Verb Tense as a Predictor of Listeners’ Reactions to Autobiographical Narratives

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Introduction

- It is a custom in our culture to share memories as a way of connecting with one another.
- Some of our most poignant memories come from highly emotional events.
- At times we emotionally relive a memory when retelling the story, as opposed to simply recalling an event. (Pillemer 1998)
When retelling an emotional event, the narrator may switch from the past verb tense to the present verb tense at the height of dramatic excitement.

- May not be conscious act
- Sometimes used to convey drama
- Occurs with strong memory triggers
Pillemer, Desrochers, and Ebanks (1998)
- Examined unconscious verb tense shifts in emotional narratives
- Studied *Archives of memory: A soldier recalls World War II* by Alice and Howard Hoffman
- Found multiple instances in which the speaker shifted to the present tense
  - Highly emotional narratives
  - For example: being shot at
Emotionality

- People respond to memories in a personal way. (Pillemer, 1998)
  - Listeners become engaged when a personal memory is revealed

- Sharing personal details indicates friendship and caring. (Tannen, 1990)
  - Listeners feel closer to the speaker
The audience will believe the speaker due to the fact that the speaker is mentally reliving the moment being discussed.

- Their credibility is hard to deny. (Larsen and Plunkett, 1987)
- Detail and authenticity are important as well. (Pillemer, 1998)
Pathos

- One of the “earliest systematic discussions of human psychology.” (Kennedy, 1991)
- Using words to bend the audience’s emotions
- Emotional speech has this effect
Why is verb tense important?

- What are the practical implications of this study?
  - Law
  - Advertising
Bell and Loftus (1988)

- Using specific details can affect a case
- Students heard high detail and low detail testimony
- Believe the high detail testimony over the low detail testimony
  - High detail had better memory of crime
- Shifting to present tense may have the same effect
Advertising

Testimonial Advertisements

- Could be more convincing
- Speakers are reliving memory
- Audience could be more compelled to buy product
  - Increased profit
Hypotheses

- Listening to verb tense shift will be more convincing
- Speaker will be more believable if switching to present tense
- Participants will have a preference for the narratives containing the verb tense shift
Method

- 120 Introductory Psychology Students
  - 98 Females, 22 Males
  - Mean age = 19.5
    - 94.2% White
    - 2.5% Hispanic
    - .8% Black
    - .8% Asian
    - 1.7% Other
Instrumentation

- Tape containing three different narratives played
  - Personal Event Story
  - Eyewitness Testimony
  - Advertisement
- Half heard past tense, half heard verb tense shift
  - Average group size: 6 participants
Students answered a thirty question survey on their opinion of the narrative

- Survey contained the same nine questions for each narrative, with one specialized question at the end
  - The speaker was exciting
  - I can relate to the speaker
  - The speaker was emotional
  - The speaker and I have something in common
  - The speaker was memorable
  - I believe the speaker
  - The speaker was boring
  - I was emotionally engaged by the speaker
  - The speaker was accurate
Results

- When combining the results from all 120 participants, the results were overwhelmingly significant.
  - Verb tense has an effect
    - On all three narratives
    - With similar questions
    - Across both genders
Results

- There were strong gender differences in the results
  - Only 22 males
  - Analyzed only females
    - Still significant, not as drastic
    - Shows a predictable response
Personal Event Story

- Story with verb tense shift was exciting
  - Everyone likes an exciting story
- Speaker with verb tense shift more was emotional
  - Emotional speakers are more interesting
- Speaker with verb tense shift was more believable
- Speaker with verb tense shift was more accurate
  - Believability and accuracy lead to persuasiveness
Personal Event Story

Characteristics of Speaker

Means

- Exciting
- Emotional
- Believable
- Accurate

Past Tense
Tense Shift
Eyewitness Testimony

- Testimony with verb tense shift was more memorable
  - Needs to be memorable
  - Jury should remember testimony

- Key criteria missing from testimony
  - No evidence
  - Hard to understand testimony out of context
Eyewitness Testimony

Memorable Characteristics of Speaker

Means

Past Tense
Tense Shift
Advertisement

- Listener can relate to speaker more with verb tense shift
  - Very important function of advertisement
- Listener has more in common with speaker with verb tense shift
  - Women relating to women
- More interested in buying this product with verb tense shift
  - The purpose of advertising
Discussion

- Results show that verb tense does make a difference
  - People are sensitive to the subtle change
  - The speaker is more convincing
  - Participants preferred narratives containing verb tense shift
  - Same dimension to what is important to each narrative
Discussion

○ Practical Applications
  ● Law
    • Trial consultants
    • Law School
  ● Advertising
    • Write ads with tense shift
    • TV, radio, and print
Discussion

- Further Research
  - Visual cues
  - All male study
  - See if gender differences exist
  - Strengthen research
Thank You!

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