Agentive Language: Its Effect on the Perception of Culpability in Investigative Interviewing

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SUMMARY

This paper looks at the effect of using agentive language in a simulated investigative interview, to determine if the use of language that assigns agency to human action impacts how interviewees perceive culpability for their role in an accident. The results revealed no significant effect of using agentive language. The research methodology, participants' disposition, and the customary use of agentive language in English may explain these results.

KEYWORDS

Linguistics, Investigative Interviewing, Accident Investigation

Introduction

Agentive language is language that assigns an agent to the cause of the outcome of an action. Different languages have their own linguistic cultures such that some, like English, naturally assign agency even in accidental events. For example, in the accidental event of a glass breaking with a human present, the English description would be "He broke the glass" whilst in Spanish or Japanese it would translate to "The glass broke itself." Vesel (2020) believes that the linguistic framing and shortcuts of the English language can lead to assigning agency, therefore, eliciting undeserved blame and liability, and can prevent organisations from learning from accident events. There is much focus placed on the use of agentive language in accident investigation reports however, there is little research on its use in the early stages of the accident investigation process such as interviewing. Hence, this research investigates the effect of using agentive vs. non-agentive language in an investigative interview on how interviewees perceive guilt, responsibility, and blame for their role in an accident event.

Method

This research involved 24 participants aged 22 to 31 years (M=25.2, SD=3.31), of which 15 were male (62.5%). Eleven (45.8%) participants had achieved a bachelor's level of education while 13 (54.2%) achieved a master's degree. Five (20.8%) participants reported English as their first native language. Ethical approval for the research was provided by the Cranfield University Research Ethics System (CURES 17068/2022). All participants provided their informed consent.

Participants were provided with a short, imaginary written accident scenario about a restaurant table fire that resulted in their friend's clothing being damaged and their friend receiving second-degree burns. They were asked to read it and imagine themselves in the scenario, playing a key role in the

sequence of events of the accident. They were then questioned about the accident in a simulated investigative interview using either the agentive or non-agentive language condition. A postinterview online questionnaire was provided to participants to capture their perceived levels of responsibility, guilt, and blame for their role in the accident. A numeric scale of 0 – 100 was used to collect perceived levels of responsibility, blame, and guilt, where 0 = no guilt/responsibility/blame

and 100 = full guilt/responsibility/blame. These measurements were divided into sub-events of the tablecloth catching fire, clothing being damaged and their friend receiving second-degree burns. This was done to determine if there would be a significant difference in the levels of guilt, responsibility, and blame for damage to an inanimate object, that is the table, and a person, that is the friend receiving burns.

Results

A MANOVA with interview condition (agentive/non-agentive) as the between-subjects factor and the guilt, responsibility, and blame as dependent variables, showed a non-significant multivariate effect (F (9,14) = .519, p =.838, partial eta = .250). To determine if English as the first native language affected ratings of culpability, a MANOVA with a between-subjects factor of interview condition (agentive/non-agentive) with guilt, responsibility, and blame as dependent variables and English as the first native language (yes/no) as the covariate was conducted. The MANOVA revealed a non-significant effect (F (9,11) = .434, p = .890, partial eta = .262). Significance is reported for p < .05.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal no significant effect of using the agentive vs. non-agentive language condition on how interviewees perceived guilt, responsibility, and blame for their role in the accident event. English as their first language also shows no significant effect on their perceived culpability for either language condition. It was expected that the use of agentive language in the interview questioning would have elicited higher ratings of culpability. Studies conducted by Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) have shown that agentive linguistic framing resulted in higher reporting of blame, responsibility, and liability even in accidental events than using non-agentive framing.

These results can be explained by a written version of the scenario influencing participants' recollection of the accident and their responses. If participants visually witnessed the accident event, they may have had a more uniform perception of the accident and better recollection of the details. Additionally, the methodology in this study meant that participants' exposure to agentive descriptions was through the aural medium. Due to its customary use in English to denote both accidental and intentional actions, participants may not have differentiated when it was being used. Lastly, participants' perception of their culpability could be due to the disposition of the individual. Some people tend to attribute agency to external factors when bad outcomes happen, whilst others, especially those who experienced the non-agentive condition and rated their culpability highly, may have felt more guilt and responsibility due to their sense of moral responsibility.

Improvements for future research implementation include a larger and more diverse sample size and an alternative methodology whereby real, natural investigative interviews are coded for agentive language and its frequency of use, whilst capturing interviewees' perceptions of ascription of agency and culpability through interviews or questionnaires. Alternatively, this study could be

adapted to include visual evidence, such as a video representation to determine if agentive framing of questions will have a significant effect when interviewees can see the event.

References

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