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Language Symmetry: A Force Behind Persuasion

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Abstract

Language operates according to rules. Rules mean prediction. The application of these language rules to persuasive campaigns through linguistic technology can result in major gains in advertising, political and marketing outcomes. For qualitative researchers in communications, marketing and messaging, one area of persuasive language technology can be found in the linguistic feature of symmetry. Language has many forms of symmetry, and most persuaders are unaware that a great deal of persuasion depends upon symmetrical message structures. In persuasion, a mirror image or symmetrical reflection of an attitude or opinion is more persuasive than a random or non-symmetrical message or idea. Reading the subtle features of language to create symmetrical responses can create extraordinarily successful results for research and applied persuasive efforts ranging from single interviews to mass marketing campaigns.

Keywords

Linguistic Research, Linguistic Symmetry, Decision Prototyping, Motivation and Decision Grammar, Predictive Motivational Profiling, Persuasive Communications, Qualitative Research

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Language Symmetry: A Force Behind Persuasion

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Language operates according to rules. Rules mean prediction. The application of these language rules to persuasive campaigns through linguistic technology can result in major gains in advertising, political and marketing outcomes. For qualitative researchers in communications, marketing and messaging, one area of persuasive language technology can be found in the linguistic feature of symmetry. Language has many forms of symmetry, and most persuaders are unaware that a great deal of persuasion depends upon symmetrical message structures. In persuasion, a mirror image or symmetrical reflection of an attitude or opinion is more persuasive than a random or non-symmetrical message or idea. Reading the subtle features of language to create symmetrical responses can create extraordinarily successful results for research and applied persuasive efforts ranging from single interviews to mass marketing campaigns. Key Words: Linguistic Research, Linguistic Symmetry, Decision Prototyping, Motivation and Decision Grammar, Predictive Motivational Profiling, Persuasive Communications, Qualitative Research.

Persuasion implies the simple presumption that someone wants to change the mind of someone else. Persuasion in this sense applies to individuals, groups, organizations and national populations (Yeager & Sommer, 2005). To change minds, the researcher and persuader employs mechanisms that are largely language phenomena (e.g., words, symbols, imagery, and emotion). Pursuing the goal of persuasion applies communications techniques that belong to the larger topic of linguistic decision making structures. To change a mind, for example, from Brand X to Brand Y routinely involves the use of symmetry in message structure, such as the use of isomorphic analogs (Yeager, 2003).

Multilayered Language

The larger framework of persuasion, used routinely in the pragmatic circles of marketing, medicine and law enforcement, is the tri-partite model of motive, opportunity and means. This model is also known as the “M.O.M. Model” (Yeager, 2003, p. 132; Sills, 2007). No behavior can occur without engaging all three components of this long-established behavioral model. To understand how symmetry in persuasive communication fits into this larger framework, we will first observe that language is multilayered, as shown by Hayakawa (1990). Inherent motivation and decision grammar are dynamic features of language and serve as a technology to predict and change behavior (Yeager, 2003). Hayakawa’s hierarchy, his famous “Ladder of Abstraction” is one example of this (Hayakawa, 1990, p. 85).

To illustrate Hayakawa (1990), take a simple sentence, such as: “Liam wants a chocolate ice cream cone.” A thought is a linguistic machine, in that a simple sentence

implies a system, i.e., a hierarchy of language features in descending order. In this example we have a situation, a person named Liam as a component in that situation, and recognition that Liam has a role in the situation. There are also a motive and a criterion defining his goal. Liam's state of mind, as expressed in language, represents a linguistic system expressing a complete thought. These are examples of clear, discernable components and nested layers inherent in conversational language that can be parsed for their meaning similar to the techniques grade-school children learn in grammar class (Yeager & Sommer, 2005).

For such components to matter, for there to be meaning, communicating requires reciprocity of symbols, shared ideas. My drawing of a cat must look enough like your conception of a cat for mutual understanding. In short, we can reasonably assume that for persuasive communication to be effective, we must reciprocate or "echo" one another's common words and phrases. In verbal terms, the reciprocals can manifest in the form of antonyms (Dilts & Yeager, 1990). Otherwise, communication doesn't occur, and attitudes are not impacted for effective, persuasive change. Like two sides of a coin or the ancient yang-yin symbol, one idea contains its reciprocal, i.e., its symmetrical opposite.

Symmetry in language plays a significant role in any effort to change the choices made by people. When people look in a mirror, they expect to see their own image, not something alien that resembles a distorted, fun-house mirror. Looking in a mirror elicits recognition *if* the image symmetrically reflects a person's expectations. Similarly, persuasive messages must also elicit a sense of recognition.

When people cope with reality to solve everyday problems, they expect their perceptions of reality to match their presumptions (i.e., predictions) of what they will encounter (Yeager & Sommer, 2005). By analogy, people are motivated and make decisions in a manner similar to a submarine commander who uses sonar to find his way underwater. By sending out "pings" of sound, the returning echo of what is really "out there" guides the commander's decisions. Language organizes our "pings" and expectations of the returning echo in terms of success or failure at finding our way through the many decisions of any given day.

Parallels

In fact, the necessity for symmetry in communication is true not only in our current context but ranges across all fields of scientific research and application. Astronomy, offers an example. Here's something from a 2007 article on string theory published in the journal *Astronomy*:

Without a logical framework in which to pose and answer our questions, our inquiries into the fundamental aspects of the physical world would devolve into semantic quibbles. (Odenwald, 2007, p. 34)

So, what is implied by a "logical framework"? The answer, in essence, is linguistic *symmetry*. Language organizes perceptions of reality. For example, if you live in Vermont in the winter, cold might often be on your mind. Should an enterprising real estate broker approach you with an offer for a home in warm Florida, you could be inclined to welcome the thought. Warm and cold are symmetrical opposites (i.e.,

antonyms). Antonyms are one kind of language structure, and thoughts form in terms of the structure that our language allows (Whorf, 1956; Yeager, 2003). The sales professional knows that if you don't like cold, then warm is fertile territory to explore in order to make a sale.

For persuasion—indeed for all communication—there must be recognizable connections between organizational language features and what is perceived as ‘true’ or ‘real.’ In Hayakawa’s terms, the abstractions must be linguistically related to their real-world referents in the same way that a map must accurately represent the road ahead (Hayakawa, 1990). It is time now for our astronomy example to do double duty. We can do some simple word substitution, and what we have now is

Without a logical framework in which to pose and answer our questions, our inquiries into the fundamental aspects of the [linguistic] world would devolve into semantic quibbles. (Odenwald, 2007, p. 34)

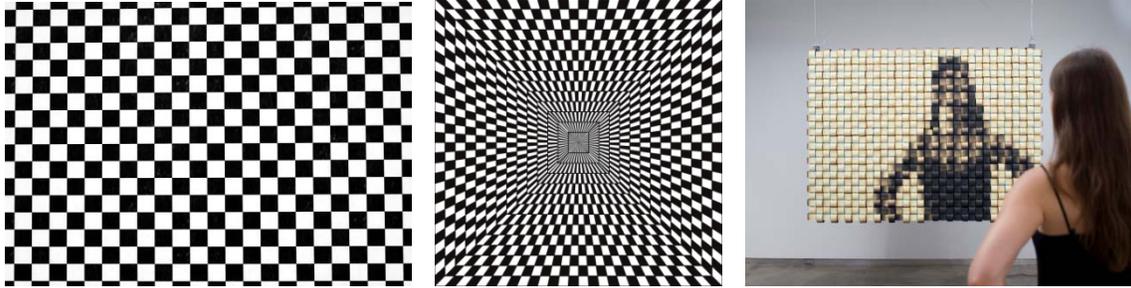
With this one change, we have not only changed what we are talking about (from physics to linguistics), we have also demonstrated a very key concept for the application of symmetry to persuasive communication. We have laddered upward or “chunked up” one level of abstraction. We have also revealed that the semantic structure of our base sentence can be a template of sorts to make this same point.

This illustrates that the language feature of *symmetry* operates across many disciplines. In other words, we have gone from talking about physics (or linguistics) to talking about analogous frames in other disciplines. This is in a very real sense an abstraction, Hayakawa-style, of our beginning topic. To push the point a bit further, The Teaching Company in the journal *Astronomy* advertises a course of instruction in calculus that makes this observation:

Formulas are important, certainly, but the course [in calculus] takes the approach that every equation is in fact also a sentence that can be understood, and solved, in English. (Teaching Company, 2007, p. 8)

Reflections

In sum, even math and English are analogous. Analogous frames are a central feature in persuasive communication. They are the logical frameworks or symmetrical connections that link the would-be persuader and his or her audience. Persuaders should ask, for example, “Does our message or message strategy reflect the audience’s reality, or distort it?” This is a vital question in many disciplines, particularly in fields like politics and marketing that are driven by audience persuasion.



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If people don't see their own image reflected in the mirror, they perceive a "disconnect" between expectation and the experience. They will not be persuaded. This happens, for instance, when an advertising or political message does not reflect a person's expectations for a personally persuasive map. Such advertising and political messages are constructed out of many components, and the crucial requirement for success of any message depends on the individual's expectation to find his or her own image in the message. If we do not see ourselves, in other words, we are not going to be persuaded—and if the message is sufficiently incongruent or asymmetrical, we are likely to be "turned off" to the degree that we may even turn off the television or radio that is broadcasting the message.

Antonyms and Synonyms

In our previous work (Yeager, 2003) we have identified some relevant concepts that need to be revisited in the context of symmetry:

- Linguistic and decision research demonstrate that "tacit," i.e., unconscious, aspects of decision making are the primary drivers behind choices of any kind.
- Changing people's attitudes, opinions, choices, preferences, priorities, decisions, beliefs and brands all depends on a hidden, tacit, mechanism of language, i.e., the interactions between conscious versus its opposite intuitive, tacit, mind-sets.

In persuasive communication, that self image that the audience responds to is multi-layered (Yeager, 2003, p. 131). When potential customers (including voters) say, "No, I don't want your product," they do so by simply not buying the product. That decision, however, involves a complex system of hidden drivers that sort for preference through the mechanism of symmetry. A *change* of preference, therefore, must involve the acceptance of a new, alternative, symmetrical framework.

Every marketer, politician and advertiser wants the customer or voter to say: "Yes, I want your product." So how does such persuasive communication happen? What is at play when a change of preference, the acceptance of a new symmetrical framework, actually happens? Going from "No" to "Yes" involves the hidden force of antonyms, i.e., *word opposites*, and this antonym/synonym pairing is the essence of complex symmetrical frameworks that represent a major feature in the persuasive process.

It goes without saying that a major feature of language is words. Dictionaries collect words representing the eight parts of speech. All of them are collected at once under one cover. Webster's Dictionary has no commercially viable competition from dictionaries of nouns, or dictionaries of pronouns, verbs, prepositions, or any other part of speech. In contrast, dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms are in common use. There is a reason for that. Antonyms and synonyms play a major role in thinking, motives, decisions, choice, persuasion, influence and communications.

People think with language (Chomsky, 1968). If you change the language, you change the subsequent choice. Like the Asian yang-yin symbol of opposites, languages often organize around word combinations such as antonyms and synonyms. Early childhood education makes much of the distinction. Children are shown a list of animals such as ponies, puppies and kittens and, perhaps, an insect. Then the children are asked: "Which one doesn't belong?" The children are learning a fundamental aspect of thinking: similarities and differences.

For advertisers, in particular, words that occur in pairs play an important role in thinking, motivation, decisions and choice. Warm vs. cold, smooth vs. rough, and broad vs. narrow illustrate examples of antonyms. Antonyms represent types of underlying words that serve to drive everyday behavior and choices that everyone makes.

Synonyms are words with subtle differences. For instance, *persuade*, *influence*, *proactive* and *driven* are synonyms with slight differences in meaning. Synonyms and antonyms both represent differences in word meaning. Antonyms show opposite meanings while synonyms show subtle differences in meaning. Advertisers need to concentrate on both when searching for persuasive ad copy, and politicians routinely use synonyms to deflect a political storm. For example, when the "estate" tax was relabeled the "death" tax, the Internal Revenue Service had to change its rules because people were appalled that they had to pay to die.

The world of advertising is well suited to this discussion about word choice. Persuasive elements in any ad may suggest thousands of potential combinations of those elements – assuming those are the right decision making components to manage. Only a few elements will match the mindset of the customer. Persuasive situations call for pointing out significant or subtle differences in ad copy to fit the customer mind set or to counteract the competition's brand message. The symmetry of antonyms and synonyms rise to the top of any communication expert's priorities when change of choice is the intended effect of persuasion and influence. For instance:

- My product is as different from the competition as night and day.
- My product has a subtle difference that makes the best choice obvious.

The symmetry of antonyms and synonyms rises to the top of any expert's priorities when change of choice is the intended effect of persuasion and influence. These experts in communication persuade or influence individuals, groups or populations in many settings. Those settings vary from interviews, discussions, groups, focus groups, political audiences, child-rearing and psychotherapy, public speaking, to executive coaching, advertising and marketing. The common denominator for all populations and settings is symmetry.

Antonyms and synonyms act like the unseen portions of an iceberg in that antonyms and synonyms serve their roles invisibly. Synonyms, alongside antonyms, serve a parallel role in the organization of language that is hidden behind everyday decision making. Word pairs are only one phenomenon of the richly textured phenomenon of language. Language has many characteristics: imagery, grammar, alphabets, words, phrases, slang, syntax, semantics, sentences, accents, pronunciation, and many more. Many such characteristics must be symmetrically matched for persuasion to occur.

Persuasive Language

There is no such thing as an average customer, voter or executive. When the profiles of an aggregated market segment change, it is *not* the profile that has changed. The group profile only reflects the changes of thousands or millions of individuals. People change one-by-one, not as a group or market segment.

A change of mind, or personal habit, occurs often in the subjective, personal world. Changes might be about brands, moods, friends, favorite movies and more. A change of mind is an individually controlled, deliberate, linguistic mechanism, not a probability (Yeager & Sommer, 2005). But most of the process is outside of the individual's awareness.

Changing a choice of brand occurs often in the commercial world. But how does a marketer or advertiser go about changing the minds of people? Ad copy in print, TV, a cell phone or on-line media calls for a reliable and valid talent few possess. Of the thousands of ways a product might be made sexy, only a few will work. The advantage goes to the advertiser with a sure and certain method of defining the winning ad copy parameters to match the customer's buying game. This is symmetry at work in the real world of persuasion.

When persuaders want to change the minds of their target audience of one person or many people, often they are implicitly seeking a change of antonym, the opposite of the controlling half of the symmetry within their target audience. In square dancing that reversal of a brand change (a disloyal customer coming back to your own brand) is called a do-si-do. This square dancing movement happens when two dancers approach each other and circle back to back, then return to their original positions.

A change of mind is a system of language events that depends, in part, on effective messaging adaptation to feedforward (a version of imaginative foresight) and to feedback:

- Feedforward: Imagine having a clean, close shave.
- Feedback: Then feel the smooth skin of a perfect shave.

An implicit feature of advertising and persuasion uses feedback and feedforward to modify people's preferences for any given product or brand. Blocked feedback, or blocked feedforward, amounts to resistance, a failure. The ad, as feedback, hasn't overcome blind-resistance to the ad's initiatives—or the feedforward has not overcome an unimagined payoff that could be of interest to a customer.

Feedback is a common word in daily use. Feedforward is less often mentioned in routine verbal and written behavior, although it is a well-known term among systems analysts. Feedforward might be usefully characterized as expectations, imagination or anticipation of future outcomes in the context at hand. In other words, feedforward is a prediction, and feedback is a reaction (or not) to actual events. As stated in the definition from Wiktionary, “an anticipatory response to expected changes in the environment of a system; to respond in advance” (Feedforward, n.d.).

If feedforward is unsatisfactory, then people normally would respond to feedback suggesting that a change in choices might be more satisfying. Yet often people do not change for a simple reason: habit. Changes in habit can be notoriously difficult to accomplish. What is required of persuaders who wish, for example, to prevent teenagers keeping the majority of their body parts un-pierced or un-tattooed? What is required to get consumers to change a brand preference? Again, this is hard sledding for most would-be persuaders.

People may use feedback judiciously (or not) to manage their choices. Much depends on how well the expert persuader manages the antonyms—one half of which represents the blindspot where the resistance resides. If a certain popular cereal represents health, for example, then selling a competing cereal that customers believe is harmful will prove impossible...unless the practitioner knows how to convert an antonym into its opposite.

The persuasive analog approach. Below is an example of persuasion that seems deceptively simple but touches on the hidden agendas in customer logic. In this example from the pharmaceutical world, we are asking our target audience (doctors) the following question: "Doctor, what do you want in an anti-coagulant?"

There is a finite set of possible ways that this question can be answered from a linguistic and structural standpoint. One of the variables we look for is the *type* of motivation within the target audience. For instance, here are two sample answers we might obtain from two different individuals. Each answer has its own requirements for a persuasive response. The answers are abbreviated for the sake of illustration:

Individual A: “I want an anti-coagulant that is safer than others.”

Individual B: “I don’t want complications.”

There are several ways to extract meaningful data from the *structure* of their responses, not just the content. Let's consider the obvious one:

- The individual “A” is expressing a *goal* that they *want*. The persuasive response would be framed in terms of what the audience wants.
- The individual “B” is expressing a *problem* they *want to avoid*. The persuasive response would be framed in terms of what the audience does not want.

This is a very important and clear distinction that we can identify from the structure of a target audience’s responses that gives us insight about their thinking on an unconscious

level. This thought structure is one of many unconscious motivational patterns of a target audience (i.e., toward *a goal*, or away from *a problem*).

We know that *attaining* what they want, or *avoiding* what they don't want, is an important component of a target audience's unconscious decision making strategy for any given context. It is equally possible that the majority of respondents in a survey could cluster around either direction of attaining a goal or avoiding a problem:

- Should the trend be strongly toward a goal, persuasive symmetry would require emphasizing in their marketing, advertising, or sales materials those goals that the target audience would *gain, achieve, attain*, etc., by using their product.
- Should the majority of the respondents cluster in the negative frame of reference (avoiding problems), persuasive symmetry would require using language that emphasizes whatever problems are *avoided* by using the product.

A marketing approach that illustrates this identical unconscious motivational pattern in messages and campaigns involves the well known mouthwash brands of Scope (*Toward* fresh breath) and Listerine (*Away From* bad breath). Eventually, both brands tried to capture both sides of this motivational pattern by using both sides of the symmetrical language pattern on multiple market segments.

The toward/away pattern illustrates one of many unconscious motivational patterns that can be identified from the decision strategy of any given target audience. Knowing the entire decision making strategy of your target audience, including all of their unconscious motivational patterns, would be necessary to ensure the degree of symmetry necessary for persuasion. Having the entire decision strategy always illustrates the major priorities among the hundreds of moving parts within a choice that takes only a heartbeat to decide. A persuader's reciprocal change strategy must be symmetrical to the major priorities of the target audience's decision strategy for change to occur.

Conclusion

Symmetry, as a feature of persuasive communication, involves a matching strategy. Once the target audience's profile has been defined, moving the mind's opinions, preferences, biases or beliefs requires the construction of an equivalent, symmetrical idea. Language has inherent organizing features that affect practical efforts such as persuasive campaigns in business, politics and geopolitics. Explicit understanding of selected language features enhances persuasive results. Language symmetry stands as one of the useful features that professional persuaders and communicators can use to good effect.

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*DABPS: Diplomate American Board of Psychological Specialists

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