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Language Use and Attributional Biases in Close Personal Relationships

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Attributional biases in close relationships can take the form of either an actor-observer bias (i.e., attributions to partner dispositions) or an egocentric bias (self-attributions). Hence, different theoretical approaches lead to contradictory predictions. To resolve this conflict, the language used to describe one's own and one's partner's behavior was analyzed. Free descriptions were coded with respect to sentence subjects (self vs. partner) and the abstractness of predicates. Evidence was found for both types of biases, though at different levels of language use. An actor-observer bias was obtained at the abstract level of adjectives, whereas an egocentric bias was found at the level of interpretive action verbs (i.e., manifest behaviors). Language use is also shown to be related to satisfaction with the partnership, action verbs being a better predictor than adjectives. The role of language in mediating or elucidating social cognitive phenomena is discussed.

Human behavior is mostly verbal behavior—despite repeated attempts to create an artificial distinction between “actual” behavior and verbalizations and other symbolic processes reflecting higher cognitive processes. What people (in families, in democratic institutions, at school) say to each other and about each other, and how such verbal behavior is interpreted, may determine their common well-being to a greater degree than overt motor behavior. No wonder, then, that verbally expressed attributions and cognitive appraisals of one's own and other persons' behaviors have been recognized as potent determinants of evaluations (Jones & Davis, 1965), decisions (Carroll & Payne, 1976) life satisfaction (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), emotions (Weiner, 1982), and depressive illness (Kuiper & Higgins, 1985)! Of course, this should

be especially so for social systems as sensitive and intense as close personal relationships (see Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976), which are the focus of the present article.

As a historical fact, the attribution approach has been the main agent of the cognitive revolution in social psychology (Dember, 1974), and this may explain the almost exclusive reliance on informational concepts and mechanisms in attribution theory. Even when it was conceded early that motivational or emotional factors may greatly affect the outcome of attributions, such influences were usually thought to be mediated by cognitive biases (e.g., self-serving memory biases). More recently, the accountability concept (Tetlock, 1985) has broadened the scope of theorizing and directed our attention to social rules and situational factors that complement the purely informational factors in attribution (Hewstone & Jaspars, 1984). Until today, however, attribution theories have remained almost blind and mute regarding the role of language and language use as a source of attributional knowledge (see Harvey, Ickes, & Kidd, 1976, 1978; Hewstone, 1983; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

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ATTRIBUTIONAL BIASES AND LANGUAGE

Although some of the earliest studies (Abelson & Kanouse, 1966; McArthur, 1972) were concerned with causal information implicit in verbal stimuli, and even though Heider (1958) emphasized the potential importance of linguistic factors in his seminal writings, there is hardly a place for language in any formulation of attribution theory. Let us briefly discuss this point with respect to one attributional phenomenon that is most prominent in the interpersonal domain and therefore most relevant for personal relationships—namely, the actor-observer bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

Observers tend to attribute observed behaviors to dispositional factors within the actor, whereas actors themselves are likely to attribute their own behavior to external factors in their (social) environment. This phenomenon has been explained in terms of the different perspectives from which actors and observers perceive the world, the differential knowledge about the self and about other people, or self-related motives (see the review by Watson, 1982). However, no attention has been given to possible differences between actors' and observers' language styles or the linguistic constraints imposed on the description of one's own versus other people's behavior.

This possibility was examined by Semin and Fiedler (1989), who argued that the actor-observer bias may reflect a different level of abstraction in the language use of actors and observers. Thus, if it is part of an observer's role to provide subjective interpretations beyond the mere description of objective facts, then this may result in a considerable degree of abstractness. In contrast, communication norms may prevent actors from interpreting and evaluating their own behavior and encourage them to "stick to the facts," yielding a less abstract level of language use.

This consideration is not strictly deducible on theoretical grounds alone; the opposite argument, that actors have to provide interpretations and observers have to stick to the facts, would not be completely implausible. However, there is by now sufficient empirical evidence to support the former assumption, that actors are reluctant to use abstract attributes in self-related descriptions (Fiedler, Semin, & Finkenauer, 1991; Semin & Fiedler, 1989) and that actors become more specific when required to account for their behavior (Fiedler, Semin & Bolten, 1989, Study 3). By contrast, descriptions of other people are readily abstracted (Semin & Fiedler, 1989). Moreover, the differential language used by actors and observers is independent of causal attribution, occurring for a more general class of verbal behaviors (Semin & Fiedler, 1989). Therefore, attributions from different perspectives may, to an unknown degree, reflect differ-

ent language styles rather than intracognitive processes or a type of mindless cognitive set resulting from linguistic habits.

As a methodological tool for measuring abstractness of language use, the *linguistic category model* developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988) was employed. In this model, four levels of encoding interpersonal behavior are distinguished, corresponding to four word categories. At the most concrete level, *descriptive action verbs* (DAVs) such as *call*, *touch*, or *visit* refer to specific observable acts defined by at least one physically invariant feature. The situational context is typically essential in the comprehension of DAV sentences. At the next level, *interpretive action verbs* (IAVs; e.g., *help*, *cheat*, *aggress*) still serve to denote single behavioral episodes but already involve some interpretation and, typically, a positive or negative evaluation. Thus, *to help* refers to a general class of different behaviors that do not share a single descriptive feature, and to classify one behavioral instance as helping involves an interpretive judgment. *State verbs* (SVs; e.g., *admire*, *abhor*, *like*) already abstract from single behavioral episodes and are therefore detached from behavioral context. State verbs refer to more or less enduring emotional or mental states but are still directed at specific object persons. Finally, the most abstract level of language use is in terms of *adjectives* (ADJs) such as *honest*, *helpful*, or *hostile*. Describing someone as honest not only abstracts from concrete behaviors in specific contexts but even from individual object persons, implying a general trait-like disposition that can be generalized over situations and object persons.

In operational terms, then, the actor-observer differences reported by Semin and Fiedler (1989) are based on the distribution of sentences containing a DAV, IAV, SV, or ADJ as a predicate. In a replication of a well-known actor-observer experiment by Nisbett, Caputo, Legrant, and Marecek (1973, Study 2), verbal explanations of why subjects themselves had chosen their majors and why they liked their own boyfriends/girlfriends (actor condition) were analyzed as well as explanations of why their best friends had chosen their majors and why they liked their girlfriends or boyfriends (observer condition). A summary score was defined for all sentences provided in response to each question, coding 1, 2, 3, and 4 for statements including DAVs, IAVs, SVs, and ADJs, respectively. These abstractness coefficients were given a different sign depending on whether a sentence implied internal or external causation, taking into account the well-established finding (e.g., Brown & Fish, 1983; Fiedler & Semin, 1988) that DAVs, IAVs, and ADJs imply internal attribution to the logical sentence subject (e.g., "Tom helps other people"; the IAV *to help* is attributed internally to Tom) whereas SVs imply external causes within

the sentence object ("Tom admires Sara"; the *SV to admire* is attributed to something within Sara). In this way, the Nisbett et al. findings could be simulated almost perfectly, relying on linguistic criteria alone and independent of any cognitive criteria or attribution judgments.

These findings not only testify to the usefulness of the linguistic categories as a research tool but at the same time highlight the potential involvement of language as a mediator of the actor-observer bias. They do not provide causal evidence, to be sure, that attribution biases are the consequence and language differences between actors and observers are the antecedent. An alternative explanation would be that the linguistic differences reflect implicit attributions that are the cause, rather than the effect, of differential language use.

Nevertheless, we argue for several reasons that a linguistic account of the actor-observer bias constitutes an important supplement to existing theories and improves our understanding of the phenomenon. First, Semin and Fiedler (1989) have demonstrated, as already mentioned, that actors' and observers' language styles persist even when behavior descriptions are provided in the context of a task that does not call for causal explanations. Although the involvement of unelicited causal thoughts cannot be excluded even in noncausal descriptions, this finding suggests that the language bias may be more universal than the attribution bias.

Second, there is some pertinent evidence from intergroup research using the linguistic category model. Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, and Semin (1989) analyzed attributions by in-group and out-group members (competing horse-racing teams), showing that language rules may override common attribution biases. In general, they found that stereotype-confirming behavior (i.e., negative out-group behavior and positive in-group behavior) is described in more abstract terms than stereotype-disconfirming behavior. However, whereas a group-serving bias would imply that IAVs rather than SVs would be favored in descriptions of positive in-group and negative out-group behaviors (because IAVs, but not SVs, imply internal attributions), the language rule predicts a preference for the more abstract SV attributes in confirming descriptions, and this is actually borne out by the data.

ACTOR-OBSERVER BIAS OR EGOCENTRIC BIAS?

Finally and most important, however, we argue that the linguistic account is more flexible and sophisticated, theoretically, than traditional accounts alone. Analyzing actors' and observers' language can help to resolve theoretical conflicts and contradictory predictions of different cognitive approaches. One such conflict is apparent in the literature on attributions in close personal rela-

tionships. The marital relation can be treated like any other interpersonal relation as an instance of actors' and observers' perspectives. Accordingly, the observation of one's partner's behavior should lead to more internal, dispositional attributions than explanations of one's own actions, which should be more likely to be attributed to external factors. This obvious prediction, however, is at variance with the so-called egocentric bias in close relationships (Fiedler, 1983; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981)—that is, the tendency to ascribe more responsibility for common acts to oneself than to one's partner. Whereas the actor-observer bias implies partner attributions, the egocentric bias implies the opposite: an inclination toward self-attribution (Burger & Rodman, 1983).

Theory in the actor-observer bias domain has been primarily concerned about *dispositional* inferences—that is, whether the actions of others and self are best understood with dispositional or situational forces as their causes. In contrast, the instrumentation of egocentric bias research has implicitly if not explicitly directed respondents' attention to *activities or actions*, and the corresponding rating scales seem to represent a more concrete level than the trait adjectives typically used to denote dispositions. It would appear to us that the apparent contradiction between the theoretical and empirical traditions relies on differences in the explanatory levels elicited from subjects. The demand of most actor-observer studies has been for explanations of behavior in terms of dispositions, whereas the predominant emphasis of the egocentric bias tradition has been on differences in contribution to acts or actions. If this suggestion is correct, we might find evidence for an egocentric bias as well as an actor-observer bias in the same study, the former being obtained at a lower level of language use than the latter. For an appropriate test of this consideration, we decided to analyze the language used in free descriptions of one's own and one's partner's behavior, because such an unrestrained response format avoids the methodological problems of elicited responses and linguistic demands associated with questionnaire methods.

The analysis of language in close relationships was intended to simulate attributional tendencies in terms of the linguistic category model. Would the language use point to actor-observer biases as in other, nonintimate relations? Or would the intimacy and mutual familiarity in couples who live together eliminate the cognitive asymmetry that is expected to give rise to the actor-observer bias, yielding an egocentric bias? Or, as suggested above, would the linguistic evidence reveal that both phenomena may exist at different language levels, thereby reconciling the predictions of both conflicting theories?

These are the research questions guiding the study reported below.

METHOD

Participants. Thirty-one heterosexual couples took part in an investigation simply announced as a psychological study of processes in close personal relationships. Some of them had responded to an advertisement in the university; others were recruited from a large student apartment house. Virtually nobody who was contacted by the female experimenter (the third author) refused to participate, so that the sample can be considered to be unbiased. Participants represented a typical student couple population; most of them had been living together for several years. Some of them shared an apartment, and most others met each other regularly and frequently. The members of each pair were received and examined separately, and their data were analyzed independently, resulting in two correlated data sets from the 31 pairs.

Procedure. Participants were informed that the investigation was concerned with a content analysis of their verbal comments on their mutual relationship. Minimal instructions mentioned only that they were expected to provide written descriptions of themselves as well as their partners. No restriction was made concerning the objective or theme of the descriptions. However, as a useful hint, they were told that descriptions might refer, for instance, to attributes, activities, feelings, or habits. Only one directive suggestion was introduced: Sentences should contain, as the logical subject, either the participant or his or her partner. Moreover, participants were encouraged to provide simple sentences rather than complex, nested, or multiply branched sentences to facilitate the subsequent content analysis. It was credibly assured that all data would be treated as absolutely confidential.

On the completion of these free descriptions, participants received a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part was an egocentric bias test including essentially the same items that had already been used by Thompson and Kelley (1981) or Fiedler (1983) to demonstrate egocentric biases. Twenty-one attributes or behaviors (e.g., planning leisure activities, being jealous) were each judged on a 50-mm graphic rating scale regarding the relative contribution of oneself (left scale pole) versus one's partner (right scale pole) to that item. This measure was included to replicate the egocentric bias with the present sample, as a premise to a cogent test of language factors.

The second part was devoted to some demographic information (age, occupation, duration of the relationship) and a measure of satisfaction with the relationship.

Specifically, participants were asked to state their satisfaction in response to the question "How satisfied are you with your mutual relationship?" on a 7-point rating scale from *very dissatisfied* (-3) to *very satisfied* (+3). These background data were assessed to examine correlates and possible consequences of attributional biases in personal relationships.

RESULTS

An analysis of the background data from the 31 dyads revealed that the majority of relationships ($n = 18$) had lasted for 2 years or more and 26 of the 31 couples had been together for at least 1 year. Nevertheless, there was enough variance in duration (from less than 3 months in 3 cases to more than 5 years in another 3 cases) to warrant consideration of this factor. The mean age of male participants was 24.63 years ($SD = 2.74$); the mean age of their female partners was 22.35 ($SD = 2.33$). Men and women showed perfect agreement, on average, in degree of satisfaction with their relationship (+1.26 on the 7-point scale from -3 to +3).

Egocentric bias questionnaire. As a measure of egocentric biases comparable to measures in earlier studies, the 21 judgments by female partners (where high values indicate partner attribution) were subtracted from the *inverted* ratings by their male partners (high values indicating self-attribution). The resulting differences are positive if self-attributions are higher than partner attributions pertaining to the same persons. (Subtracting female partner ratings from male self-ratings yields identical differences, though computed from an opposite view of the response scales.) These self-ratings and partner ratings pertaining to the same individuals were then averaged over all 21 items to obtain an overall attribution score.

The egocentric bias phenomenon was replicated for the present subject sample, according to a t test on the two correlated sets of attribution scores, $t(30) = 2.81$, $p < .01$. There was a systematic tendency for self-attributions to exceed the attributions these same persons received from their partners (M_s : 24.9 vs. 23.9), suggesting that the present study can be tied to earlier research with close relationships. The claim to contribute more than one's partner was somewhat stronger in men ($M = 25.12$) than in women ($M = 23.94$), $t(30) = 1.82$, $.05 < p < .10$.

Language analysis. The language used by both members in a dyad to describe their own as well as their partners' behavior was coded with regard to several aspects. After descriptions had been segmented into elementary propositions (usually sentences; complex sentences were split into clauses), each statement was first classified as pertaining to the male or the female partner. This

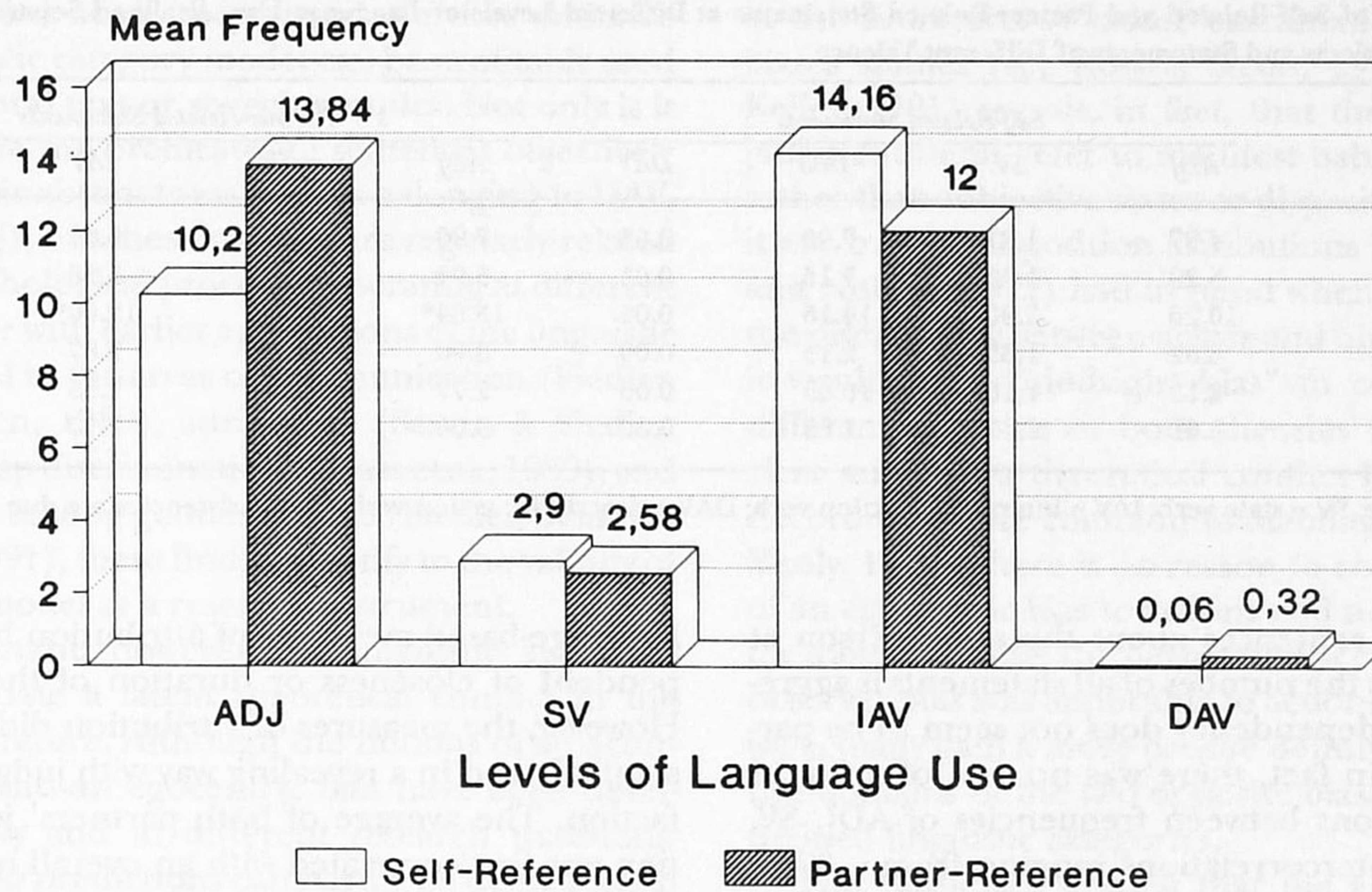


Figure 1 Mean frequency of self-related and partner-related statements at different levels of language use (pooled over male and female subjects). ADJ, adjective; SV, state verb; IAV, interpretive action verb; DAV, descriptive action verb.

classification, which refers to the logical subject of a sentence, could be accomplished with virtually perfect objectivity. Second, the predicate of each statement was coded with respect to the linguistic category model as belonging to category DAV, IAV, SV, or ADJ. There was also a substantial null category for sentences with no explicit predicate phrase (e.g., mere references to situations or simple noun phrases). Intercoder agreement for this aspect has been determined consistently (Fiedler, Semin, & Bolten, 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1988) to be about 90%, as assessed in several independent studies. Furthermore, each statement was classified as evaluatively positive, negative, or neutral and with respect to the inclusion of context phrases (i.e., adverbials). In general, the task was understood by subjects as providing descriptions of *mutual* behavior within the dyad. Even when the partner was not explicitly mentioned as a sentence object, implicit partner reference was clear from the meaning and context. We therefore refrained from coding object phrases.

The coding results can be represented as a 5 (ADJ, SV, IAV, DAV, no predicate) \times 2 (sentence about male vs. female) \times 2 (description by male vs. female partner) table, the entries of which reflect the frequency with which people described their own and their partners' behavior at different levels of abstraction. These frequencies were considered as measures of the prevalence of different language styles in self-descriptions and part-

ner descriptions. Figure 1 portrays the mean frequencies for the 31 couples, summed over descriptions by male and female members.

Apart from the overwhelming differences in the base rates of different linguistic categories, the most interesting feature in Figure 1 is an interaction of perspective (self vs. partner) and level of language use. This interaction reflects a reversal from an *actor-observer* bias at the level of ADJ to an *egocentric bias* at the level of IAV. In other words, more ADJs, or dispositional terms, are attributed to one's partner than to oneself, whereas people claim to contribute more to manifest activities expressed by IAVs than their partners. This suggests that both biases are present in close relationships though at different language levels.

The interaction of perspective with language level is statistically significant in a Perspective (self vs. partner) \times Language Level (ADJ vs. SV vs. IAV) repeated-measures ANOVA, $F(2, 60) = 12.70$, $p < .001$, from which DAVs were excluded because purely descriptive terms were virtually never used (see Figure 1). A main effect for language level, $F(2, 60) = 57.42$, $p < .001$, was also obtained. Such a statistical test is problematic, of course, because of possible dependencies among the levels of the language factor. For example, expressing a statement at the ADJ level precludes an expression of that same statement at other levels, although one might argue that ADJ sentences do not prevent the subject from producing any

TABLE 1: Frequency of Self-Related and Partner-Related Statements at Different Levels of Language Use, Analyzed Separately for Male and Female Subjects and Statements of Different Valence

Data Split	Self-Related Statements				Partner-Related Statements			
	ADJ	SV	IAV	DAV	ADJ	SV	IAV	DAV
Female subjects	4.97	1.87	7.00	0.03	7.90	1.42	6.42	0.22
Male subjects	5.29	1.03	7.16	0.03	5.94	1.16	5.58	0.10
Overall	10.26	2.90	14.16	0.06	13.84*	2.58	12.00*	0.32
Positive valence	4.52	1.35	2.13	0.00	8.00	1.32	2.87	0.00
Neutral	2.13	1.10	10.45	0.06	2.77	0.74	7.35	0.32
Negative valence	3.61	0.45	1.58	0.00	3.06	0.52	1.77	0.00

NOTE: ADJ = adjective; SV = state verb; IAV = interpretive action verb; DAV = descriptive action verb. *Inconsistencies are due to rounding.

number of other sentences about the same person at different levels. As the number of all statements is aggregated finally, the dependency does not seem to be particularly serious. In fact, there was no sign of artificial negative correlations between frequencies of ADJ, SV, IAV, and DAV (intercorrelations ranging from $-.07$ to $+.34$). Nevertheless, it seems wise to consider alternative analyses.

Indeed, a multivariate Hotelling's T^2 test supports the conclusion that the pattern of language use (i.e., the frequency of ADJ, SV, and IAV) differs significantly between self-descriptions and partner descriptions (averaged over sexes), $F(3, 24) = 5.90$, $p < .01$. Of more theoretical interest is a direct test of the opposite tendencies observed at the ADJ and IAV levels. In fact, an isolated test of the actor-observer bias with ADJ yields a significant $t(30) = 3.59$, $p < .01$, and similarly, a separate test of the opposite finding of an egocentric bias with IAV results in a significant $t = 2.48$, $p < .05$ (all tests two-sided).

No gender differences were obtained with regard to the crucial Perspective \times Language Level interaction (Table 1), which was significant in separate analyses for male, $F(2, 60) = 5.36$, $p < .01$, and female partners, $F(2, 60) = 10.41$, $p < .001$, indicating that the perspective effect is not confounded with sexist language or sex of language user.

With regard to a possible self-serving bias, it may be interesting to compare self- and partner ascriptions of positive, negative, and neutral attributes (lower part of Table 1). As evident from this data split, the actor-observer bias for ADJ ascriptions is mainly due to the ascription of positive traits to partners rather than the self. However, the egocentric bias at the IAV level is confined to neutral attributes, disappearing completely for evaluative (positive or negative) statements. Thus, no self-serving bias seems to be at work in the present sample.

Biased attribution and satisfaction. Various analyses were performed to relate language use to the background data on the 31 dyads. The general result is that the

language-based measures of attribution biases are independent of closeness or duration of the relationship. However, the measures of attribution did correlate substantially and in a revealing way with judgments of satisfaction. The average of both partners' judged satisfaction was first correlated with an overall index of bias in the egocentric bias questionnaire, defined as the overall sum of self- minus partner ratings, aggregated over items and both partners. Although this correlation only approached statistical significance ($r = -0.35$, $.05 < p < .10$), it suggests a tendency for satisfaction to decrease with egocentric biases, quite in line with the literature (Thompson & Kelley, 1981).

The satisfaction index can also be predicted by multiple regression from the language-based attribution measures—in particular, the use of evaluatively positive ADJ and IAV, pooling over self- and partner attributions, $R = .40$, $F(2, 28) = 5.35$, $p < .05$. Considering the resulting beta weights, it can be seen that satisfaction is related to positively toned language at the IAV level, $\beta_{iav} = 0.42$, $t(28) = 2.29$, $p < .05$. However, the use of positive ADJs expressing desirable traits hardly contributes to the prediction of satisfaction and even receives a slightly negative weight, $\beta_{adj} = -0.19$, $t(28) = -1.03$. Neither the number of negative attributes used to describe oneself or one's partner ($R = .13$) nor the number of neutral attributes ($R = .18$) was a suitable predictor for satisfaction.

Regression analyses with the demographic data did not reveal any systematic relations. In particular, the use of the two most prevalent categories, IAV and ADJ, was uncorrelated with the duration of relationships, $R = .19$, $F(1, 28) = 1.11$. Thus, the interdependence between language use and satisfaction does not appear to be simply due to any factors related to the intensity or duration of relationships.

DISCUSSION

These findings concerning the role of language in conveying or mediating attributional biases in close relationships have theoretical as well as methodological

implications. First of all, they provide further evidence that the linguistic category model can be profitably used to analyze natural text or speech samples. Not only is it possible to code the predicates of sentences objectively in terms of their abstractness (i.e., as belonging to DAV, IAV, SV, or ADJ), but these codings are regularly related to distinct psychological processes operating at different levels. Together with earlier applications of the linguistic category model in the areas of communication (Fiedler, Semin & Bolten, 1989), attribution (Semin & Fiedler, 1989), out-group discrimination (Maass et al., 1989), and discrimination among gender groups (Fiedler, Semin & Finkenauer, 1991), these findings testify to the validity of the linguistic model as a research instrument.

More important, however, the linguistic approach helps to elucidate a latent theoretical conflict in the attribution literature. Although the notions of an actor-observer bias and an egocentric bias have been developed separately and in different research traditions, their conflicting predictions can hardly be denied when it comes to attributions in close relationships. On the one hand, each member in a pair of persons living together is the other member's observer, and there is no restriction in theories of the actor-observer bias that would exclude such dyads from the domain of the theory. Thus, people should be more likely to provide internal attributions to dispositional factors for their partners' behavior than for their own actions or behaviors. On the other hand, closely related dyads have been shown to be particularly prone to an egocentric bias in which people claim to contribute more than their partners to various common activities and accomplishments. Again, the domain of the theory is not restricted explicitly, so that the general prediction is that of a predominance of self-over partner attributions.

The present analysis of language use reveals how this apparent conflict can be resolved, showing that both biases are actually present, albeit at different levels of abstraction. The actor-observer discrepancy is reflected in a substantially greater number of ADJs, or trait attributes, ascribed to partners than to the self. At the same time, an egocentric bias shows up in an asymmetry at the more concrete and context-bound level of IAVs, in that more manifest actions are ascribed to the self than to the partner. Both biases are statistically significant, though in opposite directions. Moreover, this reversal or interaction between the direction of attribution and the language level is reliable in terms of a parallel test with male and female partners as either actors or observers. No doubt, then, the findings can hardly be discarded as preliminary data of questionable reliability.

In hindsight, of course, these differential findings for traits (ADJs) and actions (IAVs) appear to make sense intuitively and are quite in line with a retrospective look

at the literature. A closer examination of egocentric biases studies (see Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981) reveals, in fact, that the greatest part of judgment items refer to manifest behaviors (i.e., IAVs) rather than subjective states or dispositions. By contrast, it was trait or disposition attributions (ADJs) that Jones and Nisbett (1972) had in mind when they pointed out the discrepancy between actors and observers. However, it would be a "hindsight bias" to conclude that the different domains of both theories have always been clear and that a theoretical conflict has never existed. According to the common availability account (Ross & Sicoly, 1979), there is no reason to confine the domain of an egocentric bias to actions and not to expect a bias for traits. Likewise, the perspective account for the actor-observer bias is as applicable to actions as to traits. Thus, we actually gain a more precise definition of the respective domains of the two opposite biases through clearly defined linguistic categories.

The subsidiary finding that the actor-observer bias mainly reflects partner attributions of positively toned traits, whereas the egocentric bias is evaluatively neutral, points to the possible role of social norms prohibiting partner derogation and self-praise. This illustrates another way in which attribution might reflect communication rules. Indeed, norms of this kind may have contributed to the atypical results reported by Burger and Rodman (1983), who also found more partner than self-attributions for positive outcomes.

We intentionally refrained from causal interpretations of the language-cognition link in this article. Thus, although it may be tempting to ask whether attribution tendencies reflect language conventions rather than causal thinking, we do not advocate a causal primacy of either language or cognition. In view of the traditional cognitivist approach to attribution and social cognition, however, we feel that the correlated role of language deserves to be given somewhat more attention. As mentioned above, actors and observers *do* differ in their language styles (see Semin & Fiedler, 1989), and these differences are not confined to causal attributions. For instance, a cultural norm may prohibit or, expressed less strongly, reduce the ascription of traits, or ADJs, to oneself, while traitlike abstractions are welcomed in statements about other people's behavior (Fiedler, Semin, & Bolten, 1989). Such differences may become habitual and automatic and may therefore mimic attribution biases on many occasions when language users do not intend to provide attributions. The social effect of such language habits may be the same, however, as the effect of intended attributions, and they represent a social psychological topic in their own right.

However, one might reason that any such rule of language is mediated cognitively or is a reflection, after

all, of intra-cognitive processes. For instance, a norm that precludes the self-attribution of ADJs in speech may have developed out of the cognitive appraisal that no one can be his or her own judge and jury or referee and that other people (i.e., observers) are less partial and therefore have the right to ascribe traits. Even so, such prudence is taught and communicated in language and presumably stabilized by language habits, and language will surely play a major role in the socialization of such principles. Thus, the more one thinks about the primacy of language or cognition, the more it turns out to be like the primacy of either the chicken or the egg.

Finally, a word of comment is in order concerning the prediction of satisfaction from language use in close relationships. The finding that IAVs are a better predictor of satisfaction than ADJs is consistent with the demonstration by Wills, Weiss, and Patterson (1974) that objective indicators referring to manifest behaviors are more likely to predict marital success than subjective indicators or interpretations. This finding raises the question why less abstract language use is a more effective predictor. One possibility is that IAVs are more reliable and valid than ADJs because they stick to the facts and involve less subjective interpretation. However, ADJs are objectively not only less reliable or verifiable (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) than IAVs but also less subject to voluntary control. Thus, many ADJs refer to person attributes (e.g., extroverted, intelligent, brave) that cannot be changed deliberately or voluntarily. It is unlikely that conflicts revolve around such immutable personality attributes. By contrast, IAVs refer to that level of behavioral descriptions and prescriptions that can be put in imperative form and are therefore more likely to be the subject of overt negotiations and conflicts of interest. The ironic conclusion that arises from this look at ADJs and IAVs is that the most dispositional level of person attributes (viz. ADJ) which is understood to be most revealing about individuals, is actually not under the individual's intentional or voluntary control.

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