Article

It's in the Syllabus: The Relationship Between Syllabi Word Use and Teaching Evaluations

Journal of Language and Social Psychology
1–15

DOI: 10.1177/0261927X231198513
journals.sagepub.com/home/jls

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Abstract

The authors analyzed 1,472 course syllabi written by 611 professors to determine whether communion-related and/or agency-related word use in professors' syllabi predicted those same professors' end-of-semester teaching evaluations. Linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) analyses revealed that professors who used more communal language—including third person plural pronouns (e.g., we), social words (e.g., discussion), and positive emotion words (e.g., please)—received significantly higher teaching evaluations, but agentic language did not significantly predict evaluation scores.

Keywords

word use, person perception, LIWC, teaching evaluations, syllabi

The words we use in our writing, personal conversations, and professional communications reveal a great deal about our personality and social characteristics. Studies examining language use and the Big Five have revealed, for instance, that extraverts use more social words (e.g., talk), human words (e.g., baby), and family words (e.g., daughter), and agreeable individuals use more positive emotion words (e.g., love) and fewer swear words (e.g., damn; Kern et al., 2014). Language can also provide hints about our social status, truthfulness, gender, and emotional state (Tausczik &

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Pennebaker, 2010). Research even indicates linguistic predictors of longevity, showing that people who use more words related to social integration (e.g., father) and "activated" positive emotion words (e.g., lively) tend to live longer (Pressman & Cohen, 2012). Language is an integral part of who we are, and the words we use are predictive of important life outcomes (Boyd & Pennebaker, 2017).

One outcome important to many college professors and administrators is students' evaluations of professors' teaching ("teaching evaluations"), which are used with regularity in many universities across the globe, including the United States, Germany, and China. Although the use of student ratings to measure teaching quality is somewhat controversial due to validity and bias concerns (Kulik, 2001), teaching evaluations are unquestionably a measure of *person perception*, in that students are making judgments about their overall impressions of the instructor (Gross et al., 2009). Given the predictive power of the words we use and the lasting power of first impressions in the classroom (e.g., Buchert et al., 2008), we asked the following question: Do the words that professors use in their syllabi (written before the semester begins) predict professors' teaching evaluations at the end of the semester?

A prevailing framework of person perception argues that when evaluating others, we focus on two primary aspects of judgment (the "Big 2"): warmth/communion (e.g., sincerity, kindness) and competence/agency (e.g., skills, efficacy; Abele & Brack, 2013; Fiske et al., 2002), and a large body of research has demonstrated that these two traits consistently emerge as the two central dimensions of social/person perception (e.g., Judd et al., 2005). The universality and significance of these two dimensions likely stems from their correspondence to issues that are critical to surviving in a social world—namely, determining whether the target's intentions are good/positive (warmth/communion) and whether this target has the capability to enact those intentions (competence/agency; Cuddy et al., 2008).

To what extent, then, does the "the Big 2" extend to teaching evaluations—and is one of these traits more important than the other in this context? The literature here is unclear. The stereotype content model (Cuddy et al., 2008) argues that admired groups display both warmth and competence, suggesting that both traits should be equally important to students' perceptions of their professors. Indeed, Patrick (2011) found that student ratings of professors' extraversion and agreeableness (traits related to warmth/communion) and conscientiousness (a trait related to competence/agency) were both equally predictive of teaching evaluation scores. Alternatively, Wojciszke et al. (1998) argued that in most domains, it is *communion* that is the primary driver of social cognition, such that being warm and kind is more important than being competent and hard-working—and Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) did find that non-verbal displays of warmth were a stronger predictor of teaching evaluations than non-verbal displays of competence. Finally, in settings where performance matters (such as work or school), Abele and Brack (2013) argued that agency should be more important than communion—and a study of management professors did find that professors' presentation skills and reliability (i.e., competence/agency) was a stronger predictor of teaching evaluations than how personable and approachable the professors were (i.e., warmth/communion; Kim et al., 2000). However, in all of these studies, person

perception was predicted by personality, non-verbal communication, or classroom behaviors—but person perception can also be based on language.

Several studies have examined the link between language and person perception, typically by correlating supervisor, customer, or constituent ratings with the targets' word use. For instance, interns who use more insight words (e.g., realize) and positive emotion words (e.g., enjoy) in their reflection papers receive higher job performance ratings from their supervisors (perhaps because this pattern of word use signifies a tendency to step back from events and re-appraise them in a broader context; Abe, 2009), and organizational leaders who use more positive emotion words are rated as more charismatic and effective speakers (Bono & Ilies, 2006). In addition, tech support employees who use more first person singular pronouns (e.g., I—reflecting a personal tone) and fewer assent words (e.g., uh-huh, okay—which, in this context, may be perceived as reflecting a disrespectful tone) receive higher caller satisfaction ratings (Hall et al., 2014). However, to date, only one study has examined person perception and word use specifically using a communion/agency framework; Decter-Frain and Frimer (2016) found that politicians who used more prosocial words (a subcategory of communion)—and who used *fewer* agency words—received higher approval ratings, supporting the argument for the superiority of warmth in person perception.

Recently, researchers have begun applying language analysis to teaching evaluations. For instance, in a study of 90 massive open online courses (MOOCs), Geng et al. (2020) found that students with positive opinions of the course used more communion words (i.e., social words, positive emotion words) and agency words (i.e., cognitive processing words) when describing the course or professor. However, students with negative opinions of the same course used words that were both positively related to agency (i.e., achievement words) *and* negatively related to agency (i.e., tentative words), suggesting a more complex relationship between agency and course satisfaction. In addition, Addison et al. (2015) found that students were more likely to use communion words (e.g., personable) than competence words (e.g., organized) when describing their psychology professors, providing further evidence of the strength of communion in impression formation.

Although interesting, the aforementioned studies examined *students'* words in the context of teaching evaluations—but *professors'* words are also likely to be important. So far, the only study to examine professors' words in relation to teaching evaluations (Li et al., 2017) did not find any significant relationships between professor word use during lecture and teaching evaluation scores—but that sample was relatively small (and thus, potentially underpowered). In contrast to Li et al.'s null findings, randomized experiments from the education literature have found that students respond more favorably to syllabi using reward-oriented language (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002) or a friendly tone (Harnish & Bridges, 2011), suggesting that syllabi wording —especially communal wording—may be important in impression formation of professors. However, those studies examined only *hypothetical* syllabi; the present study will be the first to examine the syllabi word use-teaching evaluation relationship with *actual* syllabi/professors. Specifically, we asked the following research questions: Will professors who use more communal language and agentic language in their syllabi

have higher teaching evaluations? Furthermore, which type of language makes the best impression on students: communal or agentic?

Method

Course Syllabi

A total of 1,472 undergraduate course syllabi were downloaded from publically-available course websites of 611 professors at a large public university from Fall 2012 through Fall 2017. If a professor taught the same course more than once during this period, we used the most recent syllabus for that course. Faculty at this institution receives minimal guidance on syllabi creation, and there is no required language or format that is dictated by university policy; as such, syllabi content and style varied widely.

Teaching Evaluations

Teaching evaluation scores were obtained from a university website; items included: overall teaching effectiveness; overall value of the course; instructor was available for help outside of class; course stimulated thinking and interest in subject; and instructor communicated concepts/theories clearly. Scores on these five items were summed to create an overall evaluation score for each course. Academic units varied with respect to the scale used on their forms (e.g., 1 to 5 scale, 0 to 9 scale), so teaching evaluation scores were converted to z-scores (with a score of 0 representing an average score). The internal reliability coefficient (α) for these 5-item measures ranged from .94 (for the 1 to 5 scale) to .98 (for the 0 to 9 scale).

Word Use Analysis

Syllabi word use was analyzed using the linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker et al., 2015). LIWC categorizes common English words into a variety of grammatical categories (e.g., pronouns, adjectives) and psychological categories (e.g., positive emotion words, social words). To measure communion and agency words, we created two summary variables using the procedure described by Decter-Frain and Frimer (2016), in which they gave each LIWC word category a weight (from -1 to $+1$) according to how relevant that category is to the construct of communion or agency.

Course Characteristics

Because various course characteristics—including grades, class size, and major—are commonly correlated with teaching evaluations, we collected the following course information from university databases to rule out possible third variable effects: average course grade, class size, class standings (i.e., percent of first year students), percent of students who completed the evaluation, and percent of students who are

international students, majors within that department, honors students, low income students, transfer students, and first generation college students. In addition, courses were coded for discipline: Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math (STEM) or Social Sciences, Arts, & Humanities (SSAH).

Results

Table 1 provides the summary data of each course characteristic, as well as the zero-order correlations between each course characteristic and teaching evaluation scores. Average course grade, percent of fourth year students, and discipline were significantly positively correlated with teaching evaluations, and class size, percent of international students, and percent of third year students were significantly negatively correlated with teaching evaluation scores. As such, these six course characteristics were used as control variables in subsequent analyses.

Most professors (60%) taught more than one course; the number of courses taught ranged from 1 to 11 ($M = 2.37$). Given the repeated measures nature of the dataset, data were analyzed using a series of MIXED stepwise regressions (with the relevant LIWC

Table 1. Correlations Among Course Characteristics and Teaching Evaluations.

Course Characteristics	Mean (*SD*) or Percent	Correlation with Teaching Evaluations
Average course grade (on a 4-point scale)	3.08 (0.41)	.36**
Class size	92.21 (84.66)	−.23**
Discipline (STEM vs. SSAH)	50.1% STEM, 49.9% SSAH	.09*
% International students	12.14 (11.69)	−.09*
% 4th year students	63.16 (26.46)	.09*
% 3rd year students	20.38 (13.80)	−.09*
% 2nd year students	11.94 (15.11)	−.05
% 1st year students	4.55 (9.17)	−.03
% students who filled out teaching evaluations	52.52 (19.80)	.08
% Majors	56.42 (30.75)	−.07
% Honors' students	3.79 (7.69)	.06
Professor Gender	66% Male, 34% Female	.06
% Low income students	33.40 (10.86)	.04
% Transfer students	23.76 (13.63)	.02
% First generation college students	48.40 (11.90)	−.01

Note. Discipline was coded as Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math (STEM) = 1 and Social Science, Arts, & Humanities (SSAH) = 2. Professor gender was coded as Male = 1 and Female = 2.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

variable entered into the first step and the control variables entered into the second step), adding a random intercept for professor. Table 2 provides the unadjusted *b*'s (with no controls) and the adjusted *b*'s (with controls) depicting the relationship between teaching evaluations and the two main outcome variables (communion and agency). Table 2 also includes the LIWC categories that were most central to the calculation of these summary variables (based on the weights provided by Decter-Frain & Frimer, 2016), for illustrative purposes.

Results revealed that, after controlling for course characteristics, professors who used more communal words tended to receive higher teaching evaluations ($p < .01$), but there was no significant relationship between agency words and teaching evaluations ($p = .62$). These findings were not significantly moderated by professor gender (p's $> .30$). For findings related to the full set of 80+ LIWC variables, please see this online supplement: https://tinyurl.com/y4nf7e2d.

Discussion

The current study is the first to demonstrate that words professors use in their syllabi predict their teaching evaluation scores. We found that professors using more communion-related words (especially first person plural pronouns, positive emotion words, and social words) received higher teaching evaluations—but no corresponding effect was found for agency words. This paper adds to a growing body of literature suggesting that word use may play a role in person perception, and these findings highlight the importance of communion/warmth in impression formation in a real world, applied context with a large and diverse sample.

There are several possible reasons for the link between communion words and teaching evaluations. First, the use of communion words (including social words and first-person plural pronouns) may help promote a feeling of community and group cohesion; indeed, some syllabi even explicitly stated that the class will serve as a "mini-community" (e.g., "**We** are in this together. For ten weeks at least, **we** are a **commune**."). Similarly, the use of positive emotion words likely contributes to a culture of respect and encouragement through the use of polite language (e.g., **please**), an emphasis on integrity (with respect to academic **honesty**), and a positive framing of the learning experience (with words such as **challenge**, **important**, and **opportunity**).

These findings might be understood in the context of emotion contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1994), which argues that people often mimic (or "catch") the emotions of others, especially trusted and familiar others. Specifically, the relationship between communion words and teaching evaluations may be due, in part, to positive mood contagion (e.g., Barsade, 2002), given that the construct of warmth/communion largely overlaps with positive emotion (Fiske et al., 2002). People who use more communion words (i.e., first person plural words and social words) tend to have higher levels of positive affect (Sun et al., 2020), and people high in positive affect tend to elicit more positive affect in others (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010); as such, it may be the case that professors with high levels of positive affect are "spreading" their positive

Table 2. Relationship Between Word Use and Teaching Evaluations ($N_{professors} = 611$, $N_{syllabi} = 1{,}472$).

LIWC Word Category	Most Common Words	Unadjusted (Without Controls)		Adjusted (With Controls)[a]		Sample Sentence
		b	*p*	*b*	*P*	
COMMUNION (summary variable)[b]		**0.02****	**<.001**	**0.01****	**<.001**	
1st Person Plural Pronouns (+1)	we, our, us	0.33**	<.001	0.29**	<.001	We will discuss the distinction between analytical and descriptive papers in our field study meetings.
Positive emotion (+1)	please, credit, well	0.11**	.001	0.11**	<.001	This course will encourage, challenge, motivate, and inspire you to make positive changes in your lifestyle and the way you interact with others.
Social processes (+1)	you, your, discussion	0.03**	.008	0.02*	.018	We are in this together. For ten weeks at least, we are a commune.
Sexual (+1)	sexual, queer, sex	0.54*	.012	0.38	.058	Finally, [we will cover] the ways in which the diverse local queer scenes and communities in Asia may borrow from Western lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ) vocabularies, but are ultimately irreducible to these frameworks.
Religion (+1)	religious, church, saint	0.11*	.024	0.06	.069	We will be looking at the religious and political history of Jews, Christians, and Muslims and their encounter with one another…
Hear (+1)	music, speaker, phone	0.21**	.007	0.12	.098	Musicians will be responsible for that music until it is collected at the final concert performance.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued).

LIWC Word Category	Most Common Words	Unadjusted (Without Controls)		Adjusted (With Controls)[a]		Sample Sentence
		b	*p*	*b*	*P*	
Swear Words (−1)	dumb, geeks, bitch	1.79	.126	1.34	.218	There is no such thing as a dumb question when it comes to laboratory safety.
Negative Emotion (−1)	problems, cheating, miss	−0.04	.246	0.01	.760	Likewise, if you find that personal problems, indecision, study and time management difficulties, and so forth are adversely impacting your successful progress at the university, please check out the Counseling Center or Student Services.
Anger (−1)	cheating, war, critical	0.10	.282	0.07	.452	Cheating, plagiarism, or any other violations of these principles will result in a failing grade for the course and a referral to the Dean's office.
Family (+1)	family, marriage, families	0.25	.289	0.06	.488	Family Day: Bring your parents, grandparents, and/or siblings to class!
Friends (+1)	date, contact, guest	0.08	.585	0.05	.678	If you know you will be absent from class, please contact me via email out of courtesy to me, Audrey, and your fellow students.
Leisure (+1)	game, music, book	0.08*	.010	0.01	.806	The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses
Assent (+1)	yes, okay, agree	0.06	.867	0.04	.909	Yes, the instructor will be providing you guidelines for your projects.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued).

LIWC Word Category	Most Common Words	Unadjusted (Without Controls)		Adjusted (With Controls)[a]		Sample Sentence
		b	*p*	*b*	*P*	
Differentiation (−1)	or, not, if	−0.07**	.004	0.00	.941	Last day to add or drop without the Dean's approval is the end of the second week.
AGENCY (summary variable)[b]		**0.00**	**.240**	**0.00**	**.620**	
1st Personal Singular Pronouns (+1)	I, me, mine	0.22**	.003	0.29**	<.001	But even if you ARE shy, I encourage you to try it —I used to be really shy myself, and now look at me!
Money (+1)	credit, economics, worth	−0.13**	<.001	−0.11**	<.001	Exams will be given in the format with both multiple choice (no partial credit) and free response (partial credit) problems.
Work (+1)	work, research, textbook	−0.02*	.021	−0.02*	.013	Grading: The course grade will be based on quiz/homework, midterm and final exams in the following way: quizzes equals 10 percent, homework grade equals 10 percent, midterm exam equals 35 percent and final exam equals 45 percent.
Certainty (+1)	all, must, complete	0.00	.946	0.09	.067	It is necessary and expected that students attend and participate in all course lectures and weekly discussion sections.
Achievement (+1)	work, first, cheating	0.07*	.044	0.04	.238	Grades reflect performance during exam, not desires for good grades (although if you do put good effort and work, this is usually reflected well).

(continued)

Table 2. (continued).

LIWC Word Category	Most Common Words	Unadjusted (Without Controls)		Adjusted (With Controls)[a]		Sample Sentence
		b	*p*	*b*	*P*	
Anxiety (−1)	risk, avoid, stress	0.06	.746	0.11	.529	Please do not risk your grade and the humiliating ordeal of having to explain your actions.
Cognitive Processes (+1)	or, not, if	−0.02	.092	0.00	.900	You will select one Soviet poster (or other visual source) from our era and make an informative and attractive poster commentary.
Insight (+1)	questions, information, analysis	−0.01	.732	0.00	.900	After reading and studying the chapter, think of questions that you can use to test your knowledge of the material.
Tentative (−1)	or, if, questions	−0.05*	.035	0.00	.948	Before posting a question on Piazza, you should look through the course materials or previous Piazza posts to see if you can find the answer to your question.

[a]Control variables included average course grade, class size, percent of international students enrolled, percent of enrolled students in senior standing, percent of enrolled students in junior standing, and course discipline (STEM vs. SSAH).
[b]Although all of the LIWC variables were included (with varying degrees of weight) in the calculation of the Communion variable and Agency variable (using the weights provided by Decter-Frain & Frimer, 2016), we have listed the variables that have the largest weights (i.e., either a weight of +1 or −1) in this table, for illustrative purposes.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.

mood to students (which, in turn, affects their teaching evaluations). Indeed, positive emotion contagion has been found in university classrooms (Houser & Waldbuesser, 2017), and Fredrickson (2003) argues that positive emotions expressed by leaders (or, in this context, professors) may be especially contagious due to their position of power in the group. Importantly, laboratory experiments have found that the use of

a leader's positive emotion words affects participants' moods and that those positive moods, in turn, affect their ratings of the leader's effectiveness (Bono & Ilies, 2006). Furthermore, positive emotions in the classroom have been found to increase student engagement (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2014) and motivation (Low et al., 2016), both of which are related to teaching evaluations (Jones et al., 2022).

So, if professors simply changed the wording of their syllabi, would their teaching evaluations improve? That, of course, is still an open question—and one that is up for debate. Chung and Pennebaker (2007) argue that deliberately changing word use is unlikely to affect our psychological states and thinking styles and that our words are more likely a *reflection* of our psychological states than the *causes* of them. However, in the case of syllabi, we would not necessarily be trying to change the professors themselves but rather to change students' *impressions* of them—impressions that might, indeed, be influenced by the types of words found in course syllabi. Given that previous experimental research has found that changing syllabi wording can affect students' (initial) opinions of a hypothetical professor (e.g., Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002), it is certainly conceivable that adjusting the language used in a syllabus may affect students' impression of a real professor as well.

Previous research indicates that people adjust their language to manage impressions all the time. As described by the communication accommodation theory (CAT; Giles et al., 2023), individuals often adjust (i.e., converge) their communication styles to align with those of others, and this can have the effect of increasing a sense of social connection and rapport; for example, conversations with health professionals who use a more accommodating conversation style are perceived as more satisfying by patients (Watson & Gallois, 1999) and suspects are more trusting of police officers who display more accommodating behavior during an interaction (Mills et al., 2021). As such, it may be the case that professors who use more communion words are well-liked by students, in part, because they have successfully accommodated their language to match the desires and needs of their students, especially by using the accommodation strategy of emotional expression. Specifically, students' sense of belonging plays an important role in their ability to thrive in higher education (Strayhorn, 2018) and students do crave connection with their instructors (Osterman, 2000), so the use of communion-related language in syllabi may signal to students that professors care about their belongingness needs. Furthermore, CAT also suggests that people use language to express their social identity and to signal their membership in a particular group. By using communal language in their syllabi, professors may signal that they view themselves as part of the same group as their students and that they are committed to working together towards a shared goal—which may increase liking.

Although these findings are provocative, this study does have several limitations. First, it includes syllabi only from full-time faculty at a large, public, diverse university that affords faculty complete freedom with respect to their syllabi wording, and these professors opted to make their course websites publicly available; it is unclear whether these results would generalize to professors who enrollment-restrict their course websites, adjunct professors, or professors at other institutions. In addition, because this

study used an archival analysis, additional data about the professors (e.g., personality traits) or students (e.g., ethnicity) were unavailable, limiting which variables we could control for. Finally, it is possible that the present findings are driven by third variables of personality and/or teaching style, such that professors with particular personalities and/or teaching styles use certain types of words in their syllabi *and* are well liked by students. For example, professors who are more extraverted tend to receive better teaching evaluations (e.g., Patrick, 2011), and extraverts use more communion-related words (Kern et al., 2014). Beyond the personalities of the professors, though, the third variable of teaching style may also contribute to these findings. Professors are probably not well-liked simply because they *use words* related to a sense of community, but rather, it is the professors who *actually promote* a sense of community—through their words, but also through their actions and teaching strategies—who likely make the best impressions. Although future research is needed to confirm the relationship between word use and teaching styles, the present study demonstrates a novel situation in which word use predicts a practical, real-world outcome, and these findings should be of interest to social/personality psychologists who study word use, educational psychologists who study teacher-student relationships, and professors at any university that uses teaching evaluations in the hiring, merit, or promotion process.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers—and the action editor—for their thoughtful and helpful comments and guidance during the review process. They are also extremely grateful to Nickolas M. Jones for his data analytic assistance and to the numerous undergraduate and post-baccalaureate research assistants who helped collect, organize, clean, and code the data for this project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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