

Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability

CAITLIN M. FAUSEY AND LERA BORODITSKY
Stanford University, Stanford, California

When bad things happen, how do we decide who is to blame and how much they should be punished? In the present studies, we examined whether subtly different linguistic descriptions of accidents influence how much people blame and punish those involved. In three studies, participants judged how much people involved in particular accidents should be blamed and how much they should have to pay for the resulting damage. The language used to describe the accidents differed subtly across conditions: Either agentive (transitive) or non-agentive (intransitive) verb forms were used. Agentive descriptions led participants to attribute more blame and request higher financial penalties than did nonagentive descriptions. Further, linguistic framing influenced judgments, even when participants reasoned about a well-known event, such as the “wardrobe malfunction” of Super Bowl 2004. Importantly, this effect of language held, even when people were able to see a video of the event. These results demonstrate that even when people have rich established knowledge and visual information about events, linguistic framing can shape event construal, with important real-world consequences. Subtle differences in linguistic descriptions can change how people construe what happened, attribute blame, and dole out punishment. Supplemental results and analyses may be downloaded from <http://pbr.psychonomic-journals.org/content/supplemental>.

When bad things happen, how do we decide who is to blame and how much they should be punished? Linguistic and contextual framing has been shown to affect people’s reasoning in a variety of domains (e.g., Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006; Levin, 1987; Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978; Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Shiv, Carmon, & Ariely, 2005; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1981), including causal attribution (see Pickering & Majid, 2007, for a recent review). In the present article, we build on this work by exploring the effects of linguistic framing in a domain of paramount real-world importance—blame and punishment.

Linguistic descriptions are of course ubiquitous in legal disputes. People linguistically frame incidents from the very moment they occur and later in police reports, legal statements, court testimony, and public discourse. Could the linguistic descriptions of an event influence how much we blame the people involved? Could language also influence how financially liable we think a person is for any resulting damage? Could linguistic framing shape construal even for well-known events (ones for which we already have rich knowledge and established mental representations) and even when we can witness the event with our own eyes?

The particular linguistic contrast of interest in the present article is between transitive agentive descriptions and intransitive nonagentive descriptions. A canonical agentive description (e.g., *Timberlake ripped the costume*) includes

a person as the subject in a transitive expression describing a change of state (in this case, ripping). A canonical nonagentive description (e.g., *The costume ripped*) is intransitive and does not place the person as the subject for the change-of-state event.¹ Previous work has shown that people are sensitive to this distinction between agentive and nonagentive frames. For example, people are more likely to remember the agent of an event when primed with agentive language than when primed with nonagentive language (e.g., Fausey, Long, Inamori, & Boroditsky, in press). The attributional consequences of these linguistic frames, however, are not well understood.

The linguistic contrast between agentive and nonagentive frames has the potential to have serious real-world consequences, especially in legal contexts. For example, in the 197,745 trials held between 1674 and 1913 at London’s central criminal court (Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 2009), cases with the agentive phrase “broke it” in the court records resulted in a guilty verdict more often than did cases with the nonagentive phrase “it broke” (76% and 70% guilty, respectively), with similar patterns for other consequential actions such as “burned it” versus “it burned” [77% and 57% guilty, respectively; $\chi^2(1, N = 2,748) = 11.04, p < .05$]. In the most serious of cases (when the charge was “killing”), the transitive/intransitive contrast as marked by different verbs also predicted verdicts. Saying “killed” resulted in more guilty verdicts than did saying “died” [65% and 56% guilty, respectively; $\chi^2(1,$

C. M. Fausey, cfausey@indiana.edu

$N = 3,814$) = 21.34, $p < .05$]. These examples suggest that agentivity may be part of a suite of linguistic cues that are influential in legal reasoning.

In a correlational analysis such as this, however, it is impossible to determine whether different linguistic forms actually caused a difference in verdicts. It could be that agentive descriptions indeed led the court more often to guilty verdicts. But it is also possible that people were simply more likely to use agentive language in cases in which the defendant was actually more guilty. Although the attributional consequences of transitivity have not been directly explored in the empirical literature, the question has been debated—and adjudicated—in court. For example, in a case petitioning to change the title of a ballot measure (California's high-profile Proposition 8 in the 2008 election titled "Eliminates right of same-sex couples to marry"), the judge rejected the petitioners' claim, ruling that "There is nothing inherently argumentative or prejudicial about transitive verbs" (*Jansson v. Bowen*, 2008). Few other questions in psycholinguistics have risen to a sufficient level of civic importance to be ruled on in high court.

With the high stakes of guilt, innocence, and the legality of constitutional amendments on the line, it is important to empirically establish whether agentive and nonagentive frames indeed have any attributional consequences. In the present article, we examine the effects of agentive and nonagentive linguistic frames on important real-world decisions about blame and punishment.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, participants read about an accidental restaurant fire that resulted in property damage. They then made judgments about the person involved in the accident. The

survey was one of many unrelated surveys in a packet presented to participants.

Method

Participants. In partial fulfillment of a course requirement, 236 Stanford University students (96 male; mean age = 19.22 years) completed one survey: 116 read the agentive and 120 read the non-agentive version of the story.

Materials. Participants read either the agentive or the nonagentive account about an individual (Mrs. Smith) who was involved in a restaurant fire. They then answered two questions (Table 1). The two accounts contain all of the same content words (all of the same nouns, verbs, and adjectives are used), involve the same individual, and describe the same outcomes. The accounts differ only in the frames used to describe the accidental events (underlined sections of Table 1): Transitive frames are used in the agentive account and intransitive frames in the nonagentive account.

Results and Discussion

Linguistic framing influenced people's judgments of both blame and financial liability. Participants who read the agentive account ($M = 4.83$, $SE = 0.14$) blamed Mrs. Smith more than did participants who read the non-agentive account ($M = 4.01$, $SE = 0.15$) [$t(234) = 4.04$, $p < .001$, $d = .53$]. A subtle difference in language caused a big difference in dollars: Participants who got the agentive report ruled that Mrs. Smith should pay \$247 (36%) more in fines ($M = \$935.17$, $SE = \$43.48$) than did participants who got the nonagentive report ($M = \$688.75$, $SE = \$43.64$) [$t(234) = 3.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$].

In Study 1, linguistic framing influenced people's judgments of financial liability. One explanation for this result could be that Mrs. Smith was punished more harshly because she had also been blamed more harshly. That is, the effect of language on financial liability might be indirect, such that language influences blame, which then determines punishment. Could language *directly* impact

Table 1
Studies 1 and 2, Reports and Questions

Agentive Report	Nonagentive Report
Mrs. Smith and her friends were finishing a lovely dinner at their favorite restaurant. After they settled the bill, they decided to head to a nearby café for coffee and dessert. Mrs. Smith followed her friends and as she stood up, <u>she flopped</u> her napkin on the centerpiece candle. <u>She had ignited</u> the napkin! As Mrs. Smith reached to grab the napkin, <u>she toppled</u> the candle and <u>ignited</u> the whole tablecloth too! As she jumped back, <u>she overturned</u> the table and <u>ignited</u> the carpet, as well. Hearing her desperate cries, the restaurant staff hurried over and heroically managed to put the fire out before anyone got hurt.	Mrs. Smith and her friends were finishing a lovely dinner at their favorite restaurant. After they settled the bill, they decided to head to a nearby café for coffee and dessert. Mrs. Smith followed her friends and as she stood up, her <u>napkin flopped</u> on the centerpiece candle. <u>The napkin had ignited!</u> As Mrs. Smith reached to grab the napkin, the <u>candle toppled</u> and the whole <u>tablecloth ignited</u> too! As she jumped back, the <u>table overturned</u> and the <u>carpet ignited</u> , as well. Hearing her desperate cries, the restaurant staff hurried over and heroically managed to put the fire out before anyone got hurt.
Questions for Study 1	
<i>Blame.</i> Mrs. Smith is discussing the damage with the restaurant. How much should she be blamed for the fire? (Likert scale from 1 to 7, anchored by <i>Not at all to blame</i> and <i>Completely to blame</i>)	
<i>Financial liability.</i> The restaurant's insurance policy does not cover minor fires. The restaurant has sought legal action to require Mrs. Smith to pay for the damage. Total costs to the restaurant were \$1,500. How much should Mrs. Smith be required to pay?	
Questions for Study 2	
<i>Financial liability.</i> The restaurant's insurance policy does not cover minor fires and so the restaurant has sought legal action to require Mrs. Smith to pay for the damage. An independent review panel used their standard blame assessment scale in reviewing this case. On this scale, 0 means <i>not at all to blame</i> and 8 means <i>completely to blame</i> . The panel gave Mrs. Smith a {1,4,7}. The total costs to the restaurant were \$1,500.	
How much should Mrs. Smith be required to pay?	