LOWER INCOME, POOR OUTCOME: A STUDY ON EUPHEMISMS

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of euphemisms in the attitudes and perceptions of populations which are currently labeled "lower income" in America. Euphemisms are often used to promote positive communication in society, especially in regards to the communication of negative information. In modern American society, although euphemistic language is encouraged and embraced, the impact of this linguistic shift has yet to be assessed. Without an evaluation of the potential harm of this rhetoric change, the impact of euphemisms cannot be properly perceived and is therefore questioned. The method of investigation involved using surveys with scenarios regarding a hypothetical individual, who is labeled as poor in one version and lower income in the alternate version. It is expected that participants will react with a higher negative attitude towards those labeled as "poor" but will also demonstrate a higher willingness to provide assistance. This study calls for a revaluation of the language used in public policy and programs. The purpose of this study is to advocate for proper language use in order to invoke necessary action, opposed to the promotion of language which conceals emotive or negative communication.

Introduction

Language is an ever-evolving communication method. One of the main linguistic devices used in American culture is that of the euphemism. According to Burridge, K., & Allan, K. (2006), the substitution of one word, for a more preferred word is a practice that dates back to the 1300s. The invention of the euphemism adversely creates a category of words that are less desirable, and generates taboo around particular vocabularies. The silencing of vocabulary becomes important when evaluated with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

According to Whorf (1940), language shapes the perceptions of those who use it. The weak version of this hypothesis notes that not only the grammatical structures used in different languages, but the words themselves influence how a population views the information to which they are subjected. Cibelli Et al. (2016), confirms this hypothesis with a study that measures color perception based on the vocabulary present in the culture. The aforementioned study showed a significant effect for the number of words present to describe the colors blue and green and the ability to discriminate effectively between them. This shows that words and thought are some of the main contributors of an individual's actions and perception. If emotive vocabulary is removed from a culture due to taboo, it is understood that the emotive thoughts which would follow the exposure to that vocabulary will also be removed.

In order for this study to be understood properly, the purpose of euphemistic language must be defined. In a study done by Dong and Zhao (2010), the conclusion was

reached that euphemisms distance the meaning of the action or word from its original

value. One such example given is that of an atomic bomb being instead referred to as a

device. By replacing the word "bomb" with a different word attached to less stigma, it

will be received with less alarm when communicated. According to Qi (2013), one of the

features of the euphemism is to invoke a less unpleasant reaction to the provided

information. The collective functions of a euphemism can be to invoke politeness, to

gloss-over, to avoid taboo, or to disguise. Qi (2013), states that although euphemisms are

used to fit cultural norms, it also avoids the intensity and gravity of the situation. The

social situation between communicator and audience experiences less distress, but the

situation being described is not changed. In some cases, the urge to be less offensive due

to societal norms can also change one's opinion about the situation.

Knowing how words shape experience, the growing popularity of using

euphemisms does cause concern for how it has since effected the perceptions in

American culture. According to Burridge, K., & Allan, K. (2006), the rise of euphemistic

language in the United States began in the late 1980's/early 1990's as more racial

diversity arrived in the work place due to programs such as Affirmative Action and the

NAACP emerged into the social/economical spotlight. The intention of both Affirmative

Action and the NAACP is to counter balance the historically disadvantaged position of

African-Americans by ensuring spaces in the workforce which would provide the enough

economic prosperity to affect the privilege positively for this community in future

generations. Note that the name "Affirmative Action" does not reference a racial quality

or speak directly to what is being affirmed. In this case, the language accomplishes the

goal of concealing purpose so that it may be more effective. Over 30 years later,

2

Americans today have continued with this language tool in a variety of social situations in order to maintain peace as well as ambiguity in conversation and implementation of public policy.

This information poses issues when opposed by the situations endured by those labeled "lower income" opposed to "poor" in America. Think of the Statue of Liberty and its famous statement "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses…" when addressing the immigrants of the rest of the world while reflecting the values of being "American". If the word poor was replaced with lower income so that the statement read "give me your tired, your lower income, your huddled masses…" it would not possess the same empathetic tone as it did in its original form. The desire to avoid the label of poor due to the shame and stigma it invokes, lessens the seriousness of the financial disparity being endured by those in these populations. As mentioned before, the changing of vocabulary does not change the reality of the situation. The lack of emotional pull from this language flattens not only inherent value of the sentence but the emotional reaction of those who can afford to offer assistance. Although there is a lack of research at this time which evaluates this particular circumstance, other studies have produced evidence which supports the connection between perception of a situation and action which should be taken in that situation due to manipulation of language.

According to Bilewicz, Milolajczak, and Babinska (2017), there was significant difference in the participants' attributed emotions towards electing an abortion as an option based on whether the unborn was labeled as a fetus or child. In situations in which the unborn was labeled as a fetus more participants were willing to elect an abortion than in situations in which the unborn was labeled child. This study shows that linguistic

choices produce a difference in what actions people deem appropriate when presented with otherwise identical situations.   This influence of diction can be applied to numerous situations but is most alarming when applied to situations that control the funding and support of lower income populations. With the information provided by Bilewicz, Milolajczak, and Babinska (2017), it is important to investigate how the terms "lower income" and "poor" affect the perception and treatment of those within this financial situation.

The object of the study is to measure the effect of euphemistic language in the perceptions of those who are labeled "lower income" opposed to the use of the word "poor". Using a survey study, participants will have a higher negative attitude towards the individual labeled "poor" but will also have a higher desire to offer assistance.

Method

Participants

Participants included 95 undergraduate students at Texas State University. These participants were enrolled in various psychology courses and were administered an anonymous survey as part of an optional class extra credit assignment. To prevent coercion, an alternative extra credit assignment was made available for those who did not want to participate. No demographics recorded of the participants who responded. Two surveys were randomly administered: 50 participants completed the survey which used the "lower income" label, and 45 participants completed the survey with the "poor" label. Of the 95 participants, one did not complete questions 8, 9, and 10 of the survey but was included in the overall frequencies of the survey.

Materials

For the purpose of this study, there were two surveys used for data collection. The cover sheet addressed IRB approval, names and contact information of the principal investigator, and an informed consent statement. Section I of each survey included a description of the hypothetical life description of an individual named Jordan. The situation is based on stereotypes commonly associated with people of lower income status. The stereotypes were balanced between perceived negative and positive attributes in order to more accurately assess the responses based on the independent variable opposed to potential bias against the negative attributes. Section I was identical in both versions of the survey except for the label which was given to Jordan. One version of the survey labeled Jordan as "lower income" both in the beginning and ending sentences, and the alternate version of the survey label Jordan as "poor" in both the beginning and ending sentences. The ending sentence is used to survey as a check, so that the participant will be exposed to the label more than once and have a higher potential to associate the label with personal feelings towards Jordan. (see Appendix A. for the different versions of the survey). Sections II of both surveys are identical. This section requested the participant to rank on a 5 point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements in regards to the hypothetical individual. Each survey included ten statements about the individual. Each survey included a detached extra credit form that the participants completed and turned in separately to keep their responses anonymous.

Procedure

  The survey study was administered to three separate psychology classes taught by Dr. Judith Easton. She was not present for the administration to alleviate any pressure which could be caused by the student-teacher relationship. Each administration of the survey was given by the principal investigator. The principal investigator kept the procedure identical in fashion for each administration. Before the participants received the survey, they were instructed to complete the survey privately and at their own pace. The disbursement of the two surveys was presented randomly by shuffling the two versions blindly and distributing them throughout the classes unbiasedly. After participants finished the survey, they detached the consent form and placed their survey or alternate option face down in a single stack in order to maintain anonymity. Each individual was instructed to highlight their name on a roster privately in order to receive extra credit. The surveys were recorded and scored at the Texas State University Testing Center.

<center>**Results**</center>

  It was hypothesized that participants who received the survey including the label of poor would have a higher overall score for "attitude/perception" questions (questions 3 through 6) and for "willingness to give assistance" (questions 7 and 8) than those who completed to the survey with the label "lower income". The two forms were scored and evaluated using Independent T-Test. The survey containing the label "poor" produced a mean of 7.86 in regards to the set of "willingness to give assistance" questions and a mean of 15.68 for the set of questions which measured the "attitude/perception" of the individual. The survey with the label of "lower income" produced a mean of 7.74 in

<center>6</center>

regards to the "willingness to give assistance" questions and a mean of 15.42 for the

questions which measured "attitude/perception" of the individual. There is not a

significant difference in the attitudes toward an individual labeled as poor when

compared to the lower income label, $t(95) = 1.705$, $p = 0.091$. Also, there is not a

significant difference in the willingness to give assistance to an individual labeled as poor

when compared to an individual labeled as lower income, $t(95) = -0.347$, $p = 0.729$. (See

Figure 1 and Figure 2)

Discussion

The findings of this research were opposite of that of Bilewicz, Milolajczak, and

Babinska (2017). The inconsistency of these results could be attributed to confounding

factors in the design and implementation of the study. The sample used for this study is

particular in that it only surveyed college students with a background in psychology. This

is not an equal demographic representation of the average American population. Using

psychology students to represent the entire population may have presented an inherent

bias due to the nature of their studies, privilege of education, and exposure to diversity in

the college setting. If the study were run again, the use of a more diverse population may

present different outcomes.

In the study, the manipulation frequency may have been too low. In the scenario

presented to participants, the labels "poor" and "lower income" were only presented

twice. This may not have been often enough to influence the reader's perception of the

individual. More testing should be done with more frequent uses of the terms "poor" and "lower income" to check the effectiveness of the manipulation

There is also the possibility that the euphemism used in this study is not polarized enough in our current society to have an effect on perception. In study done by Bilewicz, Milolajczak, and Babinska (2017), the focal point was abortion. Abortion is an issue that is publicly debated in politics and media in America. Perhaps if the discussion of lower income communities were more of a debate in the media than a burden, the results would have been stronger.

However, if the study is retested and compensates for all of the aforementioned confounds, the taboo surrounding using the word poor opposed to lower income to describe populations must be addressed. Populations will always have a preferred rhetoric style, but if the words have no effect on perception, the politically correct climate which our culture is subjected to loses validity.

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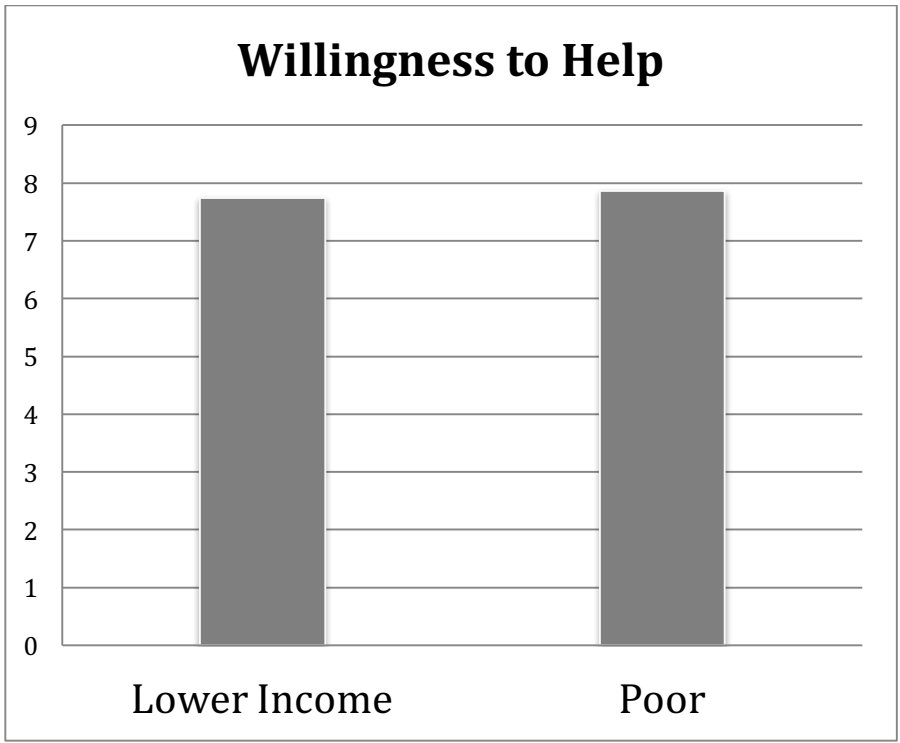 Its Social Functions. *English Language Teaching*, *3*, 118-121.

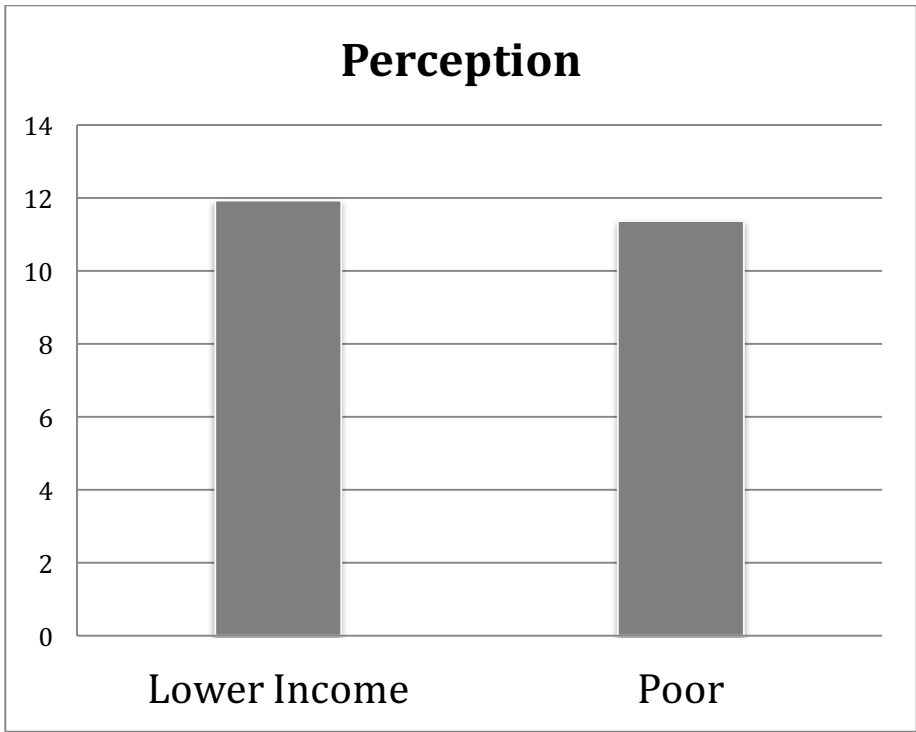*Figure 1.* Score averages for "willingness to help" questions for each label.

Figure 2. Score averages for "attitude/perception" questions for each label.

Jordan is 25 years old and is considered poor. Jordan usually makes under $11,670 per year but recently lost employment. As of last month, Jordan started receiving food stamps and other forms of financial assistance from the government. Jordan does not own a car and is reliant on the local bus system to get around town. Jordan is currently in $5,000 debt. Jordan dropped out of high school but is applying for financial aid in order to start community college next fall. Most of Jordan's family and friends are also poor.

For Section II, indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements on a scale of 1-5. Answer by using the following scale to record the correct response on your Scantron form.

Jordan is a victim.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is normal.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is motivated.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is stupid.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is responsible for their situation.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is valuable.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan deserves assistance.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

I am willing to help Jordan.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

I feel sad for Jordan.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is friendly.

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
A	B	C	D	E
1	2	3	4	5

Jordan is 25 years old and is considered lower income. Jordan usually makes under $11,670 per year but recently lost employment. As of last month, Jordan started receiving food stamps and other forms of financial assistance from the government. Jordan does not own a car and is reliant on the local bus system to get around town. Jordan is currently in $5,000 debt. Jordan dropped out of high school but is applying for financial aid in order to start community college next fall. Most of Jordan's family and friends are also considered lower income.

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