
6. The psychology of language and consumer behavior

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People use language to share and sell their ideas. Communicators—whether politicians, marketers, job candidates, or romantic interests—want to maximize the persuasive impact of their messages, and thus they choose their words carefully to formulate the best argument. Indeed, there is a long history of debate in marketing and advertising regarding the most persuasive arguments: rational or emotional, hard sell or soft sell, visual or verbal (Okazaki et al., 2010). However, along with *what* is said (the content of the persuasive arguments), *how* something is said also matters. This chapter is about the *how*. By *how*, we mean the structural aspects of language—linguistics—such as grammar, syntax, and phonetics. More specifically, we focus on psycholinguistics, which examines the relationship between language and psychology, including comprehension and perception. A rapidly growing body of research in consumer psychology is focusing on how subtle aspects of language structure—the verb tense used in a consumer review, the sound of a brand name, the tone of a persuasive message—can at times have substantial effects on consumer perception, inference-making, attitude construction, and choice behavior (Berger & Packard, 2023; Kronrod, 2022; Packard & Berger, 2024; Pogacar et al., 2022).

In the following sections, we review research on particular linguistic factors or “devices” (Pogacar, Shrum, & Lowrey, 2018, p. 689) that influence the consumption process. Space limitations mean that our review is necessarily restrictive and focuses on linguistic devices that have received the most attention from marketing and language researchers (for more comprehensive coverages, see Berger & Packard, 2023; Kronrod, 2022; Pogacar, Shrum, & Lowrey, 2018). We organize our review around two types of communication. The first is marketer-to-consumer communication, which until recently has made up the bulk of psycholinguistic consumer research (e.g., brand name development, tag lines, advertising copy). The second is consumer-to-consumer communication. The rapid rise and dissemination of internet use, the development of web-based communication modes such as social media, and the availability of text analysis programs have spawned a rapidly growing literature on language effects in consumer-to-consumer communication (e.g., product reviews, peer recommendations, influencer product evaluations). Indeed, consumer research on language has grown exponentially since the early 2000s, and much of this growth can be attributed to consumer-to-consumer communication research (Packard & Berger, 2024). Although there are numerous potential frameworks for discussing language effects, the juxtaposition of marketer-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communication is useful because it highlights an important point: linguistic effects are often context-dependent. In this case, the context is who is talking to whom, which potentially affects how consumers respond to the linguistic devices. Finally, within the

two types of communication, we organize the review around the different components of language: phonetics, grammar and syntax, discourse, and pragmatics (Kronrod, 2022).

MARKETER-TO-CONSUMER COMMUNICATION

Phonetics

Phonetics refers to the production and perception of speech sounds. Most consumer research on phonetic effects involves the sound of brand names. We review research on two aspects of brand name sounds: phonetic (sound) symbolism and sound repetition.

Phonetic symbolism

Phonetic symbolism refers to the notion that the sounds of words can convey meaning independent of their definition. Both vowel and consonant sounds are associated with many sensory perceptions. For example, front vowel (higher pitch) sounds are associated with concepts such as lighter, smaller, faster, harder, and sharper, whereas back vowel (lower pitch) sounds are associated with conceptually opposite concepts (heavier, larger, slower, softer, duller). Similarly, consonant sounds such as fricatives (sounds formed via air friction through open articulators; e.g., *v*, *s*, *f*) are associated with the same perceptions as front vowel sounds. In contrast, plosives (sounds formed via air stoppage by closed articulators; e.g., *b*, *t*, *k*) are associated with the same perceptions as back vowel sounds (French, 1977; Shrum & Lowrey, 2007; Spence, 2012). In one of the earliest examples of marketing applications of phonetic symbolism, Klink (2000) demonstrated that products with brand names containing front vowels (e.g., “Femp,” “Nellen”) are perceived as smaller, lighter (relative to darker), milder, thinner, softer, faster, colder, more bitter, more feminine, friendlier, weaker, lighter (relative to heavier), and prettier than products with brand names containing back vowels (e.g., “Fump,” “Nullen”).

The notion that individual sounds convey meaning is not new. In Plato’s *Cratylus*, Socrates argues that although the relation between the sound of a word and its meaning may sometimes be arbitrary, *good* words are those in which their sound and meaning are congruent (Plato, 1892). This notion of fit between sound and meaning also applies to brand names. One of the most consistent findings in consumer-related phonetic symbolism research is that positive marketing outcomes (e.g., brand name preferences, product attitudes, product recommendations, choice, willingness to pay) are maximized when the sound-symbolic perceptions of the brand name are congruent with the expected or preferred product attributes (Baxter & Lowrey, 2011, 2014; Botner et al., 2020; Maglio et al., 2014; Yorkston & Menon, 2004), and the effects are robust across languages (Motoki & Iseki, 2022; Pogacar et al., 2017; Shrum et al., 2012). For example, brand names with front vowel sounds (e.g., “Brimley”), which are associated in memory with concepts such as light, fast, sharp, are preferred over brand names with back vowel sounds (e.g., “Bromley”), which are associated with large, heavy, dull, for sports cars and knives, but the reverse is true for SUVs and hammers (Baxter & Lowrey, 2014; Kuehn & Mantau, 2013; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007; Motoki & Iseki, 2022). The same congruence effects noted for brand names have also been observed for spokesperson names in which phonetic congruence (front/back vowel sound distinction) increases source credibility (Baxter et al., 2015). Phonetic symbolism related to consonant sounds also influences brand name preference and product choice. Brand names with silent consonants (including */t/*, */p/*,

and /s/ as in “Sokat”) are more effective at conveying environmental friendliness compared to voiced consonants (including /d/, /g/, /z/ as in “Zogad”), and silent-consonant brand names are therefore preferred for pro-environmental products (Joshi & Kronrod, 2019).

Recent research has documented a similar congruence effect for phonesthemes, which are letter clusters associated with particular meanings (Bergen, 2004). For example, over half of all English words beginning with *gl* are associated with light (e.g., *gleam*, *glow*, *glitter*) (Bergen, 2004; Bolinger, 1950), and words ending with *olt* are associated with an energetic force (e.g., *jolt*, *bolt*, *volt*) (Hutchins, 1998). Consistent with the congruence effect, phonesthemic non-word brand names (e.g., *Glif*, *Zamolt*) showed better marketing performance (preference, attitudes, choice) when the meaning activated by the phonestheme was congruent with the product attributes or category (e.g., luminant car wax, exercise supplement) than when it was incongruent (protective car wax, sleep supplement) (Brennan et al., 2024).

Apart from issues of congruence between sound symbolism and product attributes, some sounds are just liked more than others and thus more preferred for brand names. For example, in English, certain sounds, such as the [ä] sound in *posh*, have positive connotations, whereas other sounds, such as the [yoo] sound in *puke*, have negative connotations. Thus, brand names containing positive sounds (e.g., “Kawlan”) are preferred over the negative sounds (e.g., “Kewlan”) regardless of front versus back vowel sound distinctions (Lowrey & Shrum, 2007), and positive sounds are over-represented relative to negative sounds among top brand names (Pogacar et al., 2015; Pogacar, Kouril, et al., 2018). Similarly, certain phonetic-related features of words, such as the number of syllables, ending syllable sound, and position of syllable stress, influence perceptions of a name’s femininity (Barry & Harper, 1995). Brands with more feminine-sounding names (e.g., Coca-Cola) elicit better market responses (attitudes, choice, brand rank) than brands with more masculine-sounding names (e.g., Red Bull) (Pogacar et al., 2021). These effects occur because more feminine-sounding names activate gender-stereotypical associations such as warmth (Fiske et al., 2002), and thus the effects are attenuated when warmth is a less important attribute (e.g., utilitarian products).

Sound repetition

Some words or phrases have repetitive sounds. For example, alliterative words are those in which the initial stressed sound (usually a consonant) in a syllable or word is repeated. Alliteration can occur in brand names (e.g., PayPal), or longer word passages such as complex brand names and slogans (e.g., Bed Bath and Beyond, “Britain’s Best Business Bank”). Alliterative brand names are often perceived as more appealing and produce more positive affect compared to non-alliterative brand names, and this positive affect increases preference for the alliterative brand (Argo et al., 2010). Alliteration can also increase processing fluency (i.e., the ease with which a cue is processed), which positively impacts brand performance. In one study, for example, price promotions were more favorably evaluated when they were alliterative (e.g., “3 Theybles \$30”) than when they were not (“3 Theybles \$29”), even though the non-alliterative promotion was objectively better. This effect was mediated by processing fluency (Davis et al., 2016).

Another example of sound repetition is rhyme, which is a repetition of the same or similar sounds in multiple words, usually in the final syllable. Like alliteration, rhyme can be found in brand names (7-Eleven) and slogans (“Don’t just book it. Thomas Cook it.”), and acts as a memory cue that can increase recall (Carr & Miles, 1997) and influence product evaluations, choice, and affect (Argo et al., 2010). Rhyme also influences perceptions of truthfulness. For

example, aphorisms that rhyme (e.g., “woes unite foes”) are judged to be more truthful than the semantically equivalent non-rhyming aphorism (e.g., “woes unite enemies”) (McGlone & Tofighbakhsh, 2000), and rhyming slogans are better liked, easier to remember, more persuasive, and considered more original and trustworthy compared to equivalent non-rhyming slogans (Filkuková & Klempe, 2013).

Grammar and Syntax

Grammar and syntax refer to the rules governing how words are arranged in a sentence to create meaning. The different ways in which speech parts (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.), tense, punctuation, and word order are combined provide endless possibilities for creating meaning. Very subtle changes in these components—the type of pronoun, the directness of verbs, the abstractness of descriptions—can have important effects on receivers. In the next sections, we review recent research on how grammar and syntax usage decisions influence the tone of marketing communication and how the tone affects—for better or worse—the persuasiveness of the message.

Pronouns

Pronouns (e.g., we, I, you) are ubiquitous in verbal communication (Rochon et al., 2000). Although these tiny words may seem insignificant, they can have considerable influence on how persuasive communications are interpreted. For example, pronouns serve a self-referencing function in persuasive communications, and their use can reflect or imply social relationships such as closeness (Kacewicz et al., 2014). The use of the inclusive “we” suggests a closer relationship than does the use of “you and I” (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Simmons et al., 2005). Importantly, the effectiveness of the closeness implication depends on whether the receiver thinks the closeness implication is appropriate. In one study, when participants were induced to perceive their relationship with a service provider as close, the use of the self-referencing “we” was more effective than the non-self-referencing usage (“you and the service provider”), but the effects reversed when the relationship with the service provider was perceived as distant (Sela et al., 2012).

Pronouns can also signal an emphasis on the self versus others. For example, marketers often encourage the use of customer-referencing (“you”) and firm-referencing (“we”) pronouns while discouraging the use of self-referencing, first-person pronouns (“I”) in marketer-to-consumer communications. Such strategies seem reasonable; the use of the customer-referencing “you” fits with a customer-centric approach. However, this conventional wisdom may be misguided. Across a series of experiments, the use of the singular self-referencing “I” rather than “we” increased customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior. These effects occurred because the salesperson’s usage of the first-person “I” increases perceptions that the individual salesperson has agency and empathy for the customer and feels and acts on their behalf (Packard et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of different pronoun usage (e.g., first- vs. third-person) may depend on the message positioning. For example, in a series of studies, Chang et al. (2019) manipulated whether an ad posted on social media (WeChat Moments) used first-person (“us”) or third-person (“them”) pronouns and also varied whether the accompanying visual stressed warmth or competence. First-person pronouns were more effective than third-person when

accompanied by warmth images, whereas third-person pronouns were more effective when accompanied by competence images.

Direct language

Parts of speech and their order can be manipulated to produce language that varies in the extent to which it is direct. By direct language, we refer to language that is more assertive, concrete, and explicit. The directness of language influences how it is received. For example, assertive language refers to statements that are direct, forceful, commanding, and confident, and these are better received when describing some products than others. Marketers routinely use assertive language in various types of communication, such as slogans and tag lines (“Just do it,” “Think small”) and advertising appeals (“Buy now!”). Although assertive ads and slogans have intuitive appeal, their effectiveness depends on several factors (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Quick & Considine, 2008). One factor is whether the product is utilitarian or hedonic. Assertive appeals are more persuasive than non-assertive appeals for hedonic products (e.g., chocolate), but the reverse is true for utilitarian products (e.g., a bank; Kronrod et al., 2012a). The differing effects as a function of product type are explained by the interplay between language, expectations, and mood. When consumers are in positive moods, they expect others to address them with assertive language because people in positive moods tend to use assertive language themselves. Because hedonic products are more associated with positive moods than are utilitarian products, assertive language is more effective for hedonic products.

Another factor affecting the persuasiveness of assertive appeals is whether the message is scolding or praising (Grinstein & Kronrod, 2016). Assertive language is more effective than non-assertive language when the message is praising, but the effect reverses when the message is scolding. Assertive praising language intensifies the positive meaning, whereas non-assertive language diminishes the negativity of scolding, making it more palatable. In contrast, non-assertive praise seems halfhearted, and assertive scolding seems too harsh.

Issue importance also influences the effectiveness of assertive language. Environmental messages that use assertive language are more effective for consumers for whom environmental issues are important, whereas less assertive messages are more effective for consumers for whom environmental protection is not that important (Kronrod et al., 2012b). For non-environmentally concerned consumers, the assertive message produces psychological reactance that increases message counterarguing (Brehm, 1966).

The effectiveness of assertive appeals also depends on the consumer’s relationship with a brand. Paradoxically, assertive messages backfire for consumers who have a strong commitment to a brand because assertive (compared to non-assertive) messages induce reactance in committed consumers (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017). Consumers who have a strong relationship with the brand feel greater pressure to comply with the appeal because they feel guilty ignoring the assertive message, which increases reactance and reduces message compliance.

Another aspect of direct language is the extent to which the language is concrete or abstract. Concrete (vs. abstract) language is the extent to which the words used to describe something are more specific, tangible, and easy to visualize (e.g., shoes (concrete) vs. clothing (abstract)). When salespeople use concrete (vs. abstract) language, it increases customer satisfaction, willingness to purchase, and purchase amount (Packard & Berger, 2021). This effect occurs because consumers infer that salespeople who use concrete (vs. abstract) language are more attentive and understanding of their needs.

Language intensity

Language intensity is the extent to which a message deviates from neutrality (Bowers, 1963). Markers of intense language include the addition of intensifiers that increase emphasis (e.g., very, really, extremely, best, worst). The use of more intense language can increase message persuasiveness and its components (e.g., trustworthiness, source credibility; Andersen & Blackburn, 2004; Buller et al., 2000). However, the positive effects of language intensity on persuasion are typically dependent on qualities of the source, particularly source credibility and trustworthiness. For communicators who lack credibility and trustworthiness, such as politicians, the use of intense language can backfire. For example, in one study, political candidates who used more intense language were rated lower on character attributes than candidates who used less intense language (Clementson et al., 2016). Similar findings were reported in a recent study on the use of intensive (high-arousal language) by influencers (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). In a study that investigated the interactive effects of intensive (high-arousal) language and size of the influencer's following, the use of more (vs. less) intensive language increased engagement (e.g., likes, comments) for micro-influencers (small-scale following) but decreased engagement for macro-influencers (large-scale following). This effect was driven by the activation of persuasion knowledge and its differential effects on perceived trustworthiness as a function of size of the influencer's following. Smaller (micro-) influencers were perceived to be less driven by commercial interests and more trustworthy than larger (macro-influencers), and thus the more intensive language had a more positive effect for micro-influencers.

Language complexity

Language complexity can decrease the ease of processing prose, and syntax (how words are arranged to create sentences) can be manipulated to produce more or less complex sentences (e.g., in ad copy). As an example, left-branching sentences (e.g., "Because of its fiber optic cable, Brand X is the fastest choice for internet access") are more difficult to process than right-branching sentences ("Brand X is the fastest choice for internet access because of its fiber optic cable"), even though both types of sentence are common and comprehensible. Conventional wisdom in advertising suggests that messages should strive for simplicity and avoid complexity, as the KISS advertising adage suggests (Keep It Simple, Stupid). However, research on the effects of copy complexity on advertising effectiveness is mixed (Lowrey, 2008). One factor that may explain these conflicting findings is the extent to which consumers are willing or able to process the more complex language (e.g., personal involvement). For routine, low-involvement decisions (e.g., ordering coffee), people prefer simple advertising language. However, when people are highly involved in a consumer decision (e.g., automobile purchase), their motivation to process information is higher, and they are more willing to engage with more complex language to access the information they seek. For example, although complex advertisements are not preferred for most routine communications, complex syntax leads to more favorable attitudes and greater memorability for script elements than simple syntax when involvement with the message is high, because motivation to process ad information increases message elaboration (Lowrey, 1998, 2006).

Although involvement may explain some of the differing effects of language complexity on persuasion, one problem is that the notion of language complexity is often ambiguous. Indeed, although experiments typically construct complexity conditions that differ (e.g., high vs. low), in fact, most high-complexity conditions employ moderately complex syntax. As

Lowrey (2008) shows in a re-analysis of complexity scores in previous research, it is the moderately complex syntax conditions that perform the best, typically when involvement is high. An additional reason why moderately complex syntax may be the most effective is that complexity can create “syntactic surprise,” in which the complexity (e.g., a left-branching instead of a right-branching sentence) is unexpected because more complex syntactic structures are encountered less often (Atalay et al., 2023, p. 755). Consistent with the “moderate is best” findings, Atalay et al. (2023) observed an inverted U-shape function in terms of syntactic surprise, such that medium-syntactic surprise messages are more effective (e.g., more donations, higher helpfulness ratings of reviews, greater click-through rates) than low- or high-syntactic surprise messages.

Summary

Marketers invest considerable resources to convince consumers to buy their products. Decisions on such positioning strategies involve deciding what to say to their customers. In the previous sections, we reviewed research suggesting that marketing effectiveness is also influenced by how the messages are communicated. What we find particularly fascinating about this research is how extremely subtle variations in message presentation—the sound pitch of a brand name, the rhythm and rhyme of a slogan, the choice of pronouns, the assertiveness, intensity, or complexity of a message—can have considerable effects on marketing outcomes. Moreover, not only are these message variations subtle, so too are the processes by which they exert their effects on consumers, to the extent that many of these effects occur outside consumers’ conscious awareness. Some of the effects are clearly automatic, such as phonetic effects—these effects occur even when processing resources are constrained (for a review, see Pogacar, Shrum, & Lowrey, 2018). However, even for linguistic effects that require controlled processing of the message (e.g., concrete, complex language), and when the effects are contingent on factors like product category or consumer involvement, consumers are still often unaware of how language influences them. Indeed, many if not most of the effects we have discussed involve the issue of fit, typically between the linguistic factors and consumer expectations. Yet consumers are not necessarily aware of this—things that fit just “feel right” (Teeny et al., 2021).

In the next sections, we turn to the effects of linguistic factors in the context of consumer-to-consumer communication. As we will see, some of the same linguistic factors just reviewed in the context of marketer-to-consumer communications also play a role in consumer-to-consumer communications. However, the same factors do not always have the same effects for the two types of communication, and this difference often arises because communicator context matters. Whether a marketer or consumer is discussing a product affects consumer expectations and interpretation of the messages.

CONSUMER-TO-CONSUMER COMMUNICATION

Consumers engage in numerous online and offline discussions daily to gather information, share their thoughts, and help their decision-making (Berger, 2014). These interactions can occur in various settings, such as social media platforms, online forums, and face-to-face conversations. This word-of-mouth (WOM) communication greatly influences consumer behavior,

from the books consumers buy to the websites they visit (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Trusov et al., 2009). In fact, WOM has become the top source of brand discovery for internet users in the United States, with approximately 36% of respondents relying on it (Navarro, 2024). In the following sections, we discuss how similar linguistic nuances that influence the effectiveness of marketer-to-consumer communication also influence the reception of consumer-to-consumer communication. From verb choices to narrative styles and paralinguistic features, each linguistic element in WOM communication can reveal something about the reviewer and affect the recipient's behavior. However, in many cases, the effects of particular linguistic devices and communication styles differ between marketer- and consumer-generated communications; such differences are primarily driven by differences in consumer expectations derived from communication norms (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013).

Grammar and Syntax

Direct language

Like marketer-to-consumer communications, consumer-to-consumer communications vary in the extent to which they use language that is direct (e.g., assertive, concrete, explicit, explaining), and this level of directness influences how other consumers (receivers) interpret this information and the effects it has on them. For example, the use of abstract (vs. concrete) language increases the persuasiveness of WOM (e.g., product reviews). This effect occurs because the use of abstract language signals that the reviewer has a more extreme attitude toward the product (more positive for liked and more negative for disliked products), which in turn increases or decreases receivers' buying intentions, depending on the valence of the review (Schellekens et al., 2010). In contrast, the use of explicit ("I recommend this wine") versus implicit ("I enjoyed this wine") language in WOM endorsements increases the persuasiveness of the endorsement because explicit endorsers are perceived as having more expertise and like the product more than do implicit endorsers (Packard & Berger, 2017).

Other types of direct language influence the persuasiveness of WOM communications, but the effects are often contingent on situational factors related to the reviewer or the product. For example, restaurant reviews that express certainty (e.g., high confidence) are more persuasive than those that express uncertainty (low confidence), but only for reviewers who are perceived as novices. For reviewers perceived as experts, using uncertain language is more persuasive. The effect is driven by violations of expectations. Novices who express high certainty and experts who express uncertainty both defy receivers' expectations, which causes receivers to engage more deeply in the processing of the message (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). However, there might be moderators to this effect, as recent research failed to replicate these findings, instead supporting the competing confidence heuristic hypothesis, which suggests that expressed certainty positively influences persuasion, irrespective of source expertise (Løhre et al., 2024). Another example is the framing of reviews in terms of whether they explain actions ("I chose it because...") or reactions ("I love it because..."). Consumer reviews that explain actions (compared to reactions) are perceived as more helpful for utilitarian products, but explaining reactions are perceived as more helpful than explaining actions for hedonic products (Moore, 2015).

Discourse

Discourse takes the text (generally multiple sentences, often from a corpus) as the primary unit of study. In the case of WOM, it investigates the forms and functions of communication in online settings, focusing on how the flow of messages and interactions in digital conversations conveys meaning and influences social dynamics.

Narratives

Narratives typically involve characters and temporal and relational components in the act of storytelling. For instance, when consumers perceive a single coherent and continuous narrative of a brand's story, this narrative link from past to present strengthens perceptions of brand heritage (Martin et al., 2024). Consumer reviews that are rich in narrative elements, compared to reviews that merely state arguments or attributes (e.g., in a list), increase feelings of narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), perceptions of informativeness, credibility, and persuasiveness, resulting in greater intentions to try the product (Hamby et al., 2015). Indeed, movies that induce higher levels of narrative transportation increase pleasure and arousal, which results in more positive WOM (Wang & Tang, 2021).

Narrative styles can also affect the storytellers themselves. For example, in a series of studies, Moore (2012) investigated the effects of using explaining language (e.g., “because”) in narrative reviews on the reviewers' perceptions of their own experiences. Greater use of explaining language increased the reviewers' understanding of their experiences, but the ultimate effects depended on whether the experiences were hedonic or utilitarian. Greater understanding induced by using explaining language reduced reviewers' evaluations and intentions toward hedonic experiences (both positive and negative), but polarized evaluations and intentions toward utilitarian experiences (higher for positive, lower for negative experiences).

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is concerned with how people use language to achieve specific goals, with a strong emphasis on context and usage. Unlike semantics, which explores the literal meaning of words, pragmatics delves into the meanings conveyed beyond the words themselves and how situational factors (e.g., preceding dialogue, senders' and receivers' mental states) influence intended meaning and interpretation.

Informal tone

One example is the use of informal tones and particular markers of informality when communicating with others, such as slang or swear words. The use of slang can shift the meaning of a statement based on context. When someone says a product is “lit,” the word goes beyond its literal meaning, signaling strong positive emotions toward the product. Similarly, reviewers using slang or casual language (e.g., “the computer is damn good”) can positively influence product-related behaviors because it suggests the reviewer holds strong opinions (Lafreniere et al., 2022). However, excessive use of slang or profanity may undermine the reviewer's credibility, reducing the perceived value of their opinion (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Similarly, the use of an informal tone is perceived as more valuable—up to a certain point; informality can enhance the reader's connection with the reviewer and make the review more engaging (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). However, excessive informality may cause recipients to perceive the reviewer as unintelligent and incompetent (Levin et al., 1994; Schindler & Bickart, 2012).

Certain markers of informality can influence the persuasiveness of electronic WOM, such as product reviews. For example, whether product reviewers use negation contractions (e.g., “isn’t” vs. “is not”) affects message persuasiveness. Readers of product reviews that use contractions rather than full negations have more positive attitudes toward the reviewed product and are willing to pay more for it (Kim et al., 2020). This effect occurs because reviewers who use contractions are perceived to be warmer and more competent than those who use full negations.

Interruption markers

One reason consumer-generated WOM communication can be particularly persuasive is that it is usually considered less biased and more authentic than communications that have a vested interest in a particular point of view. One aspect of WOM that is seldom present in marketer-generated appeals is the use of what we refer to as *interruption markers*. Interruption markers are linguistic and paralinguistic features such as interjections, intonation (tone indicators such as all caps, bold, emoji), tag questions (“right?” “isn’t it?”), and verbal hesitations (“uh,” “hmm”). Although such features are common in typical conversations, their presence in consumer-to-consumer communications often has a negative effect, particularly under high-involvement conditions. For example, in a study that assessed the persuasiveness of a message arguing for a comprehensive final exam, undergraduate students’ attitudes toward the issue were less favorable when the messages included hesitations, hedges, or tag questions than when they did not, but only when message relevance was high (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). In contrast, when WOM communicators use dispreferred markers (e.g., “don’t get me wrong, but...”) in front of negative information about a product, attitudes toward the product are more favorable compared to the absence of dispreferred markers because the presence of dispreferred markers increases perceptions of credibility and softens the negative assessment (Hamilton et al., 2014).

The use of textual paralinguage, such as exclamation marks and emoji, is a common feature of electronic communication. However, like hesitations and hedges, their use typically has a negative effect on receivers’ perception of the sender. For example, frequent use of textual paralinguage in a negative review signals that the sender is emotional and irrational, which decreases the informativeness of the review and its impact on receivers’ product evaluations. This effect, however, is attenuated when multiple negative reviews contain similar types of textual paralinguage (e.g., emoji, bolded texts; Kim & Gupta, 2012). Collectively, the research underscores that the way the content is communicated can be as crucial as the content itself (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005; Fiedler, 2008).

Humor, boastfulness, and figurative language

Communicators’ use of humor can influence the valence and extremity of recipients’ responses to consumer reviews. Positive reviews with humor are seen as less positive, and negative reviews with humor are perceived as less negative. This effect occurs because although negative reviews are often perceived as entertaining, humor also reduces the likelihood of receivers responding with sympathy because they view reviewers using humorous appeals as less serious (McGraw et al., 2015).

Another aspect of consumer reviews that affects their reception is the extent to which they are boastful. Although boasting is typically perceived negatively, it can have positive effects under certain conditions. For example, boasting from a trusted source increases the persuasive

impact of consumer reviews. However, low-trust sources activate heightened vigilance regarding their motives, which decreases persuasion (Packard et al., 2016).

Finally, a common linguistic device used in persuasive communications is figurative language. Figurative language conveys meaning beyond the literal definition of the words used; examples include metaphors (“the Everest of computers”), idiomatic expressions (“he’s in hot water”), and hyperbole (“I’ve told you a million times”). Generally, the use of figurative language has positive effects for marketer-to-consumer communications (e.g., advertisements; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013), although some moderating conditions may temper the effects (for a review, see Pogacar, Lowrey, & Shrum, 2018). However, the effectiveness of figurative language in consumer-to-consumer communications depends on the product category, specifically whether it is hedonic or utilitarian. Figurative language is more persuasive than literal language for hedonic products, but the reverse is true for utilitarian products (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). This differential effect is driven by conversational norms; figurative language is more often used to describe hedonic compared to utilitarian consumption, and thus considered more normative and in line with expectations, resulting in more positive attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Language is fascinating. It is at the same time remarkably complex and often taken for granted. This juxtaposition is easily seen in the research we have reviewed. Very subtle changes to aspects of words, sentences, and larger text that comprise persuasive messages can have important effects on how those messages are received, and often these effects occur outside of conscious awareness. Research on the effects of these subtle language manipulations has grown exponentially over the last two decades. With the development of new tools such as natural language processing, future research on the effects of language on consumer information processing promises even more discoveries.

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