Verb Tense as a Predictor of Reader Reactions to Autobiographical Narratives

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Introduction

- Speakers often share personal memories in conversation as a way to engage the listener (Pillemer, 1998).

- One of the ways that a speaker can do this is to switch to the present tense at the height of emotional excitement.

- Storytellers and narrators often consciously use the present tense to communicate intensity and feeling to their audience (Updike, 1990).
“Cash stands a few feet in front of them with his feet wide apart. His shoulders curl forward, hunched and tense, as he lifts the rifle and takes aim. He remains frozen in this position for a very long time. Alice can see the gun barrel over his shoulder, wavering a little, and then she sees his shoulder thrown back at the same instant the gun’s report roars over the clearing. Her ears feel the pain of a bell struck hard. The woods go unnaturally still. All the birds take note of the round black bullet wound in the TV screen, a little right of center but still fatal.”
Spontaneous verb tense shifts often occur when the memory triggers feelings and images that are strong enough to make the narrator feel as if they are reliving the event (Pillemer, Desrochers, & Ebanks, 1998). This often occurs when people recount life-threatening situations (Pillemer, 1998).
Hoffman: 15 of 18 tense shifts involved a threat to his life or others (Hoffman and Hoffman, 1990).

- “The next thing I knew, the lieutenant says, “All right. Now we’re going to prepare for the attack.” And I’m thinking, this is crazy. We can’t possibly be going to make an attack…”
- “…Anything that wasn’t nailed down they dropped and ran…I’m running through the woods with a radio on my back, wishing I didn’t have it…”

"No one saw the shark come up to him. It knocked him off the board. It pulled him under because the leg rope was attached to him. He kicked and punched the shark, I think in the gill. We look up and see this surfboard just pop out of the wave and this big, massive shark just swam off” (msnbc.com).
Previous Research

• Language Properties of Trauma Narratives (Conoscenti, McNally, & Lederman, 2004)
  - Trauma narratives contain more present-tense words than neutral narratives.
  - Women with PTSD tended to use more present-tense verbs

• Conclusion

  People recounting highly emotional memories often use present-tense verbs, suggesting that they are reliving some part of it.
Previous Research

- Effect of verb tense shifts in personal narratives on the reactions of listeners (Vandoloski, 2006).

- Students listened to three tape-recorded narratives. They either heard all three narratives in the past tense, or they heard three versions in which the speaker switched to the present tense at the emotional height of the story.

- 10 questions related to reactions to the story, such as emotionality, believability, and perceived connections to the speaker.

- Subjects gave significantly higher reaction ratings when hearing the tense switch version.

- Effect found in both males and females.

- Actors were reading the narratives; impossible to guarantee that they are identical except for verb tense.
Current Study

- Elaborate on findings of previous thesis
- Avoid key confound from Study 1
  - Individuals were systematically assigned to either a past tense or present tense version, then read the narratives themselves.
- Avoids the possibility that the actors were unconsciously reading the tense switch versions in a more emotional way.
- Allows us to see whether the effect holds for “read” versions as well as “heard” versions.
Current Study

- 87 Participants (49F) from Psych 401 pool
- Each read 3 narratives:
  - Classroom story
  - Eyewitness testimony
  - Fictional Advertisement

- Rated reactions to each story on a 7-point scale
<table>
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<tr>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The student and I have something in common.

I believe the eyewitness.

I have a visual image of the scene.
Results

hmmm...
Results

In contrast to the first study where narratives were heard, when they are in written format almost all of the effect disappears.

Significant Results from Study 1
Significant Result concerned the college story about getting an exam back. “The (college) story was exciting.”

- First item answered
- Highly significant for women only
  - Most likely be personally relevant to college-aged females

Means:
Present tense 4.02
Past tense 3.52
(p=.038)

Females only:
Present tense 4.20
Past tense 3.42
(p=.007)
**Discussion**

*Why did the effect wash out?*

1. Wide range of personalities and reading styles
   Effect may be too small to show through this “noise”

2. Attentional energy taken up by performance rather than focusing on the story itself

3. Present tense is unnatural when not spontaneous – feels forced and awkward which could reduce believability

4. More a phenomenon for listener rather than reader

5. Only effect is excitement rating for college student story – may have been reliving
Future Directions

Pick items more relevant to life
Format in a way so that subjects are not performing
Replicate original model with different actors
CREDITS

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Official Guinea Pig
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Professional Relentless Encouragement
DEBBIE CARTER
STEPHEN CARTER

Special Thanks

UNH Psychology Department
- The story/testimony/advertisement was exciting.
- I can relate to the student/eyewitness/speaker.
- The student/eyewitness/speaker was emotional.
  - The student/eyewitness/speaker and I have something in common.
  - The story/testimony/advertisement was memorable.
    - I believe the student/eyewitness/speaker.
    - The story/testimony/advertisement was boring.
  - I was emotionally engaged by the student/eyewitness/speaker.
    - The student/eyewitness/speaker was accurate.
- I would like to hear another story by the student/If I was a member of the jury, I would take this testimony into serious consideration/I would like to buy this product.
  - I felt like the event was happening to me.
  - I have a visual image of the scene.