Lexical Representation of Fact and Opinion

Douglas J. Hermann\(^2,3\) and Lise S. Rubenfeld\(^2\)

Accepted May 3, 1984

This research investigated the lexical properties underlying comprehension that a word represents fact or opinion. In Experiment 1 subjects reliably identified words as either fact or opinion. Bivariate correlations and multiple regression showed that fact/opinion judgments were predicted primarily by ratings of the ease of verifiability of a word’s referent and secondarily by the word’s literalness, but not by several other lexical attributes: abstractness-concreteness, vagueness-preciseness, and evaluation. Experiment 2 extended the results of the first experiment to an implicit fact/opinion judgment, i.e., the identification of headlines as originating from a newspaper’s front page (presumably based primarily upon fact) or from the editorial page (presumably based upon opinion). The headline judgments, also made reliably by subjects, were predicted by the same variables found significant in the first experiment, i.e., by verifiability and literalness, but not by the other lexical properties. Thus, the results of both experiments indicate that the identification of a word as representing fact or opinion is rooted in a word’s verifiability and literalness.

Among its several uses, language may be used to refer to the world (Ogden & Richards, 1923; Lyons, 1977). Because referential statements may serve as an impetus to action (e.g., “the house is on fire,” “he is a murderer”), people indicate in statements their certainty that the reference can be substantiated. This may be done explicitly (e.g., “it is a fact that she is a thief” “it is my opinion that she is a thief”) or implicitly (e.g., “she is a thief,” “she is a bandit”). In recent years considerable attention has been paid to how certain words indicate the likelihood that an assertion of reference is correct (Austin, 1962; Bach & Harnish, 1979; Searle, 1969). Performative verbs (Clark & Clark, 1977, p. 26) convey

\(^1\)The authors thank Peter Barnard, Roger Chaffin, Leslie Levin, and Steve Zecker for their helpful comments during the writing of this manuscript.
\(^2\)Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.
\(^3\)Address all correspondence to Douglas Herrmann, Department of Psychology, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York 13323.
explicitly the confidence (e.g., guarantee, claim, believe, conjecture, doubt) that the speaker may have in an utterance. However, almost no work has examined how words implicitly convey the likelihood of substantiating referential claims. The present research had the purpose of elucidating some of the lexical properties by which words implicitly convey the credibility of referential assertions.

Differences in the credibility of referential assertions hinge on the distinction between fact and opinion (Fearnside & Hothes, 1959; Quine & Ullian, 1970). Expressions of fact are demonstrable, while expressions of opinion are not. When applied to words, fact words refer to objects, events, or entities that may be demonstrated (e.g., parent, felon), while opinion words convey that the view of an object, event, or entity may be found to be limited to the speaker (e.g., bum, creep).

The distinction between fact and opinion words is widely known. Philosophers distinguish between descriptive words that are capable of describing and evaluative words that are able to express our values (Wilson, 1967; Ashby, 1967). In the applied realm, advertising specialists take care to distinguish what language in advertisements stands for fact and what language stands for opinion (Schauer, 1978); indeed, Federal Trade Commission rulings require advertisements to make clear whether claims do or do not have a factual basis. In the law, the fact/opinion distinction has been found to be especially important, concerning judicial decisions generally (Moore, 1981) and libel cases particularly (Sack, 1980). As the United States Supreme Court ruled in Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc. in 1974, it is not only necessary that a statement be defamatory to be libelous but it also must be factually false (Kaplan, 1981). Offensive language that represents only opinion cannot be libelous since opinion is incapable of being proved true or false. To apply these principles, judges have become accustomed to identifying certain words as crucial to deciding whether a passage is libelous. If these key words are evaluated as representing fact, then the passage is potentially libelous (with the court’s final decision depending not only on the factual nature of a passage but also on intent, defamatory nature of words, and other factors). If the key words are evaluated as representing opinion only, then the passage is immune from being proved libelous. The courts make determinations about fact and opinion words with awareness that context may render a fact word opinion or an opinion word factual, and that whatever the context, a court’s judgment should agree with what the ordinary man or woman regards as fact or opinion.

Although the theoretical precedent for the fact/opinion distinction in philosophy is long-standing, going back to Aristotle (c. 300 B.C./1952), no work has attempted to link philosophic theory about the distinction to