

Language and persuasion: Tag questions as powerless speech or as interpreted in context [☆]

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Abstract

Research in impression formation and persuasion has considered use of tag questions as part of a powerless speech style. However, little research has examined how contextual factors, such as characteristics of the communicator, moderates whether tag questions act “powerless”. The present study manipulated source credibility, tag question use, and argument quality. When the source was low in credibility, tag question use decreased persuasion and biased message processing relative to a control message. However, when the source was credible, tag questions increased message processing in a relatively objective manner. Therefore, it appears that tag questions can have different effects on information processing, depending on who uses the tag questions.

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When people attend to a message meant to persuade them, they can pay attention to various aspects of the message, such as the content or length, or to factors such as the gender or race of the communicator, or the linguistic cues provided by the communicator. This last aspect is the focus of the present research. People are judged by not only what they communicate, but also how they communicate it (Ng & Bradac, 1993). People can intentionally and unintentionally employ a linguistic style that perceivers use in forming impressions and attitudes (Goffman, 1959). One’s linguistic style can be so important that it not only affects the persuasiveness of an appeal, but also may be considered a defining feature of the person presenting the appeal (Holtgraves, 2001). For example, how fast one speaks (i.e., speech rate) affects how the communicator is perceived by the audience: those with a fast speech rate are perceived as more credible,

knowledgeable, and trustworthy than those with a slow speech rate (Miller, Maruyama, Beaber, & Valone, 1976), which often leads to the message being more persuasive. However, subsequent research has found the understanding of this particular style and its effects are less than straightforward (e.g., Smith & Shaffer, 1995).

Whereas speaking quickly has often been associated with positive perceptions of the source, using tag questions (i.e., short phrases in the form of a question that are attached to the end of a statement; e.g., don’t you think?; Areni, 2003) has often been associated with negative perceptions of the source. Use of tag questions can result in negative perceptions of the speaker’s sociability, credibility, and trustworthiness (Hosman, 1989), as well as decreased persuasion (Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999). In fact, Ng and Bradac (1993) have asserted that tag questions are one of the three most commonly used markers of powerlessness, along with hesitations (e.g., ...um...) and hedges (e.g., sort of). To this end, messages constructed by researchers to represent the powerless style often contain tag questions.

Although most studies suggest that individuals who use tag questions are perceived as powerless and less assertive,

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some literature suggests that there are situations in which tag questions are used by people in powerful positions. For example, powerful people (e.g., doctors, lawyers) may use tag questions to control the message recipient or to elicit information. Harres (1998) found that tag question use by medical practitioners effectively elicited information from the patient, summarized and confirmed information, and expressed empathy and feedback. Harris (1984) examined audiotapes of court trials and found that members of the court (e.g., judge, clerk, attorneys) were more likely to use tag questions than defendants, perhaps to summarize and confirm information and to demonstrate control over others. This use of tag questions is in direct contradiction to the perception of powerlessness when people of lower status use tag questions.

It thus appears that certain contexts (e.g., type of the source) may influence the way in which tag questions are used and perceived, which may in turn affect the persuasiveness of the communication. Tag questions may emphasize to people receiving the message from a noncredible source that the person is not knowledgeable and may lack confidence or certainty that the message is correct. In fact, Lakoff (1975) identified tag questions as linguistic tools used to soften the impact of assertions and to express uncertainty, which may serve to undermine the effectiveness of a message by making message recipients question the veracity of the claims. However, when message recipients consider why a credible source uses a tag question, lack of confidence is not a likely assessment. Instead, because the person presumably knows what she/he is talking about, the message recipient is reminded of the source's credibility and perceives the tag question as anticipating an affirmative "answer" from the message recipient. To be able to "answer" the tag question posed by a credible source, the person scrutinizes the information to a greater degree, answering in the affirmative when arguments are strong, and only refusing to do so when the arguments are weak.

Previous research has not specifically addressed the role of credibility in the persuasive effectiveness of tag questions. In an attempt to show that tag questions are indeed perceived as a cue to powerlessness, most studies have used either a source low in credibility or power (Bradac & Mulac, 1984) or sources where no information regarding credibility is provided (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). No experimental work compares the persuasive effectiveness of tag questions when used by a credible versus a noncredible source.

If source credibility moderates the impact of tag questions in persuasion, what process(es) underlie these effects? The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) proposes that persuasion can occur in a number of ways. An important component of the ELM is that a variable can affect persuasion in different ways as a function of the message recipient's amount of motivation and ability to think carefully about the message topic. When motivation and ability is low, variables can be persuasive by acting as a peripheral cue (i.e., by changing attitudes via a simple heuristic or association that requires little thought). When motiva-

tion and ability are high, variables can affect persuasion through more thoughtful processes (i.e., by acting as an argument, a piece of information relevant to the merits of the communication, or by biasing processing, whereby the variable influences motivation or ability to think of the attitude object in a positive or negative way). Finally, when motivation and ability are not constrained to be high or low, variables can influence the amount of information processing by increasing or decreasing the overall amount of motivation or ability to think carefully (for a review of multiple roles for variables, see Petty & Wegener, 1998).

Under conditions of low motivation and ability, tag question use has acted as a cue by affecting attitudes without thought (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). The current work focuses on situations in which motivation and ability are not constrained to be high or low, so effects on the amount of processing are more likely (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Two types of effects were of interest. First, we examined the possible moderating role of source credibility on the persuasive effects of tag questions. Much research is consistent with the hypothesis that tag questions from a low credibility speaker lead to negative perceptions of the speaker and decreased persuasion. However, only indirect evidence exists for the possibility that tag questions used by a credible source may lead to something other than negative speaker perceptions and decreased persuasion. Thus, this study attempted to demonstrate contexts when tag questions might not be construed as "powerless." Second, the research was designed to determine what processes underlie the interaction between tag questions and source credibility. We expected that credibility may affect how a message containing tag questions is processed. A manipulation of argument quality in the design may allow us to examine whether positive and negative influences of tag questions (for high and low credibility sources, respectively) are a result of different levels of processing when tag questions are present versus absent (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

A source lacking in credibility using tag questions should be less persuasive than one not using tag questions. In past research, when noncredible sources use tag questions, there are perceived more negatively (Hosman, 1989). These negative perceptions could influence persuasion in a number of ways, depending on the level of information processing given to the appeal. If processing with no tag questions is relatively high, negative persuasive effects of tag questions could be due to negative biases in processing (which would decrease persuasive effects of both strong and weak arguments) or to decreases in amount of processing (which would especially decrease the persuasive effects of strong arguments). If the level of processing with no tag questions is relatively low, negative perceptions of the source could further decrease cue value of the source.

We also expected that tag questions used by a credible source would increase processing. If tag questions are viewed not as signs of uncertainty (as they are for noncredible sources) but rather as signs of certainty, almost as a challenge to find anything wrong with one's argument, then tag ques-

tions used by credible sources should encourage message recipients to scrutinize the quality of the sources arguments. Both when sources are credible and noncredible and when effects of tag questions occur with high levels of thought, the relationship between participants' attitudes toward the proposal and cognitive responses (a common index of elaboration; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981) should be significant, but not in the no tag question conditions when amount of information processing is lower. Thus, source credibility and tag questions may have important implications not only for the degree of persuasion, but also for which route leads to persuasion.

Method

Participants and design

Hundred and fifty four introductory psychology students participated in a 2 (Credibility: low versus high) \times 2 (Language: no tag questions versus tag questions) \times 2 (Argument Quality: weak versus strong) completely crossed between-participants design.

Procedure

Participants were told that each year the Psychology Department assists the Department of Communication in evaluating editorials that are sent in by other universities, and their task would be to rate the quality of the editorials. Participants then read some introductory remarks about the editorial, and then read the message. In the introductory remarks, participants read a brief description of a person who was advocating comprehensive final exams for seniors in all majors as a graduation requirement. After reading the editorial, participants completed the dependent measures.

Manipulated variables

Credibility

Half of the participants were told that the message was written by a high school student who lived in the same town as the university where the exams were to be implemented, whereas the other half were told that the message was written by the Dean of the university where the policy was to be implemented. This type of manipulation has been used in previous studies testing effects of credibility on persuasion (Allyn & Festinger, 1961; Baron, Baron, & Miller, 1973).

Argument quality

Messages contained either three major arguments that were logically sound, defensible, and compelling (i.e., strong arguments) or that were open to challenge and easy to refute (i.e., weak arguments). The strong arguments were selected from a pool that elicited primarily favorable thoughts in a pretest, and the weak arguments were selected from a pool that elicited mainly counterarguments in a pretest (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, for example arguments).

Language

Two versions of the strong and weak argument-based messages were constructed. The control version of the message contained no tag questions in the message, whereas the tag question version contained five tag questions (e.g., right?, isn't it?, don't you think?) in the message.

Dependent variables

Attitudes

After reading the editorial, participants were asked to rate their attitude toward comprehensive final exams on five 9-point semantic differential scales (harmful/beneficial, foolish/wise, bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, and undesirable/desirable), as well as rating how strongly they agreed with the message on a 9-point scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree). The Cronbach's α for these six items was .92.

Cognitive responses

Participants then completed a cognitive response task, where they were instructed to write down any thoughts they had while reading the message. After recording their thoughts, participants were instructed to rate their thoughts as either positive using a '+' sign (in favor of senior comprehensive exams), negative using a '-' sign (opposed to senior comprehensive exams), or neutral or irrelevant using a '0.' All positive items were summed together as well as the negative items. The difference between the number of positive and negative items divided by the total number of thoughts was used to indicate the overall positivity of thoughts.

Manipulation checks

The credibility manipulation check consisted of one item asking participants to indicate on a 9-point scale how credible they thought the speaker was (1 = not at all credible to 9 = very credible), and the language manipulation check consisted of one item that assessed the extent to which the speaker added questions in the message. For the argument quality manipulation check, participants were asked to rate how strong the arguments in the message were.

Results

Manipulation checks

All manipulations were successful. Participants in the high credibility conditions rated the speaker as being more credible ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.95$) than participants in the low credibility conditions ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 2.01$), $F(1,152) = 4.12$, $p = .04$. Participants in the tag question conditions reported more tag questions in the message ($M = 7.68$, $SD = 1.99$) than participants in the control conditions ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.79$), $F(1,152) = 219.49$, $p < .001$. Finally, participants in the strong argument conditions rated the arguments in the message as stronger ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.76$) than participants in the weak argument conditions ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.95$), $F(1,152) = 30.29$, $p < .001$.

Attitudes toward the proposal

We expected that in the high credibility conditions, a significant Language \times Argument quality interaction on attitudes would show a greater difference between strong and weak arguments when tag questions are used compared to the control message. We believed that low credibility conditions could result in one of two outcomes. The low credibility conditions could show a smaller difference between strong and weak arguments when tag questions are used compared to the control message. It would also be congruent with our theoretical prediction that in the low credibility conditions there are two main effects (i.e., argument quality and language main effects), indicating that processing was biased by tag question use. In either case, an omnibus three-way interaction is predicted.

A 2 (Credibility) \times 2 (Language) \times 2 (Argument Quality) ANOVA on the attitude measure revealed a significant Credibility \times Language \times Argument Quality interaction, $F(1, 146) = 4.82$, $p = .03$. In the high credibility conditions, there was a significant Language \times Argument Quality interaction, $F(1, 74) = 7.92$, $p = .006$. That is, the difference between strong and weak arguments on the attitude measure was greater in the tag question conditions [$M_{\text{strong}} = 5.87$, $SD = 2.14$, versus $M_{\text{weak}} = 3.68$, $SD = 2.16$, $F(1, 39) = 22.81$, $p < .001$] than in the control conditions [$M_{\text{strong}} = 4.62$, $SD = 1.80$ versus $M_{\text{weak}} = 4.43$, ($SD = 1.26$), $F(1, 35) = 0.12$, $p = .73$] indicating that tag questions paired with a high credible source led to increased processing of the message. In the low credibility conditions, a main effect for Language was found, $F(1, 72) = 5.17$, $p = .03$, indicating that participants in the control conditions ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.71$) had more favorable attitudes than participants in the tag question condition ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.99$). A main effect for Argument Quality was also found, $F(1, 72) = 6.22$, $p = .02$, indicating that participants in the strong argument conditions ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.88$) had more favorable attitudes than participants in the weak argument conditions ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.54$). The Language \times Argument Quality interaction was not significant, $F(1, 72) = .026$, $p = .61$, indicating that the use of tag questions in the low credibility conditions decreased persuasion (i.e., negatively influenced the outcomes of processing) for both strong and weak arguments equally, indicating that the use of tag questions did not affect the amount of processing of the message.¹

¹ There was also a main effect for Argument Quality, $F(1, 146) = 16.54$, $p < .001$. Participants in the strong argument conditions had more favorable attitudes ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.91$) than participants in the weak argument conditions ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.62$). A significant Credibility \times Language interaction, $F(1, 146) = 4.82$, $p = .03$, revealed that the difference between the control and tag question conditions was greater in the low credibility conditions ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.61$ versus $M = 4.48$, $SD = 2.17$; $F(1, 74) = 4.92$, $p = .03$.) than in the high credibility conditions (M 's = 4.53 $SD = 1.66$ versus 4.78 $SD = 1.83$; $F(1, 76) = 0.3$, $p = .58$). These effects have no direct bearing on the primary hypotheses.

Cognitive response prediction of attitudes

In order to test the moderation of credibility and tag question use on the relation between participants' cognitive responses and attitudes, attitudes toward the proposal were submitted to a 2 (Credibility: low versus high) \times 2 (Language: control versus tag questions) multiple regression with participants' cognitive responses as a continuous predictor.² The three-way interaction was significant [$b(1, 146) = -.44$, $p = .008$]. That is, for the low credibility conditions, the effect of cognitive responses was significant [$b(1, 72) = .33$, $p = .037$]. The Cognitive Response \times Language interaction was not significant [$b(1, 72) = .13$, $p = .42$]. Taken together, this suggests that the relation between cognitive responses and attitudes did not vary as a function of language use. This pattern is consistent with the attitude data, suggesting that a relatively high amount of processing occurred in all of the low credibility conditions. In the high credibility conditions, there was a main effect for Cognitive Responses [$b(1, 74) = .39$, $p = .015$], along with the expected Cognitive Response \times Language interaction [$b(1, 74) = -.51$, $p = .002$]. In the control conditions, cognitive responses did not predict attitudes [$b(1, 35) = .14$, $p = .416$]. In the tag question conditions, however, cognitive responses did predict attitudes [$b(1, 39) = -.31$, $p = .049$], indicating that the use of tag questions by a credible source increased processing relative to a credible source not using tag questions.

Discussion

Previous research examining tag question use and persuasive effectiveness has found decreased persuasion relative to a control message. That research has used sources that have been either low in credibility or where no credibility information has been provided. The current research examined the interaction between tag questions and source credibility using current attitude change models. By manipulating source credibility, we were able to determine that tag questions affect persuasion differently when used by high and low credibility sources.

The current experiment also explored the types of processing that led to the differential effects of credibility and tag questions. Under conditions of high credibility, tag questions increased processing of the message in a relatively objective manner. That is, credible sources who used tag questions paired with strong arguments resulted in more favorable attitudes than high credibility sources who did not use tag questions, whereas high credibility sources who used tag questions paired with weak arguments resulted in less favorable attitudes than high credibility sources who did not use tag questions. In this setting, tag question use

² In order to conduct this analysis we had to eliminate the Language \times Argument Quality interaction in the high credibility conditions by reverse coding participants' attitudes in the weak argument conditions (Aiken & West, 1991).

could have been seen as a reflection of something about the source such as certainty/confidence related to the source.

Under conditions of low credibility, tag questions led to negatively biased processing, with tag questions decreasing persuasion across levels of argument quality. That is, tag questions seemed to confirm the source's low credibility. In this case, the tag question could be interpreted as self-doubt or uncertainty on the part of the source. Participants viewed this attitudinal uncertainty as congruent with their previous understanding of who the source is and therefore did not find the message to be particularly persuasive (Blankenship & Craig, 2005).

Relations between participants' cognitive responses and their attitudes supported the argument quality effects. When the source was low in credibility, participants' cognitive responses predicted attitudes equally, regardless of whether tag questions were used. In the high credibility conditions, however, cognitive responses predicted attitudes only in the tag question conditions, suggesting that tag question use by a credible source increased processing relative to a credible source not using tag questions.

One part of the overall pattern was quite unexpected. In the no tag question conditions, argument quality influenced attitudes more with the noncredible than with the credible source. Research on the effects of surprise on processing may help to explain the results. This result is similar to those presented by Baker and Petty (1994), where participants scrutinized a message more when they were surprised to learn that their opinion was in the minority. Because our low credibility source was taking a surprising position (i.e., advocating exams she/he might have to take), this may have increased processing of the message. It is less surprising when a Dean promotes comprehensive exams. Although we cannot examine this explanation with the current data, we conducted a follow-up study designed to provide direct evidence that the advocacy made by the low credibility source was more surprising.

Sixty-five participants were told they were to read a message advocating comprehensive exams at a university. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions that varied the source of the message. Prior to reading the message, one-third of participants were told the message was written by a high school student, and one-third were told the message was written by a Dean affiliated with the university. These two credibility manipulations were the same as those used in the original study. A final third were told that the message was written by a janitor who worked at the university. This source was used in order to examine a low credibility source that might not be as surprising as the high school student (because the janitor would not be advocating an exam that she/he would have to take). After reading this information, participants were asked to report the credibility of the source, as well as how surprising it was that the source is advocating comprehensive final exams. If the surprise interpretation is correct, participants who were told that the high school student wrote the message would rate that source as more surpris-

ing than both the university dean and the janitor. This would suggest that there was something specific to the high school student as a source for that message that was surprising relative to the other sources.

The data were consistent with the surprise interpretation. Participants rated the high school student as more surprising ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 2.21$) than both the university dean [$M = 4.95$, ($SD = 2.01$) $t(44) = -2.02$, $p < .041$] and the janitor [$M = 4.17$, ($SD = 1.86$), $t(44) = -2.52$, $p < .017$]. However, the university dean ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 1.56$) was more credible than both the janitor ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.73$) $t(41) = -2.56$, $p < .015$ and the high school student ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.57$) $t(39) = -3.04$, $p < .005$. Thus, the low credibility source used in the study was more surprising than the high credibility source, as well as another low credibility source (i.e., the janitor).³

Limitations and future directions

The current work provides evidence for tag questions, having different functions in different persuasion contexts. That is, under some circumstances, tag question use resulted in negatively biased processing (i.e., when source credibility was low), but in others, tag questions increased

³ Showing that the low credibility source was more surprising leaves some question as to whether the current effects result from effects of source credibility and tag questions on message processing or from effects of source surprise and tag questions. To address this, we conducted some supplemental analyses on the original study data. In these analyses, we focused on the high credibility conditions, where our follow-up data show no evidence of surprise. In addition, there is no correlation in those data between rated credibility and rated surprise within the high credibility conditions $r(19) = .01$, $p > .96$. Therefore, any effects of rated credibility in the high credibility conditions of the primary study would not be likely to be associated with any differences in perceived surprise. If our credibility interpretation is correct, then increases in processing of messages using tag questions should be most likely to the extent that participants report perceiving the source as high in credibility. That is, in the tag question conditions, to the extent that participants view the source of the message as highly credible there should be larger effects of argument quality on attitudes. We get exactly this pattern, marginally within the original study, and significantly with some added data. When the original attitude data were analyzed using a model with participants' centered perceptions of credibility, argument quality, and their interaction, there was a marginal credibility \times argument quality interaction, $F(1, 34) = 2.89$, $p < .098$. At one SD below the mean on rated credibility, there was no effect of argument quality on attitudes ($F < 1$), but at one standard deviation above the mean on rated credibility, we get a substantial effect of argument quality on attitudes, $F(1, 34) = 4.41$, $p < .05$. We also had previous data using the same sources, tag questions and strong arguments (Blankenship, Craig, & Holtgraves, 2004). When those data are included in the regression (which controls for the dependencies created by the unequal cell sizes across levels of argument quality), we do get a significant interaction between rated credibility and argument quality, $F(1, 57) = 4.50$, $p < .04$. Again, at one SD below the mean on the credibility measure, we get no effect of argument quality on attitudes ($F < 1$). At one SD above the mean of credibility, however, there is a substantial effect of argument quality on attitudes, $F(1, 57) = 5.94$, $p < .05$. These results conceptually replicate the increases in processing with tag questions only occurring when the source is high rather than low in credibility, but they do so without any likely confounds between perceptions of credibility and perceptions of surprise.

objective processing (i.e., when credibility was high). These results have a number of implications. First, although there is much research in the area of attitude change regarding multiple roles for persuasion variables (see Petty & Wegener, 1998, for a review), little work has used a multi-process framework like the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to explain *how* or *why* certain linguistic phenomena have their effects on the message recipient. Recent work on speech rate and persuasion (Smith & Shaffer, 1991, 1995) has found that under certain conditions, a rapid speech style may have positive effects (i.e., when participants are not motivated or able to attend to the contents of the message), and other times may have negative effects (i.e., when participants are motivated to process the message yet the message is presented too quickly). Future work using an ELM-based framework may help explain not only when but how certain linguistic variables affect persuasion.

Another important component of the ELM (yet relatively untapped when considering language use in persuasion) is the acknowledgement of consequences related to attitude strength, with strong attitudes being more persistent over time, more resistant to change, and better predictors of behavior than weak attitudes (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). To date, little work has examined how linguistic variables affect the strength-related consequences of attitudes. The studies presented here suggest that under certain conditions, tag questions can increase processing, thus leading to the possibility that tag question use can create relatively strong attitudes. This increase in processing might lead to stronger attitudes in part because the processing may link the attitude to a greater number of knowledge structures (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). Future work should also test whether these stronger attitudes (resulting from tag question use) may be more resistant to future persuasion attempts. If so, this would suggest that tag questions can become a rather powerful form of speech.

It should also be noted that the current work used written editorials, rather than audio-based versions of the messages. Previous work examining the effects of linguistic markers on variables such as persuasion and impression formation using audio-based messages has found similar if not stronger effects of the markers on those variables (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005; see also Ng & Bradac, 1993 for a review). Indeed, listening to a message provides message recipients a number of voice variables (e.g., pitch, tone, etc.) that do not exist with a written message, and the context in which a tag question is used along with those other variables is a more complex one. However, we are not familiar with any work that has manipulated source credibility and tag question use (written or otherwise) other than the current work. We believe that, all other things being equal, the results of the current study would apply in an audio context as well as a written one.

Conclusions

Having a clear understanding of the ways in which language styles are viewed, in light of who is using them, will

ultimately allow us to better predict the impact of persuasive messages using those language styles. The caution is that this could lead to recommendations that some language styles will be beneficial for lasting persuasion when used by some sources, but quite harmful for lasting persuasion when used by others. Further explorations of the impact of tag questions on attitudes and the processes responsible for those effects are necessary in order to fully understand the ways in which tag questions may be used most effectively.

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