact upon the addressee's task performance. These are the types of questions that present an open challenge for future research.

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Lorena Gil de Montes received her Ph.D. at the Free University Amsterdam in October 2000. She is currently a lecturer in statistics and a postdoctoral researcher in the department of social psychology and methodology of behavioral sciences, University of the Basque Country. Her main research interests are the relationship between communication and social cognition and the study of self-regulation processes.

Gün R. Semin received his Ph.D. in decision making and risk taking from the University of London in 1974. He is currently a professor in and chair of the social psychology department at the Free University Amsterdam. His research interests include language, social cognition, and communication. More specific themes are the interface between memory systems and the properties of interpersonal language, how social distance and proximity are communicated by the use of specific linguistic tools, and language as a tool to implement cognition in social interaction.

Jose Valencia is a professor of social psychology at the University of the Basque Country. He teaches social psychology and political psychology. His main research interests are attitudes, intergroup relations and intergroup conflict, social psychological processes and language use, social representations, and collective memory.