Blaming Others, Excusing Ourselves – Making Linguistic Choices

Linguist Willem Hollmann presents the idea of self-serving bias and explores how it relates to the language choices that we all make, introducing along the way some early research ideas about gender stereotypes and politeness.

Liverpool FC manager Jürgen Klopp isn't famous only for his successes with the club. YouTube has many videos illustrating how he explains the team's results when they disappoint. Rather than point to his own tactical decisions he may blame the pitch (too dry! snowy!), the wind or the referee (see for instance 'JURGEN KLOPP ALL EXCUSES FOR LIVERPOOL LOSING!!' on YouTube [accessed 5 May 2022]).

Am I picking on Klopp? No way. LFC's trophy cabinet shows that he's excellent at his job. And anyway, he's far from unique in blaming other people or external factors for failures.

Think about it: what did you tell your friends, your parents, yourself, the last time you got a mark in school that was worse than you expected? Quite possibly you blamed the test, which had questions that were 'not fair'. Perhaps you felt that your teacher's grading was too harsh. Maybe you said you didn't feel well that day.

We all do this. And conversely, when we achieve good results in sports, school, or wherever, we praise ourselves rather than saying that the referee's decisions really favoured us or the teacher was very generous in their marking.

I'm a cognitive linguist. This means that in my research I try to explain linguistic phenomena largely by drawing on cognitive psychology (Hollmann 2017). But I'm personally super keen to learn also from social psychology. The tendency I've described in Klopp and the rest of humanity, whereby we blame others for failures but commend ourselves for successes, is very well known to social psychologists. They call it the self-serving bias (Forsyth 2008).

There's an obvious link between the self-serving bias and language: we often talk about other people or factors beyond our control when we explain why something didn't go as well as we'd hoped. And we talk about ourselves a lot when something did. The question I've recently worked on is whether this bias can be observed in very subtle linguistic choices.

Three Similar (But Not Identical) Constructions…

Humans often think and talk about events in terms of who or what caused them. Unsurprisingly, we have many expressions to do this. The following sentences contain three constructions I'm especially interested in – in bold face. The examples come from

the British National Corpus (BNC), a very large electronic collection of texts compiled in the UK in the 1990s.

1. After eighteen years of respected service in the parish he caused a scandal by having an affair with a young woman who was placed under his roof.
2. He doesn't wait for things to happen, he actually makes them happen, initiating positive action, or stops them happening (preventing negative problems).
3. But just as adolescence brings about major changes in your body, most women experience some physical and emotional change during the menopause.

At first blush you might think that these constructions all mean the same. However, research by linguists including myself has revealed subtle differences. What kind of research? Well, we've looked at the kinds of things that are typically described as being 'caused', 'made to happen' or 'brought about'.

First, let's take X CAUSE Y. In this notation, X is the subject (he in example (1)) and Y, the object, the thing that is caused. In this construction, Y is usually negative. In (1) it's 'a scandal'; in other examples it may be something like 'damage' or 'death'. By contrast, when we choose X MAKE Y happen then Y is typically positive, e.g. some desirable change or worthy project. X BRING about Y, finally, is somewhere in between: Y is sometimes negative, sometimes positive and sometimes – as in example (3), where it's biological changes during puberty – neutral.

In view of the self-serving bias plus what we now know about the subtle meaning differences between the constructions in examples (1-3) we can formulate a hypothesis, and test that against our linguistic data.

But first we need to recognise that the main way to talk about ourselves is of course by using the personal pronoun 'I'. And to discuss other people or things we use 'he', 'she', 'it' and 'they'.

We can of course also use noun phrases such as 'the manager', 'the wind' and 'the players' but to avoid making my study too big I focused just on personal pronouns.

If you're wondering about 'you' and 'we', good thinking! I excluded 'you' because when psychologists discuss the self-serving bias they don't normally say anything about crediting or blaming the person(s) we're talking to. As for 'we', social psychologists have found that we are inclined to favour groups we're part of. However, they treat this as a separate phenomenon from the self-serving bias, calling it the in-group bias or in-group favouritism. So I didn't look at 'we' either.

My Hypothesis

Now thinking about the tendency to take credit for agreeable events but to blame others for unpleasant things, can you guess my hypothesis? It was this: the semantically negative construction X CAUSE Y will have relatively few 'I' subjects (remember: that's the X slot) compared to 'he/she/it/they'. Semantically positive X MAKE Y 'happen' will have comparatively many 'I' subjects. Subjects in semantically mixed/neutral X BRING 'about' Y will be in between.

In order to assess whether the hypothesis was correct I collected all examples of the three constructions from the BNC. There were thousands. Rather than looking at them one by one, which would have taken ages, I got a specialised corpus linguistics computer programme (called a concordancer) to analyse how often each construction occurred with 'I', 'he', 'she', 'it' and 'they'. The technical term for this – which you can forget immediately unless you decide to study linguistics at uni – is collocational analysis. It involves fairly advanced statistics which I won't bore you with, but which fortunately many concordance programmes do for you.

So what did I find? As predicted, X in X CAUSE Y is only rarely 'I'. More often it's 'he', 'she', 'it' or 'they'. In X MAKE Y 'happen' the tables are turned, as also expected: 'I' is more frequent than any of the third person pronoun subjects. X BRING 'about' Y is in between.

Hypothesis confirmed! Hurrah! The self-serving bias appears to guide us even when we make subtle choices between constructions that have very similar (though not identical) meanings!

Given my interest in drawing on social psychology to explain aspects of language I was pleased with this finding – as you may have gathered from my exclamation marks! But, as frequently happens, the data threw up some further questions. Specifically, questions emerged about gender and about politeness. You'll have to wait for the published paper (Hollmann to appear) to read about politeness but I will say something about gender here. Bear in mind that this is work in progress and what I'm sharing with you is the start of my thinking. Further questions and hypotheses will come up as I continue my research. In fact, I'll give you a concrete example of a natural follow-up question at the end of the next section, which will help you understand how linguistic research like this may develop more or less organically.

Positive and Negative Gender Stereotypes

There's lots of research on gender stereotypes and language. It tends to point in one deplorable direction: males are portrayed as 'competent'; females, less so (Menegatti & Rubini 2017). Since competence is a positive characteristic I hypothesised that X MAKE Y 'happen', with its positive meaning, would have relatively many 'he' subjects compared to 'she'. For X CAUSE Y, which you'll recall has a more negative meaning, I expected the reverse. And neutral/mixed X BRING 'about' Y I again suspected would be in between.

What did I find? For X BRING 'about' Y, not much. My data simply didn't contain enough examples with 'he' or 'she' subjects to be able to compare. For the other two constructions I surprisingly found the reverse of what I'd expected: relatively more 'he' than 'she' with X CAUSE Y and more she than he with X MAKE Y 'happen'.

What to make of this? Do my data show that previous scholarship on positive and negative gender stereotypes is wrong, and maybe the stereotypes don't exist? Alas, no. First of all, this is only looking at a couple of constructions. In order to make broad claims you'd would want and need to look at many, many more. But also, the positive and negative meanings associated with these constructions are really subtle. So subtle, in fact, that until I told you about them you probably never realised. And too subtle, possibly, for speakers to use them in line with common gender stereotypes.

If that's so, then can we find evidence of the stereotypes when we look at constructions that are more obviously positive and negative?

To answer this question, I did some more searches in the BNC. This time I looked at subjects of clauses containing 'cleverly' (as in (4), below) and 'stupidly' (as in (5)). No prizes for guessing which one of these adverbs is positive and which one negative! The difference isn't subtle at all. No prizes either, therefore, for guessing which of these I hypothesised would occur relatively more often with 'he', and which with 'she'.

4. She was less close to Gildas, whom she regarded with some slight awe, for she feared his irony and his sharp tongue, and would not have allowed him the slightest 'liberty' had he not cleverly, for he was very clever, 'set up', a conversation which led her, through a series of exchanges, into the danger area.
5. Stupidly she hadn't looked further than the retrieving of it and returning it to Jonas Hamilton.

This time the data were exactly as I predicted: 'he' occurs far more often with 'cleverly' than 'she'; vice-versa for 'stupidly'.

Hurrah again! Erm, actually no. Sure, the data support my hypothesis but this evidence of gender inequality in Britain is downright depressing. Admittedly, as the BNC is several decades old it would be worth repeating the analysis using more recent data. So, this is one obvious next step for my research.

Language, Psychology and Society

For the field of (cognitive) linguistics the take-away message is twofold. First, we shouldn't only look to cognitive psychology for inspiration and explanation but also to social psychology. Second, insights developed by linguists, such as on gender (and also politeness), remain valuable as well – not only in explaining language use but also in revealing uncomfortable truths about power structures and other inequalities in society.

References

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