



# How seemingly innocuous words can bias judgment: Semantic prosody and impression formation<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Semantic prosody  
Impression formation  
Social cognition  
Judgment  
Language

## ABSTRACT

Would we think more negatively of a person who *caused* rather than *produced* an outcome or who is described as *utterly* rather than *totally* unconventional? While these word choices may appear to be trivial, *cause* and *utterly* occur more frequently in a negative context in natural language use than *produced* or *totally*, even though these words do not have an explicit valenced meaning. Words that are primarily used in a valenced context are said to have semantic prosody. Five studies show that semantically-prosodic descriptors affect the impressions formed of others. These effects occur even in situations where perceivers are likely to be skeptical of messages, and they impact behavioral intentions toward targets. An *utterly* changed person was perceived as less warm and competent than a *totally* changed person (Study 1), and people held more negative impressions of an *utterly* rather than *totally* unconventional boss (Study 2). People had stronger intentions to vote for a political candidate who *produced* budget changes over one who *caused* them (Study 3) and preferred a bank that *lends* money (a word with positive semantic prosody) over a bank that *loans* money (Study 4). Finally, participants had more (less) romantic interest in potential dating partners with Tinder profiles that utilized words with positive (negative) semantic prosody (Study 5). We conclude that semantically prosodic descriptors that lack a clear positive or negative meaning still lead people to infer the valence of what is to come, which colors the impressions they form of others.

## 1. Introduction

If we read that Susan is *friendly* and that Bob is *aggressive*, we will form a more positive impression of Susan than of Bob. Person descriptors such as these have a clear positive or negative valence and are seen as similar to other words of similar valence (Bradley & Lang, 1999; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Warriner, Kuperman, & Brysbaert, 2013). Such person descriptors guide interpretation and influence evaluative impressions of others (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Kelley, 1973; Srull & Wyer, 1979).

However, if we read that Susan *lends* something and Bob *causes* an outcome, would we similarly arrive at a more positive impression of Susan than of Bob? These seemingly innocuous words have no clear valence in themselves, independent of what is being lent or caused. Do they nevertheless have the power to shift our impressions of these actors? This is what the current research assesses.

### 1.1. Language and person impressions

Social cognition has long examined how descriptors impact person perception. Generally, positive/negative person descriptors result in positive/negative impressions (D'Andrade, 1974; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kelley, 1973; for a review of descriptors in stereotyping, see Hamilton & Sherman, 1989). For instance, Asch (1946) found that inserting the positive trait *warm* (vs the negative trait *cold*) into a personality description resulted in more positive person impressions and more positive interpretations of other traits. Person impressions are also affected when person descriptors are rendered accessible in prior unrelated tasks (Higgins et al., 1977). For instance, prior activation of the positive trait *assertive* (vs the negative trait *aggressive*) in a sentence-unscrambling task created more positive impressions of a character named Donald who performs many ambiguous behaviors (such as refusing to pay his rent until his landlord repays his apartment; Srull & Wyer, 1979). The meaning behind person descriptors impacts the impressions we form. In such cases, the descriptor has an explicitly valenced meaning that is widely shared among language users and

<sup>☆</sup> Author notes: We wish to thank Isabel Saville and Jenna Manske for braving the world of Tinder in order to help us develop the materials for Study 5 and the PR lab for their helpful comments. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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usually is part of the lexical entry for the term.

However, word meaning has social components that go beyond what finds entry into the lexicon. The meaning of words and constructions is learned from interactions with other language speakers and is socially-constructed from how that word is used (Ellis, O'Donnell, & Römer, 2015; Hoey, 2005; Kilgarriff, 1997). Words that serve as person descriptors may therefore have meanings that are not entirely obvious, and these seemingly innocuous words may subtly influence impressions of other persons.

### 1.2. Semantic prosody

While many character traits are clearly positive or negative, words such as *lend* or *cause* have affective attributes that are less clear and explicit. These words have semantic prosody, which describes that they occur in a valenced context in natural language use, even though the words themselves do not have an inherent valenced meaning (Sinclair, 1991). For instance, while most people see *cause* as neutral in valence, the things that are caused within everyday discourse are overwhelmingly negative. The most frequent noun collocates within four words to the right of *cause* are death, problems, damage, pain, cancer, trouble, concern, disease, effect, harm (Davies, 2008; Stubbs, 1995). And while most people see *lend* as something neutral, the most common things that are lent are positive in valence. The most frequent noun collocates within four words to the right of *lend* are money, support, hand, credence, credibility, name, air, legitimacy, institutions, voice (Davies, 2008). While comprehensive lists of words with semantic prosody are missing, some words with semantic prosody have been documented in numerous languages (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001; Xiao & McEneaney, 2006).

A word's context is a key part of its representation. Context creates meaning for concepts that goes beyond lexical definitions and even explicit knowledge (Casasanto & Lupyan, 2015; Elman, 2011; Hoey, 2005). Hence, a word's co-occurrence with a predominantly positive or negative context may foster subtle associative meaning. This may serve adaptive purposes, such as assisting with reading comprehension by helping people predict the valence of adjacent concepts (Hoey, 2005). But it may also color such words with subtle affective tones (Louw, 1993; Sinclair, 1991), which may, in turn, guide global evaluations of other persons.

While semantic prosody may seem obvious to those concerned with how words are typically used (such as learners and teachers of second languages, Xiao & McEneaney, 2006), it may seem less obvious to casual language users (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 1995). Empirical evidence of the effects of semantic prosody on inferences is mostly lacking, but initial evidence suggests that semantic prosody can guide evaluative inferences (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016). Although participants see some words with semantic prosody (such as *cause*) as being neutral in valence and synonymous with non-semantic prosodic words (like *produce*), they nevertheless infer that *caused* outcomes are more negative than *produced* outcomes over a variety of domains. For example, participants are more likely to infer that “endocrination of abdominal lipid tissue,” a fictional medical outcome, is negative when it is *caused* rather than *produced* (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016, Studies 1a and 1b). Because words with semantic prosody lead people to infer the valence of what is to come, these words color ambiguous concepts with evaluative meaning.

### 1.3. Semantic prosody and person impressions

While prior research has shown that semantic prosody affects evaluative judgments, the extent of such effects is relatively unknown. To our knowledge, our prior work (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016) is the first investigation into the effects of semantic prosody on judgments. This prior work established that semantically-prosodic words can influence the evaluation of ambiguous events, but left many questions regarding the underlying processes and the robustness of the phenomenon

unanswered.

For instance, some might wonder whether semantically-prosodic terms influence judgment because of norms of everyday discourse, described by Grice (1975). A maxim of relevance stipulates that communicators provide only information that is relevant to the conversation and listeners interpret utterances accordingly. In research settings, this maxim can render minor aspects of question wording or scale design “relevant” in unanticipated ways (for reviews, see Schwarz, 1994, 1996). In our prior studies, we provided participants with sentences that did or did not contain semantically-prosodic words and asked them to make evaluative judgments about elements of the sentence. This renders the particular elements highly salient and participants may have attended to, and reacted to, semantically-prosodic words because the norm of relevance dictates that they do so. If so, semantically-prosodic words may have little influence when they are less focal.

Person impressions offer an avenue for addressing this issue. People are often hesitant to make judgments about others in experimental contexts when they feel they lack diagnostic information (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994). Because semantically-prosodic words, such as the word *cause*, lack clear valenced meanings (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 1995), they should not affect evaluation unless they bring valenced information to mind. If such words do have subtle social influence, they should color evaluations of other persons and potentially even affect behavioral intentions relevant to person impression.

Five studies suggest that semantically prosodic descriptors have subtle social influence. Pilot studies and previous research identify words with semantic prosody that are seen as neutral in valence and similar to synonyms with no semantic prosody. Five experiments show that impressions of other persons and entities are more negative (positive) when they are described by words with negative (positive) semantic prosody. These effects on global evaluative impressions appear for generic others (Study 1), managers (Study 2), political candidates (Study 3), brands (Study 4), and even potential dating partners on Tinder (Study 5). Semantically prosodic descriptors also affect behavioral intentions (Studies 3 and 5) and affect impressions of persons in situations where perceivers are likely skeptical of the information (Studies 4 and 5). Overall, semantic prosody exhibits generalized effects across different words (nine stimuli words in total), parts of speech (adverbs in Studies 1 & 2 and verbs in Studies 3, 4, and 5), and valence (positive and negative semantic prosody). Semantically prosodic descriptors that lack a clear positive or negative meaning still lead people to infer the valence of what is to come, which colors the impressions they form of others.

## 2. Methodological overview

All study protocols were determined to be exempt from review by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB). Respondents provided informed consent at the start of each study and were debriefed upon completion. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions, and studies that were run in this line of research. Sample sizes were determined prior to data collection as detailed in each study. Data and materials for all studies can be found at <https://osf.io/f2atn>.

### 2.1. Study 1

In Study 1, we investigate whether a semantically-prosodic adverb can affect global evaluative impressions of a target person. Participants read a description of an unknown man that described him as being *utterly* or *totally* changed. Pilot testing established that participants see the adverbs *utterly* and *totally* as being synonymous. However, the adverb *utterly* has negative semantic prosody and predominantly appears in negative contexts; its most common collocates are helpless, useless, unable, forgotten, failed, ruined, destroyed, changed, different, pleasant, clear (Davies, 2008). In contrast, the adverb *totally* is equally

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