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Controlling the narrative: Euphemistic language affects judgments of actions while avoiding perceptions of dishonesty

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Abstract

The present work examined the extent to which evaluations of actions could be biased by the strategic use of euphemistic (agreeable) and dysphemistic (disagreeable) terms. Across multiple studies, we demonstrate that evaluations of actions are made more favorable by replacing a disagreeable term (e.g., torture) with a semantically related agreeable term (e.g., enhanced interrogation) in an act's description. Notably, the influence of these terms was reduced (but not eliminated) when actions were described in a less ambiguous (i.e., more detailed) manner. Despite their influence, participants judged both agreeable and disagreeable action descriptions as largely truthful and distinct from lies, and judged agents using such descriptions as more trustworthy and moral than liars. Overall, the present findings suggest that a strategic speaker can, through the careful use of language, sway the opinions of others while avoiding many of the reputational costs associated with less subtle forms of linguistic manipulation (e.g., lying).