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Eyewitness Credibility as a Function of Grammatical Usage and Presentation Medium

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Abstract

The present study investigated the perceived credibility of an eyewitness as a function of the grammar he uses on the stand, as well as the way in which his testimony is presented (written or videotaped format) to mock jurors. Fifty students, 19 males and 31 females, from Kutztown University participated in the study. Ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 42 with a mean age of 21.94. Subjects were asked to read an exchange of dialogue between two lawyers, a defendant, and a plaintiff. Dialogue was taken, in part, from Levy (1950). Subjects either read or watched a videotape of an eyewitness who used either correct or incorrect grammar on the stand, according to condition. Significant main effects were found for grammar ($p < .05$) with higher credibility ratings being awarded to an eyewitness who used correct grammar on the stand.

How evidence is presented in court is often as influential as the type or quality of the content of that evidence. In a court setting, as well as in everyday conversation, particular styles of speech are generally accepted as being more desirable and credible than others. Prior research suggests not only that jurors discriminate among evidence on the basis of testimony presentation, but that testimony style greatly affects how jurors respond to witnesses, evidence, and lawyers (Ricke & Stutman, 1990). A key component of testimonial style and speech style in general involves the grammatical form and construction of the language in question (Powersland & Giles, 1975).

The most notable research in the area of testimony presentation began at

Duke University with the work of William O'Barr and his associates (Lind, Erickson, Conley, & O'Barr, 1979). In an attempt to investigate the effects of various styles of testimonial delivery, these researchers analyzed over 150 hours of taped testimony. Their analysis served to identify four distinct witness speech styles and the social contexts with which they are correlated. One of these four categories is called hypercorrect speech. Hypercorrect speech refers to a considerably more formal style of speech than that observed in everyday conversation (O'Barr, 1982). O'Barr and his colleagues noticed that when witnesses attempted to speak in this more formal style, they committed more frequent errors in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In a test between the use of a hypercorrect versus a standard style of testimony, the researchers found that witnesses using the standard style were rated as significantly more convincing, competent, qualified, and intelligent than those who used the hypercorrect style (O'Barr). These characteristics contribute to the general concept of credibility.

Credibility refers to the persuasive influence that results from the perceived characteristics of a communicator (Ricke & Stutman, 1990). Several experiments have also demonstrated the operation of a "prestige" factor in the persuasiveness of a communicator (Exline, 1971; Moe, 1972). Message recipients consistently assign higher credibility ratings to high-status sources, presumably because they believe that social status reflects expertise (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977).

Grammatical usage can have a profound effect on perceived social status, reflecting expertise and, in turn, credibility. To most Americans, "grammar" suggests a code of conduct regulating spoken and especially written English. Violating the rules of grammar can elicit judgments of educational, social, and even personal inferiority (Finegan, 1980).

Finegan (1980) emphasizes the written form of English as requiring much more strict adherence to the rules of grammar than does the spoken form. This raises the question as to whether one

medium of presentation is more persuasive than another or whether it is simply that more allowances are made with the rules of grammar in oral form. Whittaker & Meade (1967), using college students from Brazil, Hong Kong, India, Rhodesia, and Jordan, found that communication was perceived as being more credible in oral (tape recorded) than in written form. Conversely, Klapper (1960), claims that no mass medium is generally or always more persuasive than any other mass medium.

The present study addressed two questions: To what extent does an eyewitness's grammatical usage (correct or incorrect), which is a component of hypercorrect speech, influence his or her perceived credibility? And, does this perceived credibility differ according to the medium in which the testimony is presented? This research hypothesized that the credibility of an eyewitness is, in part, a function of the eyewitness's grammatical usage on the stand, with higher credibility being attributed to the eyewitness who uses correct grammar. In addition, based on Whittaker and Meade's (1967) research, it was expected that the highest credibility ratings would be attributed to the eyewitness that is seen on television using correct grammar, and the lowest credibility ratings would be attributed to the eyewitness whose account contains incorrect grammar and is presented in written form.

Method

Subjects

Fifty students, 19 white males and 31 white females, from Kutztown University voluntarily participated in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 42 years with a mean age of 21.94. Volunteers received extra course credit for their participation.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions and were tested as a group in their respective conditions. After a brief explanation of the

procedure, subjects signed an informed consent form. Then, each subject read an exchange of dialogue between two lawyers, a plaintiff, and a defendant. Dialogue was modified from a case taken from Levy (1950). In this case, a child, attracted by an organ grinder's monkey, ran away from his father, and crossed a busy street. The father of the boy ran out into traffic to rescue the boy and was hit by an oncoming car. The boy's father was the plaintiff and the driver of the oncoming vehicle was the defendant. A man sitting on his porch with a clear view of the incident was the eyewitness.

Subjects in condition one were asked to read an account of an eyewitness whose testimony was grammatically correct. Those in condition two read an account of an eyewitness whose testimony was grammatically flawed. The content of the testimony was the same in each condition. Subjects in condition three, after reading the exchange of dialogue between the two lawyers, the plaintiff, and the defendant, viewed a videotaped presentation of a 23 year-old, white, male eyewitness whose testimony was grammatically correct. The eyewitness had short hair and was wearing a blue suit and a matching necktie. He was seated in a witness-box with a microphone placed on the desk in front of him. The eyewitness was seen from the chest to the top of the head. Dialogue in this condition was presented verbatim from condition one. Those in condition four viewed a videotaped presentation of the same eyewitness whose testimony was grammatically flawed. Dialogue was identical to that in condition two. Differences in grammatical usage can be seen in the following sample of the eyewitness's testimony.

Attorney: Please describe in your own words what you saw.

Eyewitness (Correct Grammar Condition): Well, I was looking down at the sidewalk when I heard a man shout, "Richie, get out of the street." Then I saw the man run across the street into the path of the car.

Eyewitness (Incorrect Grammar Condition): Well, I was looking down at the sidewalk when I heard a man shout, "Richie, get out of the street." Then I seen the man run across the street into the path of the car.

Attorney: Describe the traffic pattern at the time of the accident.

Eyewitness (Correct Grammar Condition): There were no other cars on the road.

Eyewitness (Incorrect Grammar Condition): There weren't no other cars on the road.

Subjects were then asked to determine who was at fault in the case and to award money, if any, to the appropriate person. Next, they were asked to rate the credibility of the plaintiff, the defendant, and the eyewitness according to a 9-point Likert-type format with 1 representing low credibility and 9 representing high credibility.

Results

The credibility ratings attributed to the eyewitness were analyzed with a two-way, between-groups analysis of variance according to a 2 (Grammatical Usage) X 2 (Medium of Presentation) design. A significant main effect of grammatical usage was found in which more credibility was attributed to the eyewitness when he used a grammatically correct style of speech ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.81$) than when he used a grammatically incorrect style ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.71$), $F(1, 49) = 6.598$, $p < .05$. No significant interactions were found. No significant differences were found between the credibility ratings of the plaintiff and the credibility ratings of the defendant. No significant differences were found between male and female credibility ratings of the eyewitness.

Discussion

The present results are congruent with the findings of O'Barr and his associates (Erickson, B., Lind, E. A., Johnson, B. C., O'Barr, W. M., 1978)

and support the hypothesis. The eyewitness was rated higher in credibility when he used correct grammar as opposed to incorrect grammar on the stand. The fact that there were no significant differences in the perceived credibility of the defendant and the plaintiff suggests that the differences attributed to the eyewitness in the different grammar conditions were due to the manipulation of the grammar variable and not to individual differences in the sample of subjects.

Based on prior research (Berger et al., 1979; Moe, 1972; Ricke and Stutman, 1990), implications of this study can be extended to personal interactions that occur everyday. It is reasonable to assume that people will be perceived as more credible in the eye of the general public if they communicate in a grammatically correct way.

Great care was taken in the production of the stimulus videotapes in order to control for physical cues that might contribute to the perceived credibility of the eyewitness. Variables such as dress, physical appearance, and nonverbal "self display" (Exline, 1985) behaviors were controlled as much as possible between videotaped conditions.

In each condition, the same eyewitness appeared in the same environmental setting, wearing the same clothing. During the production of the videotapes, the eyewitness was instructed not to shift his gaze away from the off-camera attorney. Before the stimulus tapes for the correct and incorrect grammar conditions were shown to subjects, the tapes were examined to insure that other nonverbal self display behaviors such as blink-rate and changes in body position were consistent in each condition. Thus, an attempt was made to isolate the effects of the grammar manipulation. In so doing, the hypothesized interaction between presentation medium and grammatical usage may have been attenuated.

It was suggested by Exline (1985) that, when visual stimuli are combined with auditory stimuli, the nonverbal "self display" behaviors such as blink-rate and gaze shifting behavior, are more influential

to the viewer than the quality of the verbal message. Exline found that political candidates seen in a televised debate were perceived as less effective in that debate when they exhibited high versus low facial activity. It would be interesting to see if manipulating the nonverbal display of the eyewitness would affect his or her perceived credibility, and whether this variable would interact with the grammatical usage variable manipulated in this study.

Racial differences in perceived credibility should also be explored by including blacks and other minority group individuals in the sample of subjects. Future research might also examine the perceived credibility of a female eyewitness. In addition, future research could examine the effects of the status of the eyewitness on his or her perceived credibility.

Empirical research findings like those from this study, as well as those from future research suggested above, could be applied not only to situations in which an attorney is preparing a client for a court date, but also to public speaking and job interview situations. In these and many other situations, the way one presents oneself to others can have a profound impact on the impressions that are formed by other people. This application alone merits continued research in this area.

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