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EXPECTATION STATES: ARE FORMAL WORDS A STATUS CUE FOR COMPETENCE?

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ABSTRACT

Based in Expectation States theory, this research examines whether formal versus informal word choices used in social interaction serve as a status cue for competence. Formal refers to words most likely in a textbook. Informal refers to words most likely used in casual conversation with a friend. Results from a pilot study using vignettes and surveys indicate individuals perceive individuals who use formal words as more competent than those who use informal words. And when words used by individuals are placed in a hypothetical social interaction, the effect may depend on the number and degree of formal words used.

INTRODUCTION

The power of vocabulary to influence people and lead to success in the workplace is reflected in best-selling book titles such as *Better Word Power* (Witcut 2000) and *Word Smart: Building an Educated Vocabulary* (Robinson 2001). These books presume the more extensive one's vocabulary, the more status one gains in the workplace and other social arenas. Previously, a limited number of studies have examined word choices in social interaction. Some have shown how some words have more influential value than others (Levin, Giles and Garrett, 1994). Others show how vocabulary is used to assess intelligence levels of individuals (Dunn and Dunn, 1997; Hayes, 1988). But research on how words used in social interaction may directly link to perceived competence in a group is limited.

Expectation states is a theoretical research program examining status organizing processes within task-oriented groups (Berger, Cohen and Zelditch 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch, 1977; Berger and Zelditch, 1985). This program studies how group member evaluations of each other and themselves can lead to expectations of competence levels, and thus contribution to a group task (Berger, Wagner, Zelditch, Jr., 1985). Using the expectation states framework, this study examines whether individuals use others' word choices during interaction to assume competence levels. In the following pages, expectation states is reviewed, research on word choices and competence, and why words may be linked to expectations of competence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Expectation states theory explains status organizing processes within task-oriented groups (Berger, Cohen and Zelditch 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch, 1977; Berger and Zelditch, 1985). According to Berger and colleagues (Berger, Wagner, Zelditch, Jr., 1985), patterns of group interaction reflect social process stemming from the formation of *expectation states*. Expectation states are evaluations of each member's competence (and thus contribution to) a group task. These evaluations lead to a group status hierarchy. Those highest in status hold the most influence in the group seen in various behavioral outcomes (i.e., contribute more to the group task, are asked to contribute more, are complemented more on contributions, and have contributions accepted more often by the group) (Berger, Wagner, Zelditch, Jr., 1985).

Expectation states emerge from status cues. *Status cues* are social hints unintentionally recognized and evaluated by group members about each others potential competence and contribution to a group task. Status cues affect the formation of expectation states in an orderly way (Fisek, 1974; Berger et al, 1986). In the next section, status cues are reviewed in more detail followed by a discussion of why word choices may operate as a status cue.

Expectation States and Status Cues

Status cues provide hints for social traits people possess (Berger, Webster, Jr., Ridgeway, Rosenholtz, 1986). They serve as social information used by individuals during interaction. There are different types. *Indicative* cues explicitly label a person (e.g., when a person says, "I am a doctor"). *Expressive* cues are less deliberate (e.g., using doctor's jargon). *Task* cues give hints about a person's performance level (e.g., "I've solved this problem before"). And

categorical cues give hints about who people are (e.g., skin tone implying race). Status cues often involve multiple aspects, such as expressive-categorical like a race specific speech style (Berger et al. 1986).

Numerous studies examined how status cues used during interaction affect group members' perceptions about the target individual's competence, honesty, persuasion, confidence, leadership ability and influence (Brown et al., 1973; Smith et al., 1975; Street and Brady, 1982; Serrentino and Boutillier, 1975; Miller and Hewgill, 1963; Hollandsworth et al., 1979; Argyle, 1967; Mazur et al., 1980; Hare, 1953; Nemeth and Wachtler, 1974).

Competence is a key component in expectation states theory in the formation of the status hierarchy. If recognized status cues are highly valued by group members, more competence is expected among those members and therefore, the more status they likely hold in the group. Research on how words in social interaction may be linked to influence and competence is reviewed next.

Formal Words and Competence

Research demonstrates words carry different influential value because of their perceived formality (Levin, Giles and Garrett, 1994). The formality of an English word is based on word-origin, whether Latinate (e.g., interior) or Germanic (e.g., inside). Latin-based words more often link with authority, possibly stemming from the early Norman French, a Latinate language spoken by the power elite after the invasion of England. The result has been such words associated with high status. While Germanic words are more frequently spoken than Latinate words, research indicates Latinate words are judged as more formal when frequency is controlled (Levin and Novak, 1991). Levin et al. (1994) also found experimental participants will infer intelligence levels of others based on word origins. The more an individual uses formal words, the more association with notions of competence. Levin et al. (1994) suggest three conditions motivating the use of formal words. First, the individual wants to display competence to listeners. Levin et al. (1994) suggest this is why more formal words are used in public speaking and in written language compared to friendly conversations. Second, formal words are used to show deference. And third, they suggest formal words are used to maintain social distance.

Schools use vocabulary tests to assess intelligence. The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test* (Dunn and Dunn, 1997) is administered to measure an individual's receptive (i.e., hearing) vocabulary while also providing a measure of verbal ability or scholastic aptitude. In the test, individuals as young as two-and-a-half and as old as mature adults either respond to a stimulus phrase (e.g., for "Do cup cakes wink?" responses may be "yes" or "no") or individuals hear a word and select a corresponding picture. Research indicates this test correlates with intelligence and achievement measures among undergraduate college students (Carvajal et al., 2000).

Another vocabulary test, the "Stanford-Binet," is used to assess intelligence (Hayes, 1988). This test categorizes individuals in terms of vocabulary expertise based on the *Word Frequency Book* (Carroll et al., 1971). This book contains a standard for comparisons of five million words in terms of their frequency of use. Hayes (1988) explains that of the forty-five words used in the "Stanford-Binet" test, twenty-five words have a frequency of less than once in a million. In

addition, thirteen are not even in the *Word Frequency Book.* According to Hayes (1988), knowledge of rare words distinguishes students at higher levels of verbal intelligence.

Individuals gain knowledge of the rare words through reading texts richer in vocabulary than through general conversation and popular television (Hayes, 1988). According to Hayes (1988), daily newspapers, popular magazines and even comic books will include more rare vocabulary than television or general conversation. When children practice literacy by reading, they are exposed to approximately three times the vocabulary compared to conversation with a parent or teacher (Hayes, 1988). Work by Gottfried and Gottfried (1984) found parents spend almost three times the minutes reading to first-borns than to subsequent children. According to Hayes (1988), this helps explain evidence about sibling order and verbal "IQ" scores (see Zajonc, 1986).

All of these studies support the likelihood that words may operate as an expressive categorical status cue for such characteristics as class and education which both may relate with perceived competence during group interaction.

A Modified Definition of Formality

Words used may be a status cue because different word types (e.g., formal vs. informal) used in communication lead to different perceptions of the user's competence (e.g., Levin et al., 1994). Levin et al. (1994) suggest more formal words are used in public speaking and written language compared to friendly conversation. Therefore, a modified definition of formality is suggested. Rather than rely on word-origin, words more often used orally (e.g., in friendly conversation and excluding public speaking, like a debate) are considered less formal than words more commonly used in written form. "Written" here may include paper, tapes, cassettes, and discs, and generally relates to documentation of such things as procedures (e.g., in a machine operating manual), theory (e.g., in a textbook), research (e.g., in a scientific journal), or a speech (e.g., for a debate).

METHODS

To examine whether people use words to assess another's general competence, some preliminary work was done to differentiate between formal and informal words based on the new definition. A questionnaire listing seventy-four words consisting of pairs and triplets of synonyms were pre-tested in a large introductory class (N = 207) at a university similar to the classes from which the respondents were recruited for later questionnaires. Students were asked to rate each word in terms of how likely to find it in a college textbook (formal) or in a casual conversation with a friend (informal). Results revealed some synonyms rated significantly more formal than were others. (These results are available upon request.)

From this list of words, twenty-four formal and informal synonyms were used in two pilot questionnaires (henceforth called Questionnaire A and Questionnaire B) to examine whether words operated as a status cue. In Questionnaire A, a list of words were rated by respondents in terms of the likelihood the word would be in a college textbook (formal), used on the phone with a friend in a casual conversation (informal), used in a formal setting, or would make a person (whom they did not know) seem generally competent if that person used the word. For all of

these, a 6-point Likert scale was used (i.e., 1=extremely unlikely; 2=very unlikely; 3=unlikely; 4=likely; 5=very likely; and 6=extremely likely).

In Questionnaire B, words were paired to compose formal and informal messages placed in a hypothetical context to examine whether words are used to assess the competence of others in social interaction. This hypothetical context consisted of a two-person task- and collectively-oriented group to reflect scope conditions of expectation states theory. In the hypothetical group, members work together to solve a binary-choice task. Messages were created to reflect one person's explanation for the choice made in the task. Each message was written twice, once with formal words and once with informal synonyms. In addition, messages differed in the amount of formal or informal words included (i.e., Pair 6 had five words, Pair 5 had four, Pair 4 had five again, Pair 3 had four again, Pair 2 had three, and Pair 1 had just one word included). Respondents rated each message in terms of how much they felt it seemed competent and formal. So respondents would remain unaware of the informal-formal matching message pairs, two questionnaires were created, each with six of the messages. In neither questionnaire was there a formal or informal message with its' opposite pair. Refer to the Appendix to see the informal and formal message pairs.

HYPOTHESES

Questionnaire A

Hypothesis 1: Respondents will view informal words as less likely to be in a college textbook versus formal words.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents will view informal words as more likely to be used on the phone in a casual conversation versus the formal words.

Hypothesis 3: Respondents will view informal words as less likely to make a person seem competent versus the formal words.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents will view informal words as less likely to be in a formal setting versus the formal words.

Questionnaire B

Hypothesis 5: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 1 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

Hypothesis 6: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 2 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

Hypothesis 7: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 3 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

Hypothesis 8: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 4 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

Hypothesis 9: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 5 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

Hypothesis 10: Respondents will rate the formal message in Pair 6 as more competent and formal than the equivalent informal message.

RESULTS

Questionnaire A

During Fall 2002 and in Fall 2005 in two different Midwestern Universities, 139 students completed the survey. The courses surveyed included sociology, general education, and English. Of those surveyed, there were 21 first-year students, 17 sophomores, 24 juniors, 75 seniors and two graduate students. Seventy-two respondents were male, and 67 were female. The average age of the respondents was 20.81 years (SD = 1.75), and English was the native language for all respondents but two [1]. Finally, 129 respondents were White, five were non-White, and five did not indicate their race.

Table 1 below presents results [2]. Paired sample t-tests indicate support for hypotheses. That is, survey respondents perceived all informal words together as significantly more likely to be used in casual conversations ($t(135) = 20.85$, one-tailed $p < .001$), significantly less likely to be found in textbooks ($t(132) = -14.69$, one-tailed $p < .001$), significantly less likely to be used in formal settings ($t(134) = -7.95$, one-tailed $p < .001$), and significantly less likely to make a person who used the words seem more competent ($t(133) = -10.41$, one-tailed $p < .001$), compared to formal words. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Paired Sample T-tests of Combined Informal and Informal Words for Four Measures.

Measure	Informal Words Mean (SD)	Formal Words Mean (SD)	T-Value (df)
In a casual conversation	62.34 (10.06)	46.26 (9.78)	20.85*** (135)
In a textbook	58.45 (13.11)	70.20 (9.69)	-14.69*** (132)
In a formal setting	52.15 (10.87)	59.23 (10.15)	-7.95*** (134)
Make a person seem competent	47.53 (15.16)	57.42 (12.24)	-10.41*** (133)

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Questionnaire B

During Fall 2002 and in Fall 2005 in two different Midwestern Universities, 247 students from various courses (including sociology, general education, business marketing, religious studies, English, and history) completed the survey. There were nineteen first-year students, 52 sophomores, 62 juniors, 108 seniors, and five graduate students. One-hundred twenty respondents were male and one-hundred twenty-seven respondents were female. The average age of the respondents was 22.11 years (SD = 5.34). Two hundred twelve respondents were White and thirty-one respondents were non-white and four did not indicate their race.

Questionnaire B results provided interesting findings (refer to Table 2). Respondents perceived the formal message in Pair 1 as seeming significantly more competent ($t(231) = -2.30$, one-tailed $p < .05$) than its equivalent informal message. Respondents however, did not rate the message as seeming any different in terms of formality ($t(232) = -1.86$, one-tailed $p = .07$). This offers partial support for hypothesis 5. Respondents did perceive the formal message in Pair 2 as seeming significantly more competent ($t(234) = -2.56$, one-tailed $p < .01$) and formal ($t(234) = -2.56$, one-tailed $p < .01$) than the matching informal message. Also, respondents perceived the formal message in Pair 3 as significantly more competent ($t(233) = -7.60$, one-tailed $p < .001$) and formal ($t(233) = -8.79$, one-tailed $p < .001$) than the matching informal message. These results support hypothesis 6 and 7. For Pair 4 however, results were in the reverse direction. Respondents perceived the formal message in Pair 3 as significantly *less* competent ($t(231) = 6.66$, one-tailed $p < .001$) and *less* formal ($t(232) = 9.81$, one-tailed $p < .001$) than the matching informal message. This offers no support for hypothesis 8. No significant differences were found between the informal and formal messages in Pair 5 in terms of seeming competent ($t(234) = 1.44$, one-tailed $p = .15$) and formal ($t(236) = 1.30$, one-tailed $p = .20$). This indicates no support for hypothesis 9. Finally, respondents perceived the formal message in Pair 6 as significantly more competent ($t(234) = -2.69$, one-tailed $p < .01$) and more formal ($t(238) = -4.16$, one-tailed $p < .001$) than the matching informal message. This provides support for hypothesis 10. Refer to Table 2 for results for all pairs.

Table 2. Comparing Messages in Pairs 1 through 6. [3]

Measure	Informal Message Mean (SD)	Formal Message Mean (SD)	t-value (df)
Pair 1 (one word difference)			
Competent	3.75 (1.70)	4.25 (1.66)	-2.30* (231)
Formal	3.02 (1.62)	3.44 (1.85)	-1.86 (232)
Pair 2 (three word difference)			
Competent	4.52 (1.74)	5.07 (1.57)	-2.56** (234)
Formal	3.24 (1.71)	3.82 (1.78)	-2.56** (234)
Pair 3 (four word difference)			
Competent	3.81 (1.65)	5.34 (1.41)	-7.60*** (233)
Formal	3.05 (1.60)	4.94 (1.68)	-8.79*** (233)
Pair 4 (five word difference)			
Competent	5.75 (1.51)	4.36 (1.67)	6.66*** (231)
Formal	5.69 (1.59)	3.65 (1.59)	9.81*** (232)
Pair 5 (three word difference)			
Competent	4.93 (1.51)	4.65 (1.52)	1.44 (234)
Formal	4.32 (1.71)	4.03 (1.69)	1.30 (236)
Pair 6 (five word difference)			
Competent	4.31 (1.56)	4.89 (1.55)	-2.69** (234)
Formal	3.80 (1.74)	4.70 (1.59)	-4.16*** (238)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research examined whether survey respondents would associate words with competence and formality, and whether these associations would hold when words were used in a message related to a group task.

Questionnaire A asked respondents to rate an alphabetized list of synonyms in terms of formality. In addition, Questionnaire A asked respondents to rate the likelihood they think each word would be "used in a formal setting" or "would make a person (whom you don't know) seem generally competent, if the person used that word." Questionnaire A explores whether individuals use words by others to assess competence levels of others. Results of Questionnaire A provided empirical support for all hypotheses.

The goal of Questionnaire B was to evaluate the same words, but in an interaction as part of a message sent from one person to another. Respondents were asked to rate messages in terms of how much they felt it seemed competent and formal. Results of Questionnaire B revealed mixed results. For messages with only one word difference (i.e., Pair 1), respondents rated the formal message as significantly more competent than the formal equivalent. No significant differences on formality were found. Respondents did rate the formal message in Pair 2 (i.e., three word difference) as significantly more competent and formal. But in the messages from Pair 5, also with a three word difference, no differences were found for both measures. For Pair 3 (i.e., four word difference), results were in the predicted direction for both competence and formality. For Pair 4 (i.e., five word difference), respondents rated the formal message as significantly *less* competent *and* formal than the informal message. But for Pair 6 which also had a five word difference, respondents rated the messages in the predicted direction. This indicates inconsistent support for the idea that formal words provide a cue for competence.

Research has shown that knowledge and quantity of words imply intelligence (Carvajal, 2000) and more mastery of the English language (Hayes, 1988). This may be why the messages with a higher quantity of formal words had significant differences in ratings of formality and competence. But it does not explain the inconsistent results found in message Pairs 4 and 6. The formal message in Pair 4, which led to opposite results to what was predicted, included the formal words "perceived," "central," "moreover," "base," and "collection." Pair 6, which provided support, included the formal words "incorrect," "upper," "central," "rectangle," and "selected." In both formal messages, the words were earlier rated as more formal than informal synonyms. Further exploration between the pairs however, revealed the formal words in Pair 4 were rated as significantly more likely to be in a college textbook ($t(136) = 5.94$, two-tailed $p < .001$) in a formal setting ($t(136) = 7.70$ two-tailed $p < .001$) and make a person whom you don't know seem generally competent if the person used that word ($t(135) = 8.17$, two-tailed $p < .001$) than the formal words in Pair 6. In addition, no significant difference was found between both Pairs of formal words in terms of the likelihood of being used on the phone with a friend ($t(135) = -1.95$ two-tailed $p = .30$), thereby confirming these words are still viewed as formal overall. It may be the formality in Pair 4 was *too* formal. Another reason for the inconsistency may be due to awkward language in Pair 4's message.

Results from both questionnaires suggest the formality of words matters. In our culture, emphasis is placed on how vocabulary can equal power. In Questionnaire A, formal words were rated as likely to make a person appear more competent. Questionnaire B provides new information about competence and formal words in interaction and that perceived competence may depend on the number of formal words and degree of formality.

Based in expectation states theory, formal words may affect expectation states and therefore increase the status of the individuals using those words—a question worth considering in future research. Other research questions worth examining are whether the reaction of others depend on the gender of the individual using the words (see research related to gender and speech styles by Lakoff, 1975 and 2000; Crosby and Nyquixt, 1977; McMillan et al., 1977; Hartmann, 1976; Gleason and Weintraub, 1978; Kimble and Yoshikawa, 1981; Kleinke et al., 1973; Newcombe and Arnkoff, 1979; and Smith, 1985), or the context of the situation (e.g., professional or casual). Also the status of individuals may change results (e.g., working class individual using formal language). In addition, a threshold from using too many formal words may exist.

Finally, limitations of this research relate to the sample. Although having college students participate in research is acceptable for testing theory, it limits generalizability to the larger public. Respondents were drawn from two universities—one large research institution and a second small teaching institution. The students in each institution may have different characteristics (e.g., the majority in the smaller institution are first-generation college-goers). But their current college status alone may influence results. Therefore, also surveying the greater public on this topic is suggested.

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APPENDIX

Formal and Informal Vocabulary Message Pairs Used in Questionnaire B
Note: In the actual questionnaire, no words were in bold.

Pair	Informal	Formal
1	It just seemed right. In the other one, there was a **hint** of more black.	It just seemed right. In the other one, there was **evidence** of more black.
2	I went with my first **choice** because it seemed the other **block** had a lot of black **gathered** in places.	I went with my first **decision** because it seemed the other **rectangle** had a lot of black **accumulated** in places.
3	I **picked** this because I thought I saw a **group** of white at the **bottom**. There just seemed to be more white in that **spot**.	I **selected** this because I thought I saw a **collection** of white at the **base**. There just seemed to be more white in that **locale**.
4	I **felt** that the **middle** area had a lot of white. **Plus**, I thought the **bottom** had a **group** of white.	I **perceived** that the **central** area had a lot of white. **Moreover**, I thought the **base** had a **collection** of white.
5	At first, I **noticed** more white at the top of the **block** that I **picked**. So I stayed with this first impression.	At first, I **observed** more white at the top of the **rectangle** that I **selected**. So I stayed with this first impression.
6	The other one just seemed **wrong** to me. And there seemed to be more white space in the **top middle** part of the **block** I **picked**.	The other one just seemed **incorrect** to me. And there seemed to be more white space in the **upper center** part of the **rectangle** I **selected**.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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ENDNOTES

[1] Analyses are with and without respondents whose native language was not English. No significant changes emerged; therefore, they were included.

[2] Table 1 represents combined informal and formal words, so mean values are higher than the 6-point Likert scale used for each measure.

[3] To check whether respondent vocabulary skills affected results, regressions using education and family income (as proxies for vocabulary) on perceived competence of formal messages were performed. No significance was found.