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# Personality and language

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## Introduction

The relationship between personality and language can be conceptualized in many ways, and even the way in which the two words *language* and *personality* are juxtaposed in a title or a question may channel the different approaches and answers to how the two are related to each other or what is regarded as influencing what: does language influence personality, or, vice versa, is it personality that influences language? Is language and its use an index of personality, or can one regard language merely as a 'treasure house' where the secrets of personality are buried?

What literature there is on the subject is not particularly consistent and, somewhat surprisingly, the question has not evoked any systematic of longstanding interest in psychology. Although there are some reviews on personality and language (such as Brown and Bradshaw, 1985; Furnham, 1990a; Scherer, 1979), these predominantly address specific aspects of this interface rather than raising broader questions or advancing a more general framework within which the relationship between language and personality can be considered.

To an overview of the work on language and personality, one should add the fact that there exist a number of systematic research traditions in personality which can be regarded as intimately tied up with language. Interestingly, this is not the perspective from which the researchers in these fields necessarily present their work, and attempts to inject a language-based perspective are sometimes regarded as intrusive, unconstructive, and 'de-psychologizing' the phenomena under examination. An example of one such systematic research domain is the work on taxonomic models of personality, which has addressed the question of how best to represent the underlying structure of trait terms (cf. Semin, 1990). Another broad domain to be found in social psychology serves as a further example of research which is on language but not identified as such; namely, the work to do with what are identified as 'structural differences among traits' (Schneider, 1991, p. 548ff). The research work in this social psychological framework is concerned with identifying systematic differences between traits (adjectives) in terms of the different types of cognitive

inference they mediate. Such traditions, the former more directly anchored in the domain of personality and the latter in social cognition, can be regarded as work concerned with a systematic analysis of the properties of terms used in everyday language in the description and commentary on persons; in other words, what one may, broadly speaking, refer to as 'personality language'. The aim of this chapter is to furnish one possible analytic framework to chart questions that have been addressed on the subject of personality and language, as well as questions that have as yet not been systematically addressed. The main part uses this framework and provides examples of the type of research conducted to date. The conclusions provide an outline of a potential research agenda in this domain, listing, among other things, research items that remain open.

## Towards a framework for personality and language

There are a number of different ways in which personality and language have been regarded as the subject of research, but to our knowledge, there has not been a systematic framework that has been used to examine the different facets of the relationship between language and personality. One such possible framework is provided below with the intention of bringing some order into this field.

The very first question that one can start with is about where and in which form language makes provisions for the 'person'. It is undoubtedly the case that the category of the person is marked in language at the first and most basic level, in terms of personal pronouns, and with different indices to distinguish *between* persons as entities (although this may not necessarily be a universal — see below). Such markers can be seen as indices which reflect the category of the person as such. The next set of markers in language consists of those linguistic indices or terms that give colour and shape to this category. Thus, there are a large number of verbs that are available to describe the actions of a person as distinct from other actions as well as a number of verbs to describe the cognitive, emotional states that people experience in relation to each other. These verbs can be referred to as interpersonal terms and they constitute an integral part of what can be regarded as personality language. Another set of terms, describing persons in a less contextualized manner than verbs, are adjectives, to the extent that they abstract from the here and now of the person by identifying a person's 'enduring' qualities. Adjectives (also known more popularly in personality as dispositions or traits) have been the bread and butter of a considerable amount of personality work (some of which is described below), generally with a view to examining the semantic properties of adjectives.

These particular linguistic categories (pronouns, interpersonal verbs, adjectives) have generally been examined without any focused concern about specific linguistic features that may systematically distinguish between and within such categories. Such features may actually contribute to an improved understanding of the regularities that one observes in studies examining the semantic properties of these terms, and the attempts to apply such categories as psychologically meaningful properties or

dimensions capturing 'constitutive' features of persons. The same criticism applies to work that is concerned with the cognitive, representational properties of adjectives (for example, Hampson *et al.*, 1986; John *et al.*, 1991, *inter alia*). There is some recent work, however, that attempts to introduce a more systematic understanding of the linguistic properties of these terms independent of the psychological implications that they may carry (for example, Semin and Fiedler, 1991).

A different type of analysis that one can identify in this domain is at a more descriptive level. This work consists of approaches that attempt to identify lay or everyday theories of personality as they are expressed and found in ordinary language. Examples of this type of research can be found in studies on, for instance, everyday conceptions or ordinary language theories of the genotypic and phenotypic bases of extraversion–introversion (cf. Semin and Krahé, 1987). These descriptive approaches generally pursue the objective of contrasting everyday conceptions of personality as they are found or manifested in ordinary language with 'scientific' theories of personality. The interesting question that such descriptive research poses is whether scientific theories in personality constitute anything more than the descriptive theories that one encounters in ordinary language. Here, the concern is with the content of representations that are socially shared (possibly in Moscovici's, 1984, sense) rather than with language in the narrower sense, as in the type of emphasis on personality and language noted earlier, which is concerned with linguistic markers of persons, their actions, states, and personality.

The final range of research in this field treats language as a diagnostic instrument (from both a lay and a scientific perspective) in order to identify whether and how language use (for example, in speech) can be taken as an index of systematic differences in personality. Thus, language is used in this context as practice (or parole), and the interest is certainly not in distinct properties of language as such in marking persons and personality, but in individual differences in speech. This threefold distinction (see Table 10.1) characterizes the possible range of research in the domain of personality and language.

**Table 10.1** Possible domains of personality language

| Aspect of language examined | Examples of properties | Information yield |
|---|---|---|
| Linguistic categories | Personal pronouns, action and state verbs, adjectives | Psychological implications for the representation of persons and information processing |
| World knowledge as sedimented in language | Ordinary language theories of personality | Analysis of distinctive individual difference models |
| Speech | Accent, speed, vocabulary, etc. | Diagnostic tool for individual differences |

## Personality and language

### *Language and markers of persons*

There are a number of different ways in which persons and their features are marked in language. A variety of approaches within social psychology, cross-cultural psychology, anthropological psychology, and personality have addressed different facets of specific linguistic categories. One instance is work concerned with the cross-cultural implications of the availability of personal pronouns for the cultural constitution of the category of the person (for example, Heelas and Lock, 1981).

### Personal pronouns

Indeed, one of the fundamental ways in which persons are marked in language is by personal pronouns. A very important one is the linguistic marking of 'self' with the personal pronoun 'I' as distinct from non-self (cf. Hallowell, 1971, p. 90). Mauss (1938/1985), for instance, suggests that all linguistic communities (cultures) must have the personal pronoun 'I' and other related *personal pronouns, or positional suffixes* dealing with relationships that exist between a speaker and the object that is being spoken about. It is by no means clearly established (despite what Mauss and Hallowell maintain) that personal pronouns and the use of 'I' are a universally established and distinct category. For instance, Best writes (in relation to the earlier Maori) that 'it is well to bear in mind that a native so thoroughly identifies with his tribe that he is ever employing the first personal pronoun [when referring to his tribe]' (1924, vol. 1, p. 397; cf. also Johanson, 1954, pp. 35–9).

Personal pronouns constitute one of the categories that can be seen in Table 10.2. Aside from personal pronouns and positional or possessional suffixes, there are distinct categories in language (*interpersonal terms*) which refer to persons, their doings, and their feelings as well as their qualities or properties. The distinct devices that are meant are: *interpersonal verbs*, which refer to actions (such as, help, cheat, kiss, phone, etc.) and states (such as, love, hate, despise, etc.) and *adjectives*, which are essentially devices that are used to describe properties of persons — traits or dispositions (such as, charismatic, friendly, lovable, introverted) (cf. Semin and Fiedler, 1988, 1991). These linguistic devices mark different features of personality, ranging from behaviours, to states, to traits or dispositions. There are a number

**Table 10.2** Linguistic categories with implications for personality

| Linguistic category | Psychological implications/referent |
|---|---|
| Personal pronouns | Category of person |
| Verbs of action | Behaviour |
| Verbs of state | Affective/cognitive relations |
| Adjectives | Dispositions/traits |

of research traditions within social psychology and personality that focus on interpersonal verbs and adjectives with different theoretical and empirical strategies. In the following, brief overviews of these approaches are provided.

## Adjectives as dispositional markers

One of the longest-standing traditions in personality language is research which has addressed the features of adjectives with a view to providing taxonomic representations of personality. The idea is to examine how personality characteristics have been coded in language. Thus, one has approached this problem in this tradition by investigating trait terms and other personality descriptive terms. The guiding view was provided by Cattell:

> The position we shall adopt is a very direct one . . . making only the one assumption that all aspects of human personality which are or have been of importance, interest or utility have already been recorded in the substance of language. For, throughout history, the most fascinating subject of general discourse, and also that in which it has been most vitally necessary to have adequate, representative symbols, has been human behavior. Necessity could not possibly have been barren where so little apparatus is required to permit the birth of invention. (1943, p. 483)

This so called 'sedimentation' or 'lexical hypothesis' (Goldberg, 1981) has provided a general intellectual framework for much research focusing on examinations of how to represent interrelationships between trait terms (adjectives) (see Hofstee and De Raad, Chapter 3 in this volume; Ostendorf and Angleitner, Chapter 4 in this volume and Krahé, 1992, Chapter 3). As some (such as, Goldberg, 1989) point out, the origins of this hypothesis may be even older (Galton, 1984). The current work focuses on what may be regarded as a mainly methodological entry (essentially factor analytic) to find the dimensions by which one may have the best possible representation of the trait terms. This essentially consists of finding properties common to a variety of trait terms that allow a simpler representation of the enormous variety that one can find in a dictionary (for example, Allport and Odbert, 1936, extracted approximately 18,000 terms descriptive of personality).

The active research line on this theme which finds its modern origins in the early sixties (Norman, 1963; Tupes and Christal, 1961) employing different data collection methods with different subjects and conditions, yielded a consistent and stable factorial structure. The precise labelling of these factors is a matter of debate. One consensus presented by Goldberg and his colleagues (for example, Peabody and Goldberg, 1989) suggest the following descriptive labels for these factors: I surgency (bold–timid). II agreeableness (warm–cold). III conscientiousness (thorough–careless); IV emotional stability (relaxed–tense); and V culture (intelligent–unintelligent). More recently, this work has provided an interesting advance by combining factorial with circumplex models (for example, Hofstee *et al.*, 1992). The interesting and problematic issue in this context is what these representations of adjectives in fact mean (cf. Mulaik, 1964). Earlier work oscillated between ascribing the stable patterns to properties of language and properties of personality (for example, five meaning

concepts that are fundamental to the person domain versus five robust factors of personality). The latter view has gained some acceptance in recent years (cf. Digman and Takemoto-Chock, 1981; Peabody, 1987, *inter alia*).

The more radical views have argued that the systematic pattern that emerges in the diverse analyses is merely one mediated by the semantic relationships between the trait terms under examination (for example, D'Andrade, 1965; Mulaik, 1964; Shweder, 1982). This argument focuses on the view that language conventions mediate the judgments that subjects provide, and that the interrelationships between trait terms have to do with conceptual associations rather than being reflective either of personality or properties of personality.

Irrespective of which side of the argument one takes, it is undoubtedly the case that what is being examined is the semantics of adjectives, and that these display some regular and stable properties that are uncovered by factor-analytic approaches. The questions that have not been addressed are whether the semantic factorial solutions: (1) have any linguistic features that distinguish one from another — this would allow one to anchor the systematic relationships that are found in some distinctive and objective properties of language; (2) correspond to any psychological reality in terms of either behaviour or language use (descriptions of persons in everyday life); or (3) have any psychological reality for the make-up of persons. Essentially, this work can be regarded as a concern with the *semantics of linguistic devices in the domain of personality* (for more detail see Semin, 1990).

## Cognitive properties of trait terms

There is a very extensive tradition of research which is mainly located in the social cognition tradition (for example, Reeder and Brewer, 1979. Rothbart and Park, 1986) and which examines systematic differences between trait terms (adjectives) with respect to the differential inferential processes that they mediate. An example is Rothbart and Park's (1986) suggestion that there are systematic differences between adjectives in terms of the ease or difficulty with which their presence or absence in a person can be confirmed or disconfirmed. Generally, adjectives with negative connotations are easy to acquire and hard to get rid of. The reverse is found to apply for traits with positive connotations. For instance, one observation of dishonest behaviour is sufficient to identify the presence of a property (dishonesty), but you need a large number of disconfirmations of dishonesty or a large number of confirmatory instances to infer that the person is honest. This work, which has in part been confirmed (cf. Funder and Dobroth, 1987), is derived from earlier work by Reeder and his colleagues (for example, Reeder, 1979; Reeder and Brewer, 1979). This work shows that morality-related behaviours with negative connotations have a higher diagnostic value than behaviours with positive connotations in the same domain. A contrasting pattern is observed for ability-related behaviours, where positive evidence is regarded as more diagnostic than negative evidence.

A further related field is concerned with the representational properties of adjectives, and this work, conducted by Hampson, Goldberg, and their colleagues

(for example, Hampson *et al.*, 1986, 1987; John *et al.*, 1991) is based on the argument that traits exist in hierarchical structures, with broad traits subsuming narrower traits in the same behavioural domain. Trait (or adjective) breadth is defined in terms of the number of behaviours that a trait encompasses. A broad trait encompasses a large number of behaviours and a narrow one only a sub-set of those subsumed in a broad-trait category. A typical instance they use to illustrate this argument is the relation between 'reliable' and 'punctual'. The former refers to a range of behaviours across a number of situations and occasions, whereas the latter refers to only a sub-set of the same or related behaviours. One of the types of question that arise in this type of work is how choice of narrow or broad terms is influenced in descriptions of others (for example, Hamilton *et al.*, 1992; John *et al.*, 1991).

The main problem with this type of work is the inevitable impression of circularity of hierarchical relations or inferential properties. To the extent that there are no independent and external anchors in language by which differences between adjectives can be identified, research and theory on, for instance, trait hierarchy relations will always arouse the possible critique of circularity: if I choose broad and narrow traits on *a priori* empirical grounds than I shall always prove my theory! Although this work is highly informative it still requires some conceptual advance.

Finally, there are the beginnings of some work which is more linguistically anchored, suggesting different morphological origins for specific personality referent terminology. This finds its origins in early personality work, such as activity, state, and trait terms. The first category can be shown to be derived from verbs of action (help–helpful), the middle category derives from verbs of state (like–likeable), and the last category consists of adjectives which do not have a verb stem (such as, friendly, extraverted, etc.). This argument, developed by Semin and Fiedler (1991), also extends to differential influence implications of interpersonal verbs for personality, where it is shown that verbs of action in description of interpersonal relations give rise to strong dispositional inferences, in contrast with verbs of state (Semin and Marsman, 1991).

## Everyday language and personality

Another concern that has enjoyed a growing interest is the relationship between theories of personality as they are represented in everyday language and so-called 'scientific' theories of personality (cf. Furnham, 1990b; Semin, 1987, 1990). Here the notion of language is used with a broader reference to common-sense theories of personality as they are represented in language as the repository of world knowledge.

The counterpart to examinations of how personality is represented in language (at different levels of analysis of language) is the question of how these terms, categories, concepts, or theories are employed and deployed in discourse. How do we explain our own and other people's behaviours? Which types of personality theory do we bring to bear upon certain types of behaviour that we witness, in order to

make them meaningful? When do we utilize personality theories and when not? In a sense, these are all questions that have enjoyed a long research history in social psychology, particularly under the rubric of 'attribution theory' (for a recent review and synthesis, see Hewstone, 1989). More recently, there has been a re-emphasis of the role played by communication and language use in how such attributional inferences are mediated (cf. Fiedler and Semin, 1992). The more specific question addressed by the research in this rubric is about the types of systematic everyday theory about personality that one finds in ordinary language and the status of such everyday theories. It is to this that we now turn.

With ordinary language, the reference is to knowledge that is stored in language as the product of cultural evolution and passed on in socialization (cf. Berger, 1966). Obviously, there are diverse facets of knowledge that are found in ordinary language, also termed 'common-sense knowledge'. The aspect that is relevant in the context of this chapter is the representation of persons and personality. The particular research tradition that has examined 'common-sense knowledge' with respect to how personality is represented has grown chiefly with the aim of empirically contrasting the similarities and differences between 'scientific' knowledge and 'everyday knowledge' (cf. Semin, 1987, 1990). The general argument guiding this work is the following: 'psychological realities must always refer to the corresponding cultural and historical background upon which they are predicated' (Semin, 1990, p. 164). To that extent, the appropriateness of 'scientific' theories depends upon the degree to which they accurately reflect socially shared theories (namely, common-sense knowledge). There is a substantial amount of evidence which comes from empirical investigations of diverse facets of the person, ranging from different features of personality to aspects of intelligence, that suggests considerable overlap between conceptions developed within a 'scientific tradition' and common-sense knowledge. These studies demonstrate that lay conceptions of intelligence and creativity (for example, Sternberg, 1985), extraversion–introversion (for a review, see Semin, 1987), common-sense abilities to discriminate the different facets of multiphasic personality inventories (cf. Krahé, 1989; Semin, 1990), lay conceptions of neuroticism (Furnham, 1984, 1990b), and genotypic assumptions about the basis of extraversion–introversion (Semin and Krahé, 1987) are no different from 'scientific conceptions'. Indeed, the conclusion of these diverse studies is that the diverse methodologies employed in personality under the term 'scientific method' have essentially reproduced systematic knowledge that is available in ordinary language or in common sense.

The most interesting aspect of this work is probably the fascinating multitude of conceptions that exist simultaneously in everyday language, whereby the scientific work focuses on slices of these conceptions as and when scientific interest is raised on a specific feature of psychological reality. What has attracted little interest is how people use these theories about personality and different facets of the person in everyday discourse and how such use effects self- and other-perception, as well as the functions of such theories of personality in terms of predictive and retrodictive explanations or accounts in ordinary discourse.

### Speech and personality

Another way of looking at personality and language is to examine the differences in speech as a function of the dispositions of speakers, or alternatively to examine how adopting distinct speech habits may influence personality. The question that has been addressed is more specifically the following: how do distinct personality types use language and can one use language as a diagnostic tool to discriminate between different types of personality? This question about how personality influences speech can be examined by showing the relationship between individual differences and systematic differences in language use, such as linguistic code in use (for example, elaborated or restricted), grammar, vocabulary, accent, and speed, among other observable linguistic phenomena. Indeed, most previous reviews of the personality and language domain (for example, Brown and Bradshaw, 1985; Furnham, 1990a; Scherer, 1979) have considered this specific focus as the locus of the personality–language domain at the expense of other considerations.

The review that Scherer (1979) provided of the existence of personality markers in speech still remains valid. He argues that 'It is not sheer scientific curiosity which stimulates further inquiry into the origins, functions and mechanisms of personality marking. It has become painfully clear in the course of this review that most research done in this area has been carried out in the spirit of a drag-net fishing expedition' (p. 194). In general, he identified four aspects of speech in their relation to personality. The first is the *frequency, intensity*, and *quality of voice* as a function of dispositional characteristics. The evidence of an association between, for example extraversion and voice intensity, or higher frequency and competence and dominance, remain tendentious findings. The second aspect is *fluency*, namely the presence or absence of pauses and speech rate. Extraverts, for instance, appear to show a higher speech rate than introverts and fewer pauses. The third aspect refers to *morphological* and *syntactical properties* in their relation to personality. One could, for instance, speculate that cognitively more complex people would be more likely to generate more complex sentence structures. Again, the research in this field, as Scherer (1979) presents it, seems to be inconclusive. Finally, *conversational behaviour* constitutes the fourth factor. The seemingly consistent finding here is the high correlation between large amount of verbal output and extraversion.

Overall, the research in this field is relatively inconclusive and unsystematic. There is, of course, the other side of the coin, which is concerned with what the types of personality inference are that people make on the basis of specific speech styles. This work has already been extensively reviewed (cf. Brown and Bradshaw, 1985; Scherer, 1979).

## Conclusions and directions

Characteristically, the research on personality and language in its diverse facets described above takes a non-dynamic and synchronic approach. Its other shortcoming

is the decontextualized focus on language, as in the case of studies on the semantic properties of the adjectival (trait) domain. This is not to undervalue this work, but to draw attention to the *ecological* conditions of the interface between language and personality. It is in conversation that we use personality language to describe ourselves, our friends, or our enemies. It is within such dynamic contexts that we strategically employ different interpersonal terms, depending on the demands of the situation and our interlocutors. Other types of situation involving personality language include those in which we form impressions about others, and there is substantial research in social cognition about how people use category membership, for instance, to form impressions (for example, Allport, 1954; Fiske and Neuberg, 1990; Tajfel, 1981). There is precious little on how we use language in mediating personality impressions and how such impressions are shaped in the course of social interaction.

If one were to employ the distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' advanced by Saussure, then one would locate the majority of the work to date on the subject on the side of 'langue', because this research has little to report on interaction and communication as a dialogical, processual, and negotiated activity in which central aspects of personality language are manifested. This includes, in our case, the use of the knowledge about persons, as manifested in studies on ordinary language analyses of personality, and theories guiding the inferences people make about personality from speech in discourse about persons. The idealized knowledge we have about language and personality, represented in Table 10.1, refers to work on world knowledge as sedimented in language with particular reference to personality, on the one hand. On the other, it refers to linguistic categories such as personal pronouns, interpersonal verbs, and adjectives. Finally, it refers to speech, which has been examined as a diagnostic tool. But none of this research examines personality language in the sense of how world knowledge that is sedimented in language is deployed in discourse, through the strategic use of specific, personality-referent linguistic categories. The examination of *how* and *when* people apply person terms is an important question, which follows from the distinctions introduced in this chapter. Such analyses of personality language in dialogue would help to elucidate the processes involved in the interpretation of actions and the negotiation of interpretations. Thus, the direction of research that is regarded as a field in need of examination is the analysis of how person terms are used in ordinary discourse, where they feature naturally, and of how they influence the reception and manifestation of personality.

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