THE EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE ABSTRACTION ON SIMILARITY AND LIKEABILITY IN PERSONAL DESCRIPTIONS

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By
Lucille-Michi T. Gilbert

Thesis Committee:
R. Kelly Aune, Chairperson
Krystyna Aune
Jessica Gasiorek

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ABSTRACT

Highly abstract or concrete language communicates different types of information. Variations in language abstraction in descriptive language have been observed to affect the impressions made between the subject that the description is referring to, the individual describing the subject, and the individual receiving the description about the subject. The current study examined the effects of language abstraction in descriptive language when an individual describes his or herself to another. This study predicted an interaction effect between descriptions’ levels of language abstraction and the positive or negative valence of the description. Each participant read a profile that was assigned a specific valence and level of abstractness, and then rated the subject of the profile on perceived similarity and likeability. Results indicated a significant positive linear relationship: as positive profiles increased in abstractness, so did ratings of likeability and similarity. A comparable but negative relationship was observed for the negative profiles but failed to achieve significance. Suggestions and implications of the current study are discussed.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The relationship between language and perceptions continues to inspire new areas of research in language and social psychology. Speakers’ thoughts affect and are reflected in the language they use, and the language they use affects the thoughts of their listeners (De Saussure, 1960; Hoijer, 1954). Furthermore, people choose certain words or phrases over others in their everyday conversations to create or manage the impressions others form of them. For example, Cialdini et al. (1976) found that certain pronouns are chosen to enhance one’s impression or avoid association that threatens one’s impression. People use the pronoun “we” to say “we won the game” when their university football team won a game. This allows them to “bask in reflected glory” (BIRG) and enhance one’s positive impression (Cialdini et al. 1976). If their university football team lost, people “cut off reflected failure” (CORF) by saying “they lost the game” instead of “we lost the game”. In this way fans manage impressions by avoiding possible negative associations with the team. Comparable use of pronouns to increase association or avoid association has been observed in group (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) and interpersonal communication contexts (Slatcher, Vazire, & Pennebaker, 2008) as well. Rudolph and Försterling (1997) found that certain verbs contribute to increases in attributions of causality. For example, news stories found in the Boston Globe newspaper used more passive verbs (i.e., the woman was raped by the man) than active verbs (i.e., the man raped the woman) (Henley, Miller, & Beazley, 1995). In descriptions of domestic violence, the phrase “the woman was raped by a man” led to greater perceptions of the woman as bringing the crime on to herself. In turn, such perceptions could lead to downplaying the causal role of men’s violent behavior and an increase in acceptance of violence towards women (Frazer & Miller, 2008). Douglas, Sutton, and McGarty (2008) also report the use of verbs in creating impressions of causality in both interpersonal and intergroup communication contexts.
In addition to strategic verb selection, people can manipulate others’ impressions via language selections characterized by greater concreteness or abstraction. In the field of cognitive and memory psychology, abstract words are defined as vague or general terms, such as the words “truth” or “love”. Concrete words, conversely, are defined as those conveying more explicit stimuli or providing more specific imagery, such as “house” or “dog” (James, 1890; Paivio, 1971). The different cognitive activities associated with processing concrete and abstract words have generated research in meaning and memorization. After analyzing MRI scans, concrete words were seen to be processed in the bilateral regions of the brains where nonverbal semantics are processed. Abstract words activated areas in the left hemisphere of the brain where phonological processes, verbal short-term memory, and lexical retrieval are also processed (Binder, Westbury, McKiernan, Possing, & Medler, 2005). The cognitive processes associated with abstract and concrete words affect the extent to which words are memorable or meaningful. Dukes and Bastian (1966) found that concrete words were recalled better than abstract words even though abstract words tend to be more meaningful than concrete words. Abstract words were considered more meaningful because abstract words were considered relative to more words than concrete words or having greater word association. The meaningful weight allowed people to believe they were given more abstract words than concrete words when people were given the same number of abstract and concrete words (Galbraith & Underwood, 1973).

Conceptions of language abstraction are not limited to depicting only words as more abstract or more concrete. In the field of language and social psychology, language abstraction (also known as “linguistic abstraction”) refers instead to the “verbs and adjectives people use in their everyday descriptive language” (Douglas & Sutton, 2003, p.682). This type of language abstraction research observes how the use of adjectives or verbs creates a greater focus on the dispositional or situational factors attended to when people describe or provide descriptions of information (i.e., “descriptive language”). Dispositional factors refer to character or personality
traits. Descriptive language is perceived as more abstract when descriptions of disposition make use of adjectives (e.g., “Sam is athletic”). Situational factors, on the other hand, refer to environmental or external factors. Descriptive language is perceived as less abstract, more concrete when descriptions of situations make use of verbs (e.g., “Sam ran track”). Researchers observed varying levels of language abstraction in relation to various affective cues on cognition (Beukeboom, 2009; Beukeboom & de Jong, 2008; Beukeboom & Semin, 2006; Congruence & Dependence, 2012), attempts in persuasion (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Menegatti & Rubini, 2013; Rubini & Sigall, 2002), group (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; Sutton & Douglas, 2008) or interpersonal relationships (Reitsma-van Rooijen, Semin, & Van Leeuwen, 2007) and other areas of communication (Fiedler, 2008). Semin and Fiedler (1988) found that levels of abstraction vary in people’s descriptive language.

Research on language abstraction also explores how different levels of abstraction in descriptive language affects the way recipients make inferences or create impressions of the people being described. For example, when describing a person to another, varying levels of language abstraction change the impressions that are made of the people doing the describing (Douglas & Sutton, 2006; 2010). In the judicial context, prosecuting and defense attorneys will use similar grammatical strategies. High levels of abstraction are used when attorneys describe their clients or their opponent’s clients to attribute blame, intentionality, or warranted attributions (Schmid & Fiedler, 1998). As noted above, language abstraction does not only affect impressions of the people being described, but also the people providing descriptions of others. People who describe others with higher levels of abstraction are perceived as closer to the individuals they are describing in interpersonal distance (Reitsma-van Rooijen, Semin, Van Leeuwen, 2007), likeable (Douglas & Sutton, 2010), and having biased attitudes towards the people they are describing (Douglas & Sutton, 2006).
The current study observes whether language abstraction has similar effects on the impressions made when people provide descriptions of themselves. The same effect language abstraction has on perceived likeability may occur when people describe themselves. If language abstraction varies in self-focused personal descriptions, perceived likeability for the subject of descriptions may also vary for the recipients of those descriptions. The Linguistic Category Model (LCM) created by Semin and Fiedler (1991) will be presented to explain the foundations of language abstraction. A summary of the research on the relationship between language abstraction and impressions within group and interpersonal communication will be reviewed. Finally, the effects of language abstraction on traits of likeability and similarity will be explored.

**Language Abstraction**

Semin and Fiedler (1988) observed how language can fluctuate across four dimensions, distinguishing language as more abstract or concrete (refer to table 1.1). The first dimension is time. Language abstraction refers to a single event or an enduring quality. Concrete language implies a clear beginning and end in actions and is considered low in the dimension of time. Abstract language implies enduring qualities, such as psychological states or characteristics and is considered high in the dimension of time. Abstract language is restricted to a timeframe and can generalize over different context and people. A more concrete example would be “Laura kicked the ball” implying that the moment has passed. A more abstract example would be “Laura loves kickball”. The latter example refers to a psychological state and does not indicate a specific or defined moment in time. Laura could have recently come to like kickball, or she could have liked kickball for a long time, still likes kickball, and will continue to like kickball.

The second dimension is verifiability. Semin and Fiedler (1988) explain this dimension as the relationship between the degrees of verifiability and interpretation. Abstract language is less verifiable than concrete language because abstract language describes intangible qualities (e.g., psychological or emotional states, characteristics or personality traits) and, consequently, requires
further interpretation. Concrete language is a description of a physical trait or behavior that is more verifiable and requires less interpretation relative to abstract language. For example, a concrete statement such as “Jack fell down the stairs” is easier to verify than an abstract statement such “Jack is clumsy.” The action of Jack falling down is easier to verify because the statements only requires observing a single act. The characterization of Jack as clumsy is more difficult to verify because the statement requires defining what behaviors are indicative of being clumsy and making several observations to ensure that the behaviors are not singular events but indeed a personality or physical trait.

The third dimension is disputability, i.e., the extent to which the description is debatable. Semin and Fielder (1988) found that consistent with dimensions of interpretativeness and verifiability, abstract language, which is less verifiable, is also highly disputable and can be debated. Concrete language, which is more verifiable, is less debatable as the language refers to observations rather than interpretations. A concrete example such as “Math uses numbers” is less disputable. Verification can be made with a single observation and it is clear what is to be observed in verifying the reference. Concrete statements tend to be more objective because they refer to descriptions of distinct behaviors or actions. The abstract example “Math is difficult” is more disputable because abstract statements tend to be more subjective, influenced by opinions or perceptions, making them more subject to dispute.

The fourth dimension is informativeness. Language varies in the type of information being communicated. Semin and Fiedler (1988) found that concrete language provides greater information about the situation whereas abstract language provides greater information about dispositional traits. The function of concrete terms is to draw attention to an event or situation, while providing a detailed representation of the event or situation. The use of concrete language is predominantly found in situated contexts, having a local perceptual focus. Concrete language is greatly dependent on the people and the interactions being described (e.g., Jessie hugged Alex).
Abstract language, conversely, is not as situationally constrained. Because abstract language is subject to interpretation it can encompass or refer to a multitude of possible behaviors or actions. Abstract language has a more *global perceptual focus*, illustrating concepts that go beyond a single moment, such as characteristic traits (e.g., Jessie is kind), detracting from transient features in a given situation. Consequently the degree of language abstraction is a function of the extent to which the information provided focuses more on the subject or situation is (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

In sum, across the four dimensions of language abstraction, more abstract language tends to exhibit an enduring quality, unmarked by time; it tends to be lower in verifiability, higher in disputability, and provides more information about the subject at hand. Concrete language, conversely, tends to be more time-constrained, exhibiting a less enduring quality; it tends to be higher in verifiability, lower in disputability and provides more situationally-focused information (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

**Linguistic Category Model**

Based on their conceptualization of language abstraction, Semin and Fiedler (1991) created a taxonomy describing four categories of language abstraction, three of which are verb types and the last is an adjective type (refer to Table 1.2). The categories are listed from concrete to abstract, from descriptions of actions or situations to descriptions of psychological states to descriptions of characteristics or personality traits. The categories are descriptive action verbs (DAVs), interpretative action verbs (IAVs), state verbs (SVs), and adjectives (ADJs).

Descriptive actions verbs (DAVs) are of the highest level of concreteness and lowest level of abstractness. Descriptive action verbs (for example, “write”, “kick”, “hug”) are distinct references to an action, behavior, or situation and are neutral, observable, and verifiable descriptions of a single act or event (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Descriptive action verbs are classified as high in the dimension of time, high in verifiability, low in disputability, and provide situational information but
no dispositional informational. DAV statements (e.g., "Jesse hugs Sam") are usually predicates with adverbial phrases that are dependent on the context or situation.

Interpretative action verbs (IAVs) cover an infinite number of actions, such as the present act and the possibility of future acts, or a greater likelihood of repetition. IAVs (for example, “hurt”, “help”, “comfort”) are rated as low in dimension of time but higher than DAVs in the dimension of time. An incident described using IAVs may not be a single event, but possible multiple incidents involving the past, present, or future. If “Jesse hurts Sam”, the verb implies that Jesse has and may continue to hurt Sam. Jesse is also predicted to feel negatively towards Sam and does not have emotional control over her actions. If “Jesse helps Sam”, then Jesse has and may continue to help Sam. Jesse may not have control over such feelings because Sam is also likely to inspire help from others (Semin & Fiedler, 1991). Interpretative action verbs are evaluated and valenced positively (e.g., *amuse*, *encourage*) or negatively (e.g., *cheat*, *harm*) more so than descriptive action verbs (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). While DAVs such as kick or kiss can carry a positive or negative valence, DAVs are delivered as neutral or impartial observations. IAVs are also lower in verifiability and higher in disputability as they do not refer to a specific action or behavior but rather a general class of behaviors (de Montes, Semin, & Valencia, 2003) providing both a description and interpretation of the behavior. Psychological states, personal responsibilities, or voluntary controls of the actor can be implied or inferred from the use of IAVs (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). Similarly to DAVs, IAVs provide information about situations; however unlike DAVs IAVs are also information about dispositions.

State verbs (SVs) are descriptions of enduring psychological or emotional states without referencing specific actions or situations; for example, “love”, “hate”, or “dislike.” SVs are high in the dimension of time. SVs are also low in verifiability and high in disputability. SVs are not objective or observable but instead are emotional (e.g., love, hate), motivational (e.g., attempt, strive), cognitive (e.g., believe), or reflect changes in mental states (e.g., recognize, understands)
(Semin & Fiedler, 1998). SV statements (e.g., “Jesse likes Sam”) describe unintended reactions that are caused by emotional or uncontrollable forces and are also positively or negatively valenced. SVs are low in situational information and high in dispositional information.

Adjectives (ADJs) are the highest in abstractness and lowest in concreteness because ADJs are global, able to pertain to a general populace. ADJs are the highest in the dimension of time, lowest in verifiability, and highest in disputability. Adjectives (for example, “aggressive”, “kind”, “pleasant”) do not describe a situation but an actor or person (Fiedler, 2008). ADJ statements (e.g., “Jesse is pleasant”) refer to properties of a person, specifically personality traits, characteristics, or dispositions (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). They are also the lowest in situational information and highest in dispositional information. ADJs are stable, atemporal, or cross-situational (Jiga-Boy, Clark, & Semin, 2013; Semin & Fiedler, 1998) and are relevant to social inferences, impression formation, and implicit personality theory, different domains of social psychology (Semin & Fiedler, 1991). The varying levels of abstractness in language affect how people manage impressions of groups and others (Schmid & Fiedler, 1998; Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

**Language Abstraction in Intergroup Communication**

Language abstraction allows the manipulation of attributional effects within intergroup contexts. Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, and Semin (1989) observed a change in language abstraction when describing ingroup/outgroup members and negative/positive behaviors exhibited. People described positive ingroup behaviors abstractly and positive outgroup behaviors concretely. People also described negative ingroup behaviors concretely and negative outgroup behaviors abstractly. The phenomenon is known as the Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB). Research on LIB demonstrates the use of language abstraction in intergroup communication in the existence and persistence of group stereotypes (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). Studies on LIB explain two reasons for people’s use of language abstraction in intergroup communication.
First, people are motivated by an intrapersonal purpose. In order to create and maintain a sense of social identity, people associate themselves with groups who hold similar or desired values or traits (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). To increase their self-esteem, people maintain a positive image towards their group and ingroup members and express superiority through social comparison by attributing a negative image towards outside groups or outgroup members (Trepte, 2006). The underlying principle of language abstraction within intergroup communication is that language should enhance the image of the ingroup and derogate the image of the outgroup (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stalhberg, 1995).

In order to test the relationship between language abstraction and intergroup contexts, researchers asked people from two cities that were equal competitors involved in horse races to participate in a social psychological study (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). Those who participated viewed a short cartoon episode with either a protagonist who was from the same city, representing ingroup members, or from the competing city, representing outgroup members. The episodes also showed the protagonist behaving badly, representing undesirable behaviors, or behaving positively, representing desirable behaviors. After watching the episode, participants were presented with multiple descriptions of the situation, each employing words consistent with one of the four different categories (i.e., DAVs, IAVs, SVs, & ADJs). Participants were then asked to choose a description that best described the protagonist. The results showed that people choose descriptions characterized by higher levels of abstractness faced with desirable ingroup behaviors or undesirable outgroup behaviors, and chose descriptions characterized by higher levels of concreteness when faced with undesirable ingroup behaviors or desirable outgroup behaviors. These findings have been replicated across many studies investigating intergroup communication (for a review, see Sutton & Douglas, 2008). If ingroup members behave positively or outgroup members behave negatively, high language abstraction suggests the behaviors or traits are inherent or stable characteristics of the groups. If ingroup members behave negatively or outgroup
members behave positively, low language abstraction or high concreteness suggests the behaviors are irregular or uncharacteristic. The LIB has been demonstrated across a variety of different situations concerning intergroup communication (for a review, see Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996), competing sports, interest groups (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri & Semin, 1989), and between sexes (Fiedler, Semin, & Finkenauer, 1993). Proponents of LIB acknowledge that positive stereotypes do exist for outgroup members or groups in general, such as “Asians are smart.” Studies on language abstraction and intergroup contexts recognized that not all stereotypes favored ingroup members or derogated outgroup members (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995).

Positive attributions for outgroup members and negative attributions for ingroup members fulfill a social cognitive purpose. Although studies on language abstraction focused on the LIB, studies found another phenomenon called the Linguistic Expectancy Bias (LEB). LEB explains how language abstraction in intergroup communication defines and maintains expected group behaviors. Language abstraction in intergroup communication informs ingroup and outgroup members about behaviors that are expected or consistent (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995). Behaviors consistent with stereotypes are described at high levels of abstraction with stronger dispositional inferences than behaviors inconsistent with stereotypes (Maass et al., 1995).

Participants in a study were asked to choose several positive stereotypes and several negative stereotypes for both the ingroup and outgroup members. After, the participants were provided eight stories of ingroup and outgroup members. Some stories had ingroup and outgroup protagonists exhibit negative behaviors that aligned with the chosen stereotypes and other negative behaviors that did not align with negative stereotypes. The other stories had ingroup and outgroup protagonists exhibited positive behaviors that aligned with the stereotypes and positive behaviors that did not align with the positive stereotypes. After reading each of the stories, the participants read descriptions of the protagonists, varying from more abstract to more concrete (e.g., ADJs, SVs, IAVs, & DAVs). Maass et al. (1995) found that behaviors, regardless of valence and
membership, are described more abstractly when behaviors are congruent with the chosen stereotypes than those that are incongruent with the chosen stereotypes. These findings support the idea that language abstraction also informs people of expectations.

The findings of research on LIB and LEB demonstrate two motivations for language abstraction in communication. The first is for an intrapersonal purpose or ingroup protection - to protect the image of the group is to also protect the image of one’s self. The second purpose for language abstraction in intergroup communication is for a social cognitive purpose, communication of expected or consistent group behaviors. Further motivations for the use of language abstraction are examined in other areas of communication, specifically interpersonal communication when managing impressions of a third party member.

**Language Abstraction in Judicial Contexts**

Variation in language abstraction can communicate different perspectives of a single event or situation. Defense and prosecuting attorneys utilize varying levels of abstraction in their language to characterize their clients, describing the same situation in ways that benefits the clients. Schmid and Fiedler (1996; 1998) studied statements given by defense and prosecuting attorneys when describing the defendant or the victim of a crime. Statements studied in the judicial context demonstrated that language abstraction can be used to imply stable personality traits, intentionality, and causality. Lawyers in training acting as a prosecuting attorney described negative behaviors of the defendant more abstractly with adjectives. Similarly, lawyers in training acting as a defending attorney described negative behaviors of the victim more abstractly with adjectives (Schmid & Fiedler, 1998). Prosecuting attorneys used higher levels of abstractness, specifically adjectives (ADJs), to describe defendant’s negative behaviors as stable character traits.

Levels of language abstraction also affected how defendants and victims are perceived to be connected to a crime, especially in terms of responsibility. Prosecuting attorneys may describe the perpetrator as a criminal fully aware of his or her actions. Prosecuting attorneys used concrete
language, specifically interpretative action verbs (IAVs) to implicitly project intentionality or causality onto the defendant. For example, if “Alex harmed Rory,” IAVs like “harm” imply the subject’s motivation for the action and control over the situation. Specifically, that Alex did not like Rory, and second, that Alex acted on his feelings towards Rory.

When attorneys describe the actions of the defendant, varying levels of abstractness identify internal or external forces as the cause for any negative conduct committed by the defendant. Schmid and Fiedler (1998) observed lawyers in training, when assigned as defense attorneys, using more abstract language, specifically state verbs (SVs). SVs are used by the defending lawyers to describe defendants to “portray the subject as a patient or recipient of an uncontrollable external impact on his behavior” (Schmid & Fiedler, 1996, p.377). If Alex hated Rory, SVs like “hate” imply a psychological state that is prompted by an external force. Rory did something to make Alex hate him. SVs can also imply less responsibility on Alex’s actions towards Rory if Rory is the true cause to actions against him. The closing statements affected people’s perceived blame, guilt, and intent.

Schmid and Fielder (1998) found that the use of varying levels of abstractness not only implies intentions or attributions towards the defendants and victims, but affects the judgments of the recipients of the judicial statements, specifically statements using IAVs. Recipients of the judicial statements expressed greater blame and attributed greater guilt towards defendants after reading negative descriptions from prosecuting attorneys that used IAVs. The findings of language abstraction research in the judicial context show that people use language abstraction to manage the impressions of others and that language affects how impressions are formed.

**Language Abstraction in Third Party Descriptions**

Varying levels of abstractness in descriptive language affects the way recipients form their perceptions of those being described as well as those who are providing the descriptions. Recipients of descriptive language can infer certain information about those who describe a
situation (Douglas & Sutton, 2006; 2010). To demonstrate how recipients infer information from varying levels of language abstraction, Douglas and Sutton exposed participants to scenes where an individual behaved positively or negatively. A description was provided with the scene. Participants were then told that the description was either written by a friend, an enemy, or an unbiased bystander and that the participants were to choose who they believe wrote the description. The descriptions actually varied in abstractness. Participants were also asked to rate whether the person who wrote the description, or the describer, was biased or unbiased. For scenes that portrayed an individual acting positively, participants rated describers to be more of a friend and more biased than writers of concrete descriptions. For scenes that portrayed an individual acting negatively, participants rated describers to be an enemy and biased if descriptions were high in abstractness (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Describers were rated as unbiased or having no relationship with the person being described if descriptions were low in abstractness (i.e., high in concreteness). Participants would rate describers as less likely to be an unbiased observer with increasing abstraction in the description. The study also surveyed the intentions of the describers. Participants surveyed the describers as having certain intentions when descriptions were abstract rather than concrete. Describers were perceived as purposely creating negative or positive impressions of those being described when descriptions were abstract. Describers were rated as simply describing situations objectively when descriptions were concrete. The valence of the description did not affect participants' judgments on describers' relationship or motive. If an individual exhibited negative behaviors and was described abstractly, then participants inferred that the describer wanted to create a negative impression of the individual. If an individual exhibited positive behaviors and was described abstractly, then participants inferred that the describer wanted to create a positive impression of the individual. Participants were more likely to rate the describer of negative or positive descriptions as having no personal motive the more the description was concrete (Douglas & Sutton, 2006).
In another study done by Douglas and Sutton (2010), participants rated the likeability of the describer. Participants read several different descriptions about a person engaging in a negative or positive act. Each description varied in abstractness. After reading a description, participants rated most likeable to least likeable subjects from the descriptions in the following order: abstract positive descriptions, concrete positive descriptions, concrete negative descriptions, and abstract negative descriptions. Similar to the past studies on intergroup communication, the study found an interaction effect on positive/negative descriptions and abstract/concrete descriptions. Abstract descriptions showed a stronger effect on likeability in comparison to concrete descriptions, and positive descriptions showed a stronger effect on likeability in comparison to negative descriptions. Douglas and Sutton (2010) explained that describers of abstract positive descriptions tend to be more liked than describers of concrete positive descriptions. Participants may have speculated that describers had good intentions towards those being described when using positive abstract than positive concrete. As demonstrated in the previous study, participants infer that abstract descriptions are made against or in favor of those being described (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Such a finding could also explain why describers of negative abstract descriptions are the least liked. Participants might infer that describers have ill intentions towards those being described. In past studies, language abstraction involved several parties: the person being described, the person describing, and the person receiving or processing the description. The relationship between abstract/concrete and positive/negative descriptions is demonstrated further in situations where the person being described and the receiver of the description are the same. Reistma-van Rooijen, Semin, and Van Leeuwen (2007) studied people’s reactions when receiving descriptions of themselves from others, eliminating a third party to better understand language abstraction in an interpersonal context.
Language Abstraction in Interpersonal Communication

Past studies discussed how impressions are made when people receive descriptions about others. Further research into language abstraction has provided new insight when people receive descriptions about themselves and the impressions they make of those who described them. In a study done by Reistma-van Rooijen, Semin, and Van Leeuwen (2007), participants were asked to describe a situation in which they behaved in a socially responsible manner or a socially irresponsible manner. Once submitted, participants were told that another person would read their submission and respond with a description of their impression of the participants. The researchers prepared manipulated responses. Participants who wrote about a situation in which they were socially responsible received positive descriptions. The manipulated responses varied in abstractness. The more abstract responses were ‘You are someone who stands up for others’ and ‘You are socially very responsible’. The more concrete responses were ‘You acted in the interests of others’ and ‘You stood up for the interests of others’. Participants who wrote about a situation in which they were socially irresponsible received negative descriptions. The more abstract responses were ‘You are someone who harms the interests of others’ and ‘You are socially very irresponsible.’ The concrete responses were ‘You harmed the interests of others’ and ‘You did not stand for the interests of others.’ Participants were then asked to rate the perceived proximity or personal distance they felt with the person who wrote the responses. Results showed that participants rated closer personal distance for those who responded with abstract positive descriptions than those who responded with concrete positive descriptions. Participants rated greater personal distance for those who responded with abstract negative descriptions than those who responded with concrete negative descriptions. Reistma-van Rooijen et al. (2007) concluded that language abstraction conveys qualities of social relationships in both intergroup and interpersonal relations. In sum, Reistma-van Rooijen et al. (2007) revealed that people who are the
subject of a description will create impressions of their describers, and that language abstraction affects the impressions made.

Hypotheses

The research on language abstraction has focused on several roles involved in interpersonal communication and qualities of interpersonal relationships. The several roles of language abstraction involved in interpersonal communication are listed – the subject of the situation/description, the person providing the description, and the recipient of the description. Schmid and Fielder (1996; 1998) analyzed the speeches of lawyers who described their clients, and concluded that language abstraction affects the impressions recipients make about the subject being described. Douglas and Sutton’s (2006; 2010) findings showed how language abstraction influences recipients’ impressions make of both the subject and describer. Added research from Reistmas-van Rooijen et al. (2007) explored the influence of language abstraction on the impressions recipients make of the describer when the recipients are also the subjects being described. The current study, to further extend the research on language abstraction, observes whether recipients make impressions of the describer if the describer is also the subject being described. Language abstraction has often been used in interpersonal or close relationships. The qualities on interpersonal relationship to be observed in the current study are similarity and likeability.

Increasing Perceptions of Similarity

Perceived similarity is important for interpersonal relationships. Persons in close relationships such as friendships or romantic relationships tend to have an increased number of similar traits and attitudes (Till & Freedman, 1978). Certain qualities of abstract language, in contrast to concrete language, may have an increased effect on peoples’ perceptions of their similarity. Specifically, it may be the case that level of interpretation influences perceptions of similarity. Concrete language is less interpretative than abstract language.
provides situational informative, describing a single and specific act or behavior through the use of verbs that have limited interpretability. If people are described concretely, there may be fewer perceived shared characteristics or common activities between two people. Abstract language, on the other hand, is cross-situational and encompasses more activities or situations by being inclusive of a broader bandwidth of characteristics or activities, thus increasing interpretativeness. People who play sports, exercise, or do other rigorous activities can all be described abstractly through the use of an adjective, such as ‘athletic’. The cross-situational quality of abstract language may allow for an increase perception of similarity to a greater extent than does concrete language. For example, if described using more concrete language–‘David does yoga’ and ‘Whitney runs every day’ – David and Whitney may not perceive themselves as very similar. On the other hand, if described more abstractly – they are both described as ‘athletic’ – such a description may allow for greater perceptions of similarity.

The second quality is the general or ambiguous nature of abstract language that makes it highly relatable. Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) explained ambiguous descriptions in reference to trait breadth, which is a similar characteristic to abstract language. Ambiguously worded descriptions encompassed more characteristic traits like abstract language such as state verbs and adjectives. They also found that that people will attribute to themselves more traits if traits are ambiguously worded relative to concretely worded traits. Snyder and Shenkel (1976) demonstrated that vague, general, or easily interpretative personality descriptions tend to be viewed as accurate and true. If abstract descriptions were perceived as accurate or were highly relatable, descriptions of other people may increase perceptions of similarity or shared traits. If Sam receives results from a personality test describing her as intelligent, she may also perceive Michael, who described himself as intelligent, to be similar to herself.

However, perceived similarity is also affected by the description’s positive or negative valence. According to Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989), people associate with others as a way of self
presentation or impression management. People tend to associate themselves with those who are perceived as positive role models and disassociate or distance themselves from those who are perceived as negative role models. People might perceive similarity with those who are described positively and perceive dissimilarity with those who are described negatively. In terms of attributing positive or negative personality traits, Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) found that people tend to attribute more positive character traits (e.g., talented, active, sophisticated) than negative character traits (e.g., disorganized, socially anxious) to themselves as a result of a self-serving bias. It is reasonable to assume the same process could be expected in reference to perceiving similarity with others.

The current study proposes an interaction effect between language abstraction and valence. If abstract language allows for greater generalities and interpretation on personality or disposition, then abstract language will increase perceptions of similarity for positive descriptions or dissimilarity for negative descriptions in comparison to concrete language. The current study will test the following hypotheses:

H1: Valence of profiles and degree of abstractness of profiles will interact such that:

H1a: For positive profiles, as level of abstractness increases, ratings of similarity will increase;

H1b: For negative profiles, as level of abstractness increases ratings of similarity will decrease.

**Increasing Likeability**

Likeability is just as important as perceived similarity in relationships. Likeability encompasses more than just liking. Other desired characteristics such as warmth, reliability, charm, and attractiveness contribute to perceived liking (Jones & Pittman, 1982). People tend to manage their impressions to appear likeable. Language can also assist in creating these favorable impressions, especially when people describe themselves. Differences between abstract and
concrete language, specifically cognitive effort and ambiguity, allow for greater or lesser ratings of likeability.

Ter Doest, Semin, and Sherman (2002) tested whether varying levels of language abstraction affected cognitive processing levels. Participants were asked to read a biographical description subsequent to evaluating the subject of the description. After participants read the biographical description, they were given five minutes to write down everything they remembered about the subject they read. Participants were also asked to rate the subject on general impressions, such as whether weak or strong, positive or negative. Ter Doest, Semin, and Sherman (2002) found that concrete descriptions elicited deeper cognitive processing because participants gave greater attention to the descriptions and recalled more information about the subject than those who read abstract descriptions. Abstract descriptions elicited greater judgment or impressions on the subject than concrete descriptions. The study then concluded that more abstract language elicited more heuristic processing as concrete language elicited more systematic processing, similar to past studies about abstract or concrete themes (Dukes & Bastian, 1966; Fiedler, Semin, & Bolten, 1989; Paivio, 1971).

Cognitive processing is often conceptualized as employing two systems: heuristic and systematic processing. Chaiken (1980,) claims heuristic processing “de-emphasizes detailed information processing and focuses on the role of simple rules” (p.752) whereas systematic processing employs deep analysis of information or content. Heuristic processing or “heuristics” (i.e., mental shortcuts) allows people to make quicker, and sometimes biased judgments while deeper or systematic processing requires more time and effort (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). If abstract language elicits heuristic processing and concrete language elicits systematic processing, then biased impressions, positively and negatively, will be made for descriptions that are more abstract than descriptions that are more concrete. For example, Marc will likely be rated as a nicer person if he were described positively and abstractly, such as “Marc is pleasant”, than if he were
described concretely, such as "Marc smiled a lot". Negatively described, Marc may be rated as a mean person if he were described abstractly, "Marc is aggressive", than if he were described concretely, "Marc hit someone".

Language abstraction does not only vary in cognitive effort but also in levels of ambiguity that could allow increases in liking. Norton, Frost, and Ariely (2007) observed the relationship between liking and information of another, discussing the ideas of ambiguity and liking as well as familiarity and contempt. They found that more information led to decrease in liking because more information led to perceptions of dissimilarity. Ambiguity played a major role in increasing ratings of liking. The researchers suggested that ambiguity allows for greater interpretation such that people will implicitly generalize the personality of others. For example, if Gordon is described as being a ‘warm’ person, then people will also perceive Gordon as happy, pleasant, or nice because they attribute those traits to ‘warm’.

Abstract language is more ambiguous than concrete language because abstract language has more trait breadth, or traits that can be associated with other traits. If a person is described abstractly, then more traits, positive or negative, can be attributed to their personality. For example, if Barbara was described abstractly as smart, people might also perceive her to be organized, clever, or even happy. While abstract descriptions focus on personality or disposition, concrete descriptions focus on context or situation. If Barbara was described concretely, ‘Barbara read a book’, people may not attribute traits but may try to decipher why Barbara is reading a book, maybe for pleasure or for a class. The varying levels of ambiguity in language abstraction can increase perceptions of positive or negative personality traits, allowing for greater or lesser liking of a person being described.

If abstract language requires less cognitive effort but provides more perceived personality traits in comparison to more cognitive effort and less perceived personality traits from concrete language, than language abstraction will have a greater effect on likeability than concrete language.
If a person is positively or negatively described, the varying levels of abstractness will influence the intensity of liking. The current study will test the following hypotheses:

**H2: Valence of profiles and degree of abstractness of profiles will interact such that:**

**H2a:** For positive profiles, as level of abstractness increases, ratings of likeability will increase;

**H2b:** For negative profiles, as level of abstractness increases ratings of likeability will decrease.
Chapter 2

Methods

Recruitment

One hundred and twenty one University of Hawai`i at Mānoa undergraduate students participated in the current study. The demographics of the university consist of Asians 40%, Caucasians 20%, Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders 18%, Mixed 15 %, and other 7% (Common Data Set, 2014). Eighty three percent of undergraduate students are younger than 25 years old. Students were recruited to participate in the study through the Department of Communicology SONA system and earned class or extra credit for their participation. The study itself was conducted online. A link was provided on SONA once participants agree to the contract provided (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants were told that the current study focused on first impression management, specifically exploring the types of information that people share first with others, and would determine if certain types of information affect the impressions people make about them. Participants were asked to share information by creating a profile that listed four brief statements about themselves (see Appendix B). Participants were told that the information they recorded in their profiles can be positive or negative. The researcher then informed the participants that the profile they created would subsequently be read by another participant who would rate the person depicted in the profile on a variety of qualities. After generating his/her profile, participants were provided with a profile allegedly generated by another anonymous participant. They were asked to read and subsequently rate the person depicted in that profile on the same qualities.

The profiles generated by the participants were not actually read by other participants. The stimulus profiles that participants read and subsequently rated were generated by the researcher to vary specifically in their degree of abstractness. After reading the profile, participants rated the
person depicted in the profile on scales assessing perceived similarity, likeability, and the positive or negative valence of the profile. After completing the assessments of the manipulated profiles, participants were debriefed and excused.

Profile Descriptions

The study employed a 2 (valence: positive, negative) x 4 (language abstraction: descriptive action verbs, interpretive action verbs, state verbs, adjectives) ANOVA design. After participants submitted their profile, they received one of eight profiles generated for the present study by the researcher and were told that the profile came from another participant (see Appendix D). Each participant received only one profile. The profile had four brief statements. Statements were manipulated to ensure the content remained the same in reference to the valence and levels of abstractness. The entire profile was positively or negatively valenced. Positive profiles described socially desirable behaviors and personality traits such as intelligence, athleticism, and friendliness. Negative profiles described characteristics that are not socially desirable such as lack of intelligence, laziness, and anti-social characteristics. The profile also represented one of the four levels of language abstraction (i.e., descriptive action verbs, interpretative action verbs, state verbs, or adjectives). For every level of abstraction, the researcher has generated eight brief statements that served as a pool used to generate a profile consisting of four statements (see Appendix C). The website that participants access the profiles will generate a profile by randomly selecting four of the eight statements to create a brief profile.

Valence

To ensure that profiles were perceived as positively valenced or negatively valenced, two scales were added as a manipulation check. Participants were asked to rate each profile by responding to two statements. The first asked participants “How positive is the profile that you read?” and the second asked “How negative is the profile that you read?” Both items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 ‘not at all’ and 7 ‘extremely’. Scores for the negative item were
reversed. The positive profiles and the reversed scores of the negative profiles were averaged into a single scale with the higher number indicating higher perceived positive valence. The two items demonstrated a satisfactory reliability of .97 ($M = 3.86, SD = 2.42$). Positive profiles were significantly different from negative profiles, $F(1,112) = 829.15, p < .000, \eta^2 = .88$. Positive profiles ($M = 6.13, SD = .87$) were rated as more positive than negative profiles ($M = 1.63, SD = .87$). Refer to Table 3 for means and standard deviations for the valence and abstract profiles.

**Similarity**

Participants also rated the person depicted in the generated profiles on perceived similarity indicating the extent to which they found the stimulus person to be similar to themselves. The three statements that were read by participants were rated on Likert-type scales bounded by 1 ‘not at all’ and 7 ‘very much’. Participants responded to items such as “In your view, to what extent is the person very similar to you” and “In your view to what extent do you and the person share common values and attitudes”. The scales demonstrated a satisfactory reliability of .93 ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.55$). The three items were averaged to create a similarity scale wherein the higher number indicated greater perceived similarity.

**Likeability**

After participants read the generated profile, they were asked to complete a likeability scale indicating the extent to which they find the stimulus person likeable. The Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989) likeability scale was used for the current study. The scale includes statements starting with “In your view, to what extent is the person” ending with one of the following attributes: friendly, likeable, attractive, personable, and pleasant. Participants responded to each statement using a Likert-type scale anchored by 1 ‘not at all’ and 7 ‘very much’. The scales demonstrated a satisfactory reliability of .97 ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.82$), and were averaged together such that the higher number indicated greater perceived likeability.
Chapter 3

Results

Examination of Hypotheses

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted an interaction effect between valence of profiles and level of abstractness, specifically on ratings of perceived similarity (H1) and perceived likeability (H2).

Two 2 X 4 analyses of variance were conducted to test the hypothesized interaction between valence of profiles (i.e., positive/negative) and level of abstraction (i.e., DAV/IAV/SV/ADJ).

Not surprisingly, there was a main effect for valence on perceived similarity, $F(1,113) = 176.07, p < .000, \eta^2 = .61$. Persons depicted in the positive profiles were perceived as more similar ($M = 4.58, SD = .99$) than were persons depicted in the negative profiles ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.01$). There was no main effect for level of abstraction on perceived similarity, $F(3,113) = .47, ns$. DAVs ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.12$), IAVs ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.71$), SVs ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.48$), and ADJs ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.80$) did not significantly differ in ratings of similarity. The interaction effect between valence and level of abstraction on perceived similarity was significant and the means were consistent with Hypothesis 1, $F(3,113) = 3.23, p = .03, \eta^2 = .03$.

The ANOVA for profile valence and level of abstraction on likeability produced similar results. There was a significant effect for profile valence, $F(1,113) = 346.19, p < .000, \eta^2 = .72$. Positively valenced profiles were perceived as more likeable ($M = 5.38, SD = .92$) than were negatively valenced profiles ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.01$). There was no main effect for abstractness on likeability, $F(3,113) = 2.22, p = ns$. DAVs ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.41$), IAVs ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.78$), SVs ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.92$), and ADJs ($M = 3.77, SD = 2.13$) did not significantly differ in ratings of likeability. The interaction effect between valence and level of abstraction on perceived likeability was also significant, $F(3,113) = 4.71, p < .000, \eta^2 = .03$, and the means appeared consistent with H2.

Reviews of the negative and positive profile means for perceived similarity and perceived likeability across levels of abstractness were generally consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2.
However a specific test for both hypotheses would be found in two a priori polynomial contrast tests of the means for perceived similarity and perceived likeability across the four levels of abstractness. H1a and H1b as well as H2a and H2b predicted that means across levels of abstractness would follow contrasting linear slopes for the positive and negative profiles. For the positively valenced profile, the polynomial contrast test was significant for similarity, $p = .03$, indicating that the means increased in a linear manner from the DAV condition to the ADJ condition, consistent with H1a. Ratings for similarity increased in a linear manner from DAVs ($M = 4.02, SD = .90$), IAVs ($M = 4.84, SD = .98$), SVs ($M = 4.53, SD = .89$), to ADJs ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.02$). H1b stated that the means across the four levels of abstractness would decrease for similarity in the negatively valenced condition. Although the means generally followed this pattern, from DAVs ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.03$), IAVs ($M = 2.67, SD = 1.23$), SVs ($M = 2.19, SD = .88$), and ADJs ($M = 1.90, SD = .86$), the polynomial contrast was not significant, $p = .10$. Figure I illustrates the patterns of means tested in H1 (refer to Table 3).

Hypothesis 2 predicted the same pattern of means for likeability: in the positively valenced condition (H2a) the means across the four levels of abstractness would increase from DAV to ADJ; in the negatively valenced condition these means would decrease. The polynomial contrast test for H2a was significant, $p = .00$. Perceptions of likeability increased in a linear manner from the DAV condition to the ADJ condition. In the following order, ratings for likeability increased from DAVs ($M = 4.72, SD = .63$), IAVs ($M = 5.20, SD = .94$), SVs ($M = 5.80, SD = .94$), to ADJs ($M = 5.81, SD = .70$). In the negatively valenced condition the means generally decreased from the DAV condition to the ADJ condition, from DAVs ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.01$), IAVs ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.11$), SVs ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.09$), and ADJs ($M = 1.86, SD = .75$), but the polynomial contrast test was not significant, $p = .17$. Figure II illustrates the patterns of means tested in H2 (refer to Table 4).
Chapter 4

Discussion

The current study set out to explore the effects of language abstraction in personal descriptions on perceptions of likeability and similarity. Past research reveals consistent findings on the interaction between profile valence and language abstraction, especially in areas of communication and impression management. Positively-valenced profile descriptions characterized by high levels of abstractness tend to be rated higher in relational qualities such as personal distance (Reistma-van Rooijen, Semin, & Van Leeuwen, 2007) and likeability (Douglas & Sutton, 2010), or used for close relationships (e.g., ingroup members) (Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996) than lower levels of abstractness. Additionally, negatively-valenced descriptions characterized higher levels of abstractness tend to be rated lower in relational qualities than those using lower levels of abstractness (for a review, see Menegatti & Rubini, 2009). Therefore, it was expected this rather robust interaction effect would also be found when people describe themselves to another person. The relationship between valence and language abstraction has been observed in many other areas of communication except for interpersonal communication, especially concerning perceptions of likeability and similarity, two important qualities necessary for an interpersonal relationship.

In the current study, participants viewed profiles manipulated to vary their levels of abstractness and valence. To understand specific relationships between valence and language abstraction, Hypothesis 1a predicted a positive linear relationship, such that as positive profiles increased in abstractness so would the ratings of perceived similarity. Results supported the H1a. Participants rated the persons depicted in the positive profile as more similar as the language abstractness of the profile increased. Hypotheses 1b predicted a negative linear relationship between perceived similarity and levels of abstractness in profiles that were negatively-valenced. Although the results failed to achieve significance, the means did display a generally negative trend
across levels of abstractness that were consistent with H1b. The effect size suggests this test may have been underpowered.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted a similar interaction between valence of profiles and levels of language abstractness on likeability. Hypothesis 2a predicted a positive linear relationship, such that as positive profiles increased in abstractness so would the ratings of likeability. Results were consistent with this hypothesis. Participants rated the profiled persons as more likeable as language abstractness increased. Hypotheses 2b predicted that among negatively-valenced profiles, a negative linear relationship between language abstractness and ratings of likeability would be found. As with the comparable test in similarity, the data yielded no statistically significant relationship consistent with Hypothesis 1b. The means, however, were consistent with the expected relationship. Similar to H1b, it would appear that the test was underpowered.

As the current study has shown a relationship between language abstraction in positively valenced descriptions and likeability and similarity, future studies could explore what specifically causes language abstraction to elicit higher ratings in these relational qualities. The findings show that as language abstractness increases in positively valenced descriptions, so does perceived similarity. This suggests as language abstractness increases, perceptions of inclusiveness in characteristics, attitudes, and values may also increase, contributing to higher ratings for perceived similarity. The effects of abstractness in personal descriptions are similar to the effects of ambiguous descriptions. Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) found that ambiguous descriptions have greater capacity for trait breadth, or inclusiveness of personalities and characteristics. For example, the description “Ariel is optimistic” can include traits such as pleasant, happy, or positive. Ambiguous descriptions and abstract language share similar qualities, especially the use of adjectives. Future studies can further explore the effects of language abstraction relative to perceived generalities and inclusiveness.
The findings in the study also show that as abstraction increases in positive descriptions, so do ratings of likeability. This may be explained by the types of processing elicited by the varying levels of abstractness. Ter Doest, Semin, and Sherman (2002) found that concrete descriptions elicited deeper cognitive processing in comparison to abstract descriptions. Concrete descriptions elicited more systematic processing and abstract descriptions elicited more heuristic processing. Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011) explained that people make more biased judgments when processing information heuristically relative to systematically. Future studies could explore whether language abstraction eliciting certain types of cognitive processing indirectly affects perceptions of likeability and possibly other perceptions of relational qualities. It may be that as language abstraction increases, cognitive effort decreases, which could lead to more biased judgments.

The negatively valenced descriptions did not appear to be as strongly affected by language abstraction. This may have been influenced by a positivity bias, which would explain why positive profiles had stronger effect sizes than did the negative profiles. Profiles varied in language abstraction but were controlled for content. However, as profiles became more abstract, the profiles could be interpreted in different ways. With descriptive action verb profiles, the verb used was “punched” and with the adjective profiles, the adjective used was “aggressive”. While the adjective “aggressive” was meant to be physically aggressive, participants may have a positivity bias, interpreting less harsh or critical attributes. Participants may have interpreted “aggressive” as verbally aggressive or socially aggressive. The positivity bias may have limited the impact of the negative profiles when language was more abstract.

In past studies, a positivity bias may not have affected participants who read negatively valenced descriptions because – unlike the present study – participants referred to a picture or situation. For example, in past studies, people first saw a picture where Jaime punches another person. When Jaime is described as “aggressive”, people may perceive Jaime as being physically
aggressive instead of socially or verbally aggressive. The pictures may have helped restrict the interpretation of abstract language and control for the content throughout the different descriptions that varied in language abstraction. Future studies should consider better controlling for content throughout profiles with pictures or without pictures.

Finally, it would appear that the test was underpowered. A larger sample may have produced significant effects. Future studies will need to consider the number of participants or the effects of their manipulation when observing the relationship between negative profiles and language abstraction.

Implications

These findings offer three primary takeaways that support or advance language abstraction research in language abstraction. First, the study continued to support the relationship between valence of descriptions and language abstraction that past studies have shown. Specifically, positive abstract descriptions are rated higher in personal qualities or are used for closer relationships than positive concrete descriptions, and that negative abstract descriptions are rated lower in relational qualities than negative concrete descriptions. This seems to be a robust pattern that is consistent across different relationships and contexts.

Secondly, the relationship between valence and language abstraction is still supported and applicable in this new observed relationship. Language abstraction research has typically observed the relationship between three people: the subject of a description (subject), the person providing the description (describer), and the recipient of the description (recipient). Douglas and Sutton (2010) found how recipients form impressions of the subject and the describer. Reistma-van Rooijen, Semin, and Van Leeuwen (2007) found recipients formed impressions of the describer when the recipients were also the subjects. The current study observes a new relationship, wherein the recipient forms impressions of the describer when the describer is also the subject, i.e., describers describe themselves. Past studies have shown that language abstraction is used to form
and maintain the impressions of others; the current study has shown that language abstraction could be used to form and maintain personal impressions or people’s self-image.

Lastly, the findings suggest practical applications for situations in which one is asked to provide positive and negative personal descriptions. These practical applications could be used in job settings, such as job applications or interviews, or dating situations, such as online profiles or face-to-face settings. The findings suggest that as language abstractness increases in personal positive descriptions, so do perceptions of similarity and likeability. Abstract language would then be better than concrete language if a person’s goal was to be perceived as similar or likeable. When a situation requires people to describe themselves positively, people can describe themselves using adjectives that positively highlight their personality (e.g., “I am friendly” or “I am optimistic”) or state verbs that describe their emotional or psychological states (e.g., “I love my friends” or “I like learning”). More positive characteristics would be interpreted and also attributed to a person’s character. If people were to positively describe themselves in concrete language, such as descriptive action verbs (e.g., “I hugged my friends”) or interpretative action verbs (e.g., “I comfort my family”), the situation may be perceived a singular event and not part of their character.

The findings also suggest that abstract language is less likeable than concrete language when providing negative personal descriptions. In situations that require people to talk negatively about themselves, concrete language may soften judgments than abstract language. Such situations could be during interviews, where applicants are asked about certain flaws or weaknesses. By using descriptive action verbs (e.g., “I punched him”) or interpretative action verbs (e.g., “I hurt him”), the situation is described more than a person’s disposition. If a person were to use abstract language, such as state verbs (e.g., “I hate him”) or adjectives (e.g., “I am aggressive”), than more negative characteristics could be interpreted and attributed to the person.
Considerations for Future Research

The current study was constrained by four limitations. First, the manipulated profiles could have been perceived as fake or simulated. The valence of the profiles or the language of the profiles could have lessened the legitimacy of the profile. People will often talk and attribute positive descriptions to themselves (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Positive profiles could have been viewed as submitted by other participants. However, negative profiles may have seemed unrealistic, especially profiles with statements that may be perceived as personal or even upsetting (e.g., “I am abusive” or “I hurt my family”). Language could have also affected the perceived legitimacy of the profiles. When people describe themselves, they could talk in varying levels of abstractness. However, in the current study, each profile was restricted to a specific level of abstractness and verb tense. The profile could have been perceived as mechanical or repetitive. For these reasons, future studies should do a manipulation check for participant’s perception of the legitimacy of the profiles.

Second, in past studies, descriptions that varied in language abstraction would refer to a past situation or event that participants witnessed or read. The studies then controlled for verb tense. For example, Douglas and Sutton (2003) showed participants a picture of a person running. The descriptions remained consistent in verb tense (i.e., present participle) among the varying levels of abstraction (e.g., A is running; A is training; A likes to train; A is athletic). The dimension of time is then implied through the type of verb or adjective and the verb tenses are controlled. However, in the present study, in order to align the different levels of abstractness with the conceptually appropriated depicted dimension of time, certain verbs were given past tense markers. DAVs needed to state a clear beginning and ending, IAVs were to have temporary timelines; and SVs and ADJs were temporal to adhere to their correct dimensions of time. In order to align the levels of abstraction with the correct dimension of time, DAVs were given past tense markers, while IAVs, SVs, and ADJs were given present continuous markers. Future research could
explore the effects of the variability of verb tense across the varying levels of abstractness on likeability and similarity.

Future research could then study how manipulating the dimension of time can change the effects of language abstraction. For example, concrete language (e.g., DAVs and IAVs) is known to have a specific time frame, a clear beginning and end (e.g., Jesse left work) (Fielder & Semin, 1988). If the dimension of time were to be manipulated and descriptive action verbs were given present continuous tense markers, (e.g., Jesse leaves work early) descriptive action verbs may imply a behavioral habit that is inherently dispositional. If concrete language exhibits dimensions similar to abstract language, concrete language may have similar effects like that of abstract language. The same would be true if abstract language exhibits dimensions similar to concrete language. Semin and Fielder (1988) observed abstract (e.g., SVs and ADJs) language implying enduring qualities, characteristics, or dispositional traits (e.g., Jordan is smart). If abstract language exhibited lower dimensions of time (e.g., Jordan was smart), then the described characteristic would be considered a past quality that may not be present anymore. If the dimension of time can be changed for the levels of abstraction, then the effects of language abstraction may not be exclusively caused by the level of abstractness but also perceived time.

The third difference between past methods in comparison to the present method is the number of stimuli descriptions provided to participants. In past studies, researchers would show a picture or event to a participant and provide only one description. In the current study, the methods required participants to read several statements. By providing more than one statement about a subject, there may be a greater effect than one statement, especially for descriptive action verbs. In the current study, the descriptive action verb negative statement was “I left work early”. Alone, descriptive action verb statements are meant to be perceived as neutral and not heavily valenced even if the statement is negative (Fiedler & Semin, 1988). The information is more situational than dispositional. However, if several negative descriptive action verbs are given, then
the statements seem less situationally informative and more dispositionally informative. Negative experiences are perceived as less situationally caused because they are experienced repeatedly such that the person is perceived more as the cause instead of the victim.

Future research could explore specific contexts where personal descriptions require more than one descriptive statement or where personal descriptions are common such as job interviews or online dating profiles. Fiedler, Semin, and Bolten (1989) found that when engaged in free communication, wherein information exchanges are taken for granted, people will speak more abstractly. Conversely, when social judgment tasks are assigned, people will speak more concretely. Hansen and Wänke (2010) found that concrete language is perceived as more true or honest relative to abstract language. Situations that require more social judgment tasks may elicit more concrete language than abstract language. If people require evidentiary proof, concrete language may be deemed as more important than abstract language. Language abstraction research can then observe how language abstraction affects the level of abstractness when people describe themselves in a job interview (i.e., social judgment task) or a casual encounter (i.e., free communication).

Lastly, the current study manipulated the profiles to control for varying levels of abstractness. Both the statements in the profiles and the persons depicted were fictitious. Future studies should consider using authentic personal descriptions. Possibly, researchers could ask participants to submit personal descriptions and rate the submitted personal descriptions. Future research could also place participants in settings that simulate real situations, such as interviews or applications requiring personal descriptions.

In summary, the current study has provided a new perspective in the research on language abstraction in personal descriptions and its effects on likeability and similarity. Findings suggest that when people positively describe themselves using greater levels of language abstraction, they are perceived as more similar and more likeable than those who write positive descriptions of
themselves using lesser levels of abstraction. Also, the findings suggests that people who describe themselves negatively using greater levels of abstraction, are perceived as less similar and less likeable relative to those who describe themselves negatively using lesser levels of abstraction. Such findings reveal new areas of research on language abstraction and its effects on attributions, perceptions, and relationships.
References


Fiedler, K. (2008). The implicit theory that has inspired and restricted LCM research: Why some studies were conducted but others not. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 27*, 182-196.


### Tables

**Table 1.1 The dimensions of language abstraction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Linguistic Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Time) How enduring the quality is</td>
<td>LOW     →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Verifiability) How easy it is to verify the statement generates</td>
<td>HIGH    ←</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Disputability) How much disagreement the statement generates</td>
<td>LOW     →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Information) How informative the statement is</td>
<td>Situation ←→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Abstraction</td>
<td>Concrete ←→</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Modified from Semin & Fiedler (1988).
Table 1.2 The classification of linguistic terms in the interpersonal domain and their classification criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Characteristic Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Action Verbs (DAVs)</td>
<td>call, yell, see,</td>
<td>Reference to a single behavioral event; Reference to specific object and situation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yell, hit, kick,</td>
<td>Context essential for sentence comprehension; Objective description of observable events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>walk, talk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification criteria:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refer to one particular activity and to a physically invariant feature of the action;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Action has clear beginning and end; In general do not have positive and negative semantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>valence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative Action Verbs (IAVs)</td>
<td>cheat, tease, help, consult avoid, attack argue, imitate</td>
<td>Reference to single behavioral event; Reference to specific object and situation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomous sentence comprehension; Interpretation beyond description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification criteria:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refer to general class of behaviors; Have defined action with beginning and end; Have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>positive and negative semantic valence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Verbs (SVs)</td>
<td>admire, like hate, love abhor appreciate</td>
<td>As IAV, no reference to concrete action frames but to states evoked in object of sentence by unspecified action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification criteria:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refer to mental and emotional states; No clear definition of beginning and end; Do not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>readily take progressive forms; Not freely used in imperatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives (ADJs)</td>
<td>honest, impulsive reliable, helpful nice, emotional aggressive</td>
<td>As IAV, no reference to concrete action frames but to states evoked in object of sentence by unspecified action.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Modified from Semin & Fiedler (1991)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAV</td>
<td>5.60 (.76)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAV</td>
<td>5.90 (.99)</td>
<td>1.53 (.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>6.30 (.82)</td>
<td>1.61 (.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ</td>
<td>6.70 (.46)</td>
<td>1.38 (2.77)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2*

*Means and Standard Deviations for Valence and Language Abstraction*
Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Similarity as a Function of Valence and Language Abstraction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAV</td>
<td>4.02 (.90)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAV</td>
<td>4.84 (.98)</td>
<td>2.27 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>4.53 (.89)</td>
<td>2.19 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ</td>
<td>4.93 (1.02)</td>
<td>1.89 (.86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4

*Means and Standard Deviations for Likeability as a Function of Valence and language abstraction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAV</td>
<td>4.72 (.63)</td>
<td>2.48 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAV</td>
<td>5.20 (.94)</td>
<td>2.31 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>5.80 (.94)</td>
<td>2.57 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ</td>
<td>5.81 (.70)</td>
<td>1.86 (.75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

Figure I

Relationship between Profile Valence and Level of Abstraction on Perceptions of Similarity

Positive

Negative
Figure II
Relationship between Profile Valence and Level of Abstraction on Likeability
You are invited to take part in a research study that examines the types of information students share when first introducing themselves. If you have an interest in participating, please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to the study.

The current research study is conducted by Lucille Gilbert and advised by Dr. R. Kelly Aune from the Department of Communicology at University of Hawaii at Manoa.

**Background Information**
The focus of the current study is to investigate the types of information people first share with others.

**Procedures**
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete two parts of the study.

**First,** you will be asked to share information about yourself in four brief statements to create a profile. Please do not include any personal information that could be used to identify you, such as your name. The information you share can be positive or negative. The profile will be read by the researchers and another participant so only share information that you are comfortable sharing with another person. The profile will remain anonymous. The profile will be read by another participant and will be rated on certain qualities. If you feel uncomfortable sharing information and would like to stop participating in the study, you can leave the website without any risks.

**Second,** after you have submitted your profile, you will view a profile anonymously submitted by another participant. After reading the profile, you will fill out a survey rating the other participant on certain qualities.

Completion of the study will require 15 to 20 minutes of your time.

**Confidentiality**
The survey and the profile you submit will remain anonymous throughout the study. You will not be asked to provide any personal information that could be used to identify you.

**Voluntary Participation**
Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future standing with the University of Hawaii, the Communicology department, or the courses in which you are enrolled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not submit any information or answer any questions. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalties.

**Contact and Questions**
If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the researcher, Lucille Gilbert, by email at Lucille.Gilbert@hawaii.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the UH Committee on Human Studies by phone at (808) 956-5007 or by email at uhirb@hawaii.edu.
At this time, you may print a copy of this information to keep for your records.

By clicking next you freely agree to participate in this study.
APPENDIX B
Part I Instructions

INSTRUCTIONS

Please share anything about yourself in four brief statements.
The information you share can be positive things about you or negative things about you.
The information you share will be read by another participant but will remain anonymous.

Please do not share any personal information or any information that can be used to identify you, such as your name.

1. __________________________________________________________________________________________

2. __________________________________________________________________________________________

3. __________________________________________________________________________________________

4. __________________________________________________________________________________________
## APPENDIX C

**Generated Profile Descriptions**

### Descriptive Action Verbs (DAV)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Valence (+)</th>
<th>Negative Valence (-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I listened to my friend talk about their problems.</td>
<td>1. I interrupted my friends in our conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I spoke up in class.</td>
<td>2. I slept through my classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I introduced myself to others at a social event.</td>
<td>3. I stood off to the side at a social event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I hugged my siblings.</td>
<td>4. I yelled at my siblings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I told my fiancé something personal.</td>
<td>5. I slept with someone other than my fiancé.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I said yes to a lot of things.</td>
<td>6. I told people they had to do things my way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I bought some gifts for people.</td>
<td>7. I complained about a lot of things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I smiled thinking about my life.</td>
<td>8. I bought myself things when I was supposed to be buying for others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interpretative Action Verbs (IAV)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Valence (+)</th>
<th>Negative Valence (-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I comfort my friends.</td>
<td>1. I bother my friends with my problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I participate in all my classes.</td>
<td>2. I miss my classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I attend social events.</td>
<td>3. I avoid social events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I spend time with my family.</td>
<td>4. I hurt my family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I share everything with my fiancé.</td>
<td>5. I cheat on my fiancé.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I go along with people about most things.</td>
<td>6. I boss people around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I share with others.</td>
<td>7. I point out the bad in situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I show people the silver lining in most situations.</td>
<td>8. I spoil myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### State Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Valence (+)</th>
<th>Negative Valence (-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I think about my friends’ needs.</td>
<td>1. I neglect my friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I concentrate on my studies.</td>
<td>2. I forget about my classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I enjoy social events.</td>
<td>3. I dislike social events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I care for my family.</td>
<td>4. I hate my family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am true to my fiancé.</td>
<td>5. I regret my relationship with my fiancé.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I agree with people about most things.</td>
<td>6. I prefer my way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I love everyone.</td>
<td>7. I brood about most things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I believe in myself.</td>
<td>8. I care only for myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Adjectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Valence (+)</th>
<th>Negative Valence (-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am a thoughtful person.</td>
<td>1. I am rude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am responsible.</td>
<td>2. I am irresponsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am a sociable person.</td>
<td>3. I am anti-social.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am caring.</td>
<td>4. I am abusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am faithful.</td>
<td>5. I am unfaithful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I am easy-going.</td>
<td>6. I am aggressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am generous.</td>
<td>7. I am selfish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am optimistic about most things.</td>
<td>8. I am pessimistic about most things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Part II Survey & Scales

INSTRUCTIONS

Please read the following profile submitted by another participant. After reading the profile, please read and consider each item carefully and respond to each item on the scale provided.

Valence Check

1. How positive is the profile that you read?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Extremely Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. How negative is the profile that you read?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Extremely Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarity Assessment

In your view to what extent is the person...

1. Similar to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. In your view to what extent do you and the person share common values and attitudes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. In our view to what extent are you and the person alike in outlook, perspective, values, and work habits?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Likeability Assessment

In your view to what extent is the person...

1. **Friendly**
   
   Not at all | Extremely
   1         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7

2. **Likeable**
   
   Not at all | Extremely
   1         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7

3. **Attractive**
   
   Not at all | Extremely
   1         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7

4. **Personable**
   
   Not at all | Extremely
   1         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7

5. **Pleasant**
   
   Not at all | Extremely
   1         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7