

RHETORICAL ELICITATION OF AGREEMENT IN PERSUASION

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The persuasive effect of the rhetorical elicitation of agreement responses was assessed under various conditions of initial attitude relative to the attitudinal position advocated. Additionally, the resulting resistance to counterpersuasion was measured. A significant increase in the effectiveness of persuasion was obtained, especially under conditions of initially opposed attitude. No facilitation of effectiveness was found under conditions of initially neutral attitude. Resistance to counterpersuasion was not differentially affected by treatments. The enhancement of cognitive involvement is discussed as an insufficient explanation. A rationale based mainly on the operant learning of the connotations of significance and certainty associated with verbal constructs such as the rhetorical agreement question was developed and employed to explain the results obtained. Also, an alternative explanation was proposed, maintaining that the findings might be due to a lowering of the communicatee's defenses as a consequence of changes in source perception brought about by the style of language used.

Since the Sophists it has been felt that, in a debate situation, it is advantageous for the speaker to get his opponent to express agreement with particular arguments advanced. Frequent agreement, it was felt, would create the impression of superior knowledge and reasoning on the part of the speaker, and lead the audience to doubt the opponent's expertise and credibility. Schopenhauer (orig. publ. 1864), in proposing his 36 tactics of successful debate, urged speakers to seek the admission of agreement by the opponent, but to avoid admitting agreement themselves, should the opponent employ this strategy. In debate, the most apparent means of eliciting the critical responses of admission are the use of questions to the opponent, directly soliciting the expression of agreement. "Isn't this so and so?" may be considered the prototype of such an agreement question. This is not to say, however, that the elicitation of an agreement response is necessarily via questions only. Other verbal constructs could be used, and nonverbal cues are not inconceivable in this function.

¹ The author wishes to thank Percy H. Tannenbaum, for valuable comments, and David O. Sears and James L. Hoyt, for their help with research materials.

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Such speculations concerning debate could be extended and applied to persuasive situations not immediately involving an opponent. A particular opponent may be challenged in absentia, or an "imaginary" or "generalized" opponent may be created and "argued with." Also, the speaker might behave toward his audience, or toward subsections of it, as if it were an opponent, able and likely to express its stands on issues raised in connection with agreement-eliciting cues. In such situations, which are characteristic of persuasion in the context of mass communication, the provocation of an agreement response is *rhetorical* in the sense that an overt response of an "opponent" is not possible or, at least, not expected by the speaker.

If the elicitation of agreement responses is rhetorical rather than direct, it most probably does not result in the overt expression of agreement, which is presumed to have the suggested critical implications in debate. Apparently, then, other mechanisms must be involved to account for any particular effects brought about by the use of this rhetorical tactic or strategy, which is so heavily employed in all domains of persuasive communication. To explore the way in which the rhetorical elicitation of agreement operates, three possible psychological mechanisms are developed, and a procedure is devised which permits the assessment of the relative predictive accuracy of the various models.

This investigation utilizes the agreement question, which is proposed to be the communication mechanism par excellence to elicit an agreement response in the recipient. Grammatical transformations to interrogative forms are used to operationalize the provocation of agreement without affecting the content of arguments presented. The crucial experimental variation is thus purely syntactical.

The agreement question is unique in that it appears to be suggestive of an agreement response. It typically implies agreement with the assertion conveyed in it. For example, the question "Prices have gone up, haven't they?" seems biased toward the answer "Yes, they have." The elicitation of the objection "No, they haven't" is, in all likelihood, not intended or expected. This agreement bias can take negative form, grammatically speaking. For example, it should be recognized that the response "No, it hasn't" to the question "Driving hasn't become any safer, has it?" expresses genuine agreement. In general, any assertion, positive or negative, put into an agreement question undergoes a double transformation: declarative to interrogative, and reversal of the affirmative-negative mode. Thus, the basic forms are " $A b$." \rightarrow " $A b \nu$?" or " $A \sim b$?" and " $A \sim b$." \rightarrow " $A \sim b \alpha$?" or " $A b$?", where $A b$ denotes an elementary assertion, ν some negative, assertion-bound question marker (e.g., Isn't it? Haven't they? Don't we?), and α some positive, assertion-bound question marker (e.g., Is it? Have they? Do we?). These various forms are not necessarily equipotent with respect to the elicitation of agreement responses. It is conceivable that the particular forms meet differential habit strengths as the result of preferences in usage.

A first rationale from which to predict persuasive implications of the rhetorical use of agreement questions may be advanced on the basis of learning-theoretical considerations, mainly (but certainly not exclusively) involving operant conditioning. It is assumed that the mature language user has a conditioning history of both the encoding and the decoding of agreement questions in a social context. Typically, the agreement question is used to elicit the respondent's admission of

the appropriateness and the value of the persuader's argumentation. This "having to agree" with some point of view—being "nailed"—is characteristically interpreted and experienced as the losing, or at least the partial losing, of an argument. Obviously, the assertion conveyed in the agreement question must have some minimal power or strength, defined as subjectively felt significance and certainty, to resist easy refutation. The encoder should thus tend to elicit agreement with only the best arguments available to him. A poor choice, resulting in disagreement, would have undesirable, unpleasant consequences. It can be assumed that if the question user starts at a theoretical point of non-differentiation, the conveyed "good" argument will be positively reinforced and develop response strength, and the conveyed "poor" argument will be negatively reinforced and lose response strength. This development may be assisted by other mechanisms, such as, for example, social learning. The instrumental value in a social situation defines the reinforcement contingencies, and these contingencies may account for the hypothesized development of a pronounced association of the agreement question with relatively powerful arguments. It is proposed that the association established for the agreement question generalizes to the rhetorical agreement question. As a consequence, the rhetorical agreement question gains in persuasive power, relative to the assertion in statement form. This power increase should be independent of the respondent's initial attitude. Thus, the question form, in general, should exhibit greater effectiveness. Additionally, it might be expected that the significance-denoting rhetorical agreement question somewhat facilitates resistance to counter persuasion.

In developing a second, quite independent rationale, it is assumed that the mature language user has developed a very pronounced tendency to respond with some answer to a direct question, since both the inability to respond meaningfully and the refusal to respond usually define noxious states in the respondent. Whenever the communication situation provides cues which make the overt response appear unnecessary and improper, it is expected that this response tendency

generalizes to a covert response. Such situations exist in many social exchanges, but they are particularly characteristic of mass communication: the persuader on the air, for example, addressing the recipient from the screen, asks questions that are rhetorical by physical circumstances—if feedback irrelevancy rather than communicator intent is accepted as the critical definitional criterion. The “rhetoricalness” of questions, not apparent in the encoding behavior, but rather in situational cues, may effect the inhibition of the *overt* components of the verbal response. It may be assumed, however, on the basis of the postulated response generalization, that the executed *covert* response produces psychological consequences similar to those associated with the entire response—social factors aside.

It may be argued that the assumed covert agreement response elicited by a rhetorical agreement question, as compared to the relatively passive decoding of an assertion in statement form, raises the individual's level of awareness. It makes him cognizant of his position on a particular issue, and it may activate issue-related cognitions to consolidate and bolster his evaluations, thereby facilitating his involvement with the issue, and possibly producing some self-commitment. If the position advocated in the persuasive assertion coincides with the individual's initial position, the elicitation of agreement responses should enhance communication effectiveness. Similarly, if the individual has not developed an explicit stand with respect to the persuasive issue, and consequently his “position” is not dissonant with the one advocated, his greater cognitive involvement should also enhance effectiveness. However, if the position advocated conflicts with the individual's position, increased awareness and cognitive involvement should only facilitate the recognition of the discrepancy, and thus yield a more vigorous refusal to accept the persuasive assertion. In this case the individual would respond with *disagreement* to the agreement question, and this disagreement would be associated with the activation of refutation attempts and result in the explicit rejection of the persuasive assertion. Effectiveness of the rhetorical agreement question under such conditions

would therefore be lower rather than higher than that of the statement form.

The assumption of greater cognitive involvement associated with the covert verbal response to a rhetorical agreement question also has implications for predictions regarding resistance to counterpersuasion (cf. McGuire, 1964). The greater explicitness in the individual's cognition of his attitudinal position may result in self-commitment, due to his motivational tendency to perceive his own formed opinions as nonfluctuating and stable. This self-commitment should produce more pronounced resistance to attitude change. In contrast, communicating the persuasive assertion in statement form should leave the individual relatively unprotected against counterattacks.

Finally, in proposing a third rationale, it may be argued that the use of rhetorical questions defines a delivery style of relatively high “extraversion” (Bowers, 1965). The relatively dynamic presentation, compared to the “subdued” presentation of assertions in statement form, might make the communicator's persuasive attempt more apparent, and respondents might protect themselves against his “rhetorical virtuosity” by discounting his arguments somewhat (cf. Dietrich, 1946). As a consequence, the statement form should have relatively greater effectiveness, independent of initial attitude. Similarly, the statement form should yield more pronounced resistance, since only the dynamic presentation creates some doubts as to the trustworthiness of the source.

METHOD

Subjects

Ninety male and female undergraduates from introductory psychology classes at the University of Wisconsin served as subjects. They participated to earn extra points toward their course grade. The male/female ratio was approximately 2:3 throughout all experimental conditions.

Design

A 2×3 factorial design was employed, based on two levels of grammatical form (statement, rhetorical agreement question) of critical arguments in the persuasive communication, and on three levels of initial attitude (unfavorable, neutral, favorable) toward the person constituting the focus of the persuasive issue. Fifteen subjects were assigned to each of the various conditions.

Procedure

Six groups of 15 subjects met with the experimenter for a single session. Each group was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of grammatical form. Within each group, 5 subjects were randomly assigned to each condition of initial attitude. This was unobtrusively accomplished through the distribution of manipulatory booklets in prearranged order. Subjects were not permitted to interact with one another in any way. The seating arrangement eliminated face-to-face contacts. All instructions were tape-recorded.

The experimenter introduced the study as a project sponsored by the American Bar Association, aimed at the improvement of court procedures. The particular research interest was said to be the decision process within a jury, specifically, how the individual jury member forms various attitudes and how these attitudes are modified as novel, relevant information is received during the proceedings of further testimony and the summations of prosecution and defense. Deviations from standard court procedures were explained as necessary to facilitate the systematic investigation of such information-dependent judgmental adjustments.

The trial chosen, the case of "The State of New York vs Johnny Myers," was developed from the Burdick case used by Sears (1965). It involves a juvenile who was charged with second-degree murder in the killing of his father. The defense claimed that the killing was manslaughter.

Subjects received a booklet of background information on the case, giving all relevant personal data on the defendant, the deceased, and their family, the opening statements of the court, descriptions of prosecution and defense motions, the testimony of police officers and the coroner, and, in the appropriate conditions, that of the defendant's school principal and a social worker. After exposure to this preliminary information, the subjects' attitudes toward the defendant were assessed.

Assessment of initial attitude was followed by the subjects' exposure to the critical experimental communication: the tape-recorded summation of the defense attorney. The summation made references to some testimony that had not been previously presented, and thus was not redundant. After exposure, subjects received a second booklet instructing them to generate a recommendation of a fair and adequate prison term for the defendant.

Recommendation of the prison term was followed by the subjects' exposure to the countercommunication: the tape-recorded summation of the prosecution attorney, who also made reference to thus far not presented testimony. After exposure, the subjects received a third booklet, and again recommended a prison term.

Finally, the actual purpose of the study was fully disclosed. Postexperimental interviews indicated that the subjects were deeply interested in the case. Without exception, they performed their tasks with extreme sincerity.

Manipulation of initial attitude. In the neutral

condition the testimony of the defendant's principal and a social worker was omitted. The remaining testimony was strictly factual and relatively ambiguous with respect to evaluations of the defendant. The available evidence did not permit the development of strong feelings pro or con, that is, pronounced positive or negative affect toward the defendant.

The testimony given by the principal and the social worker was manipulated to create negative or positive affect in the corresponding conditions of initial attitude. In the negative condition, the principal described the defendant as being thoroughly selfish, unreliable, and "stealing from other boys, disrupting classes, passing obscene pictures around, and being consistently one of the worst discipline problems in the school," whereas in the positive condition, he described the boy as modest, self-reliant, helpful, and "behaving in the classroom as well as all the other boys." Similarly, in the negative condition, the social worker described him as difficult, aggressive, and a gang member involved in the robbery of a grocery store, and in the positive condition as well-balanced, concerned, and a passive gang member not at all involved in the gang's objectionable activities.

Manipulation of grammatical form. The summation by the defense was composed of relatively independent parts presenting critical evidence. Typically, an argument was developed and then summarized in a concluding assertion. Ten of these argument-condensing, persuasive statements were chosen to be transformed from the statement form into the agreement-question form. Four of the transformed sentences formed a recapitulation of general arguments. The six remaining sentences were placed after the build-up of particular arguments, and were interspersed throughout the text. Four affirmative statements were transformed to the negative-interrogative form (e.g., "On this night, and in this condition, Frank Myers was a threat to his own daughter" to "Wasn't Frank Myers a threat to his own daughter?"). Analogously, four negative statements were transformed to the affirmative-interrogative form (e.g., "But he never used his knife as a weapon before" to "But did he ever use his knife as a weapon before?"). The remaining two statements were transformed from simple affirmative to affirmative with a negative-interrogative agreement-eliciting appendix (e.g., "Johnny was a peaceful boy" to "Johnny was a peaceful boy, wasn't he?").

The two versions of the defense speech were identical in all other respects. Copies were made from an especially prepared tape of the statement version. For the question version, only the critical statements were cut out and replaced by similarly prepared transformed agreement questions. The splicing was undetectable.

Dependent Measures

Initial attitude toward the defendant was assessed on a verbally labeled 7-point scale, ranging from "very unfavorable" through "very favorable."

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF EXPERIMENTALLY MANIPULATED INITIAL ATTITUDES BEFORE DEFENSE AND PROSECUTION SPEECHES

Source	df	MS	F
Grammatical form (A)	1	544	.900
Initial attitude (B)	2	38.633	63.882*
A × B	2	.144	239
Error	84	.605	

* $p < .001$.

Recommended prison terms, the measure devised to assess the impact of the persuasive communications, were recorded in years, with ½ year as the smallest unit of measurement. Subjects expressed their recommendations in the form of a number written in an allocated space. The range of permissible sentences was from ½ year, the minimum term for manslaughter, to 50 years, the maximum term for second-degree murder.

The persuasive impact of the critical experimental communication was measured in the first prison-term recommendation. Resistance to counterpersuasion was measured mainly in the difference in years between the first and the second prison-term recommendation.

RESULTS

Manipulation of Initial Attitude

In order to determine whether the manipulation of initial attitude toward the defendant was successful, an analysis of variance was performed on the attitude ratings. As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, the achieved differentiation is quite satisfactory. The mean scores exhibit the desired differences in the attitude conditions, but show only negligible differences between the grammatical-form groups within any particular attitude condition. The scores of the neutral condition appear to reflect a tolerable, slight bias toward favorableness (4.0 defines a neutral score). Both the conditions of unfavorable attitude

TABLE 2

MEAN INITIAL ATTITUDE SCORES

Grammatical form	Initial attitude		
	Unfavorable	Neutral	Favorable
Statement	5.200 _a	3.867 _b	3.067 _c
Question	5.200 _a	3.600 _b	2.867 _c

Note.—Scores range from 1, very favorable, through 7, very unfavorable. Differences between the means were analyzed by the Newman-Keuls method. Means having different letter subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

TABLE 3

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF RECOMMENDED PRISON TERMS AFTER THE DEFENSE SPEECH

Source	df	MS	F
Grammatical form (A)	1	29.469	5.308*
Initial attitude (B)	2	96.886	17.452**
A × B	2	12.386	2.231
Error	84	5.552	

* $p < .025$

** $p < .001$

and favorable attitude should be considered as only minimally polarized (the scores of 5.0 and 3.0 were both qualified with "slightly" on the attitude scale). This minimal polarization has the advantage of leaving adequate space for polarizing effects to take, but it might constitute a rather weak manifestation of the theoretically relevant initial predispositions met by the various rhetorical forms of a communication.

Impact of the Persuasive Communication

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4, the agreement-question version of the persuasive communication, taken across all conditions of initial attitude, yielded a significantly lower mean recommended prison term than the statement version. Inspection of the mean scores of the individual experimental groups reveals that the effect is highly significant under conditions of initially unfavorable attitude toward the defendant ($p < .005$, by multiple t test). Under conditions of initially favorable attitude, the effect is quite pronounced, but fails to meet conventional statistical criteria (p approaches .10 by multiple

TABLE 4

MEAN RECOMMENDED PRISON TERMS AFTER THE DEFENSE SPEECH

Grammatical form	Initial attitude			Combined initial attitudes
	Unfavorable	Neutral	Favorable	
Statement	6.600 _a	2.433 _{b,c}	2.600 _{b,c}	3.878 _(x)
Question	4.133 _b	2.533 _{b,c}	1.533 _c	2.733 _(y)

Note.—Scores are in years. Differences between means were analyzed by the Newman-Keuls method. Means having no letter in their subscripts in common differ significantly at $p < .05$. The combined means, denoted by parenthesized subscripts, differ significantly at $p < .025$ ($F = 5.308$, $df = 1/84$).

t test). In contrast, the effect under conditions of initially neutral attitude is negligible.

The comparison across conditions of initial attitude shows the difference-reducing impact of the persuasive communication: the conditions of neutral attitude no longer differ significantly from the conditions of favorable attitude. The relatively greater change in the neutral conditions may be attributed to the prior lack of favorable information about the defendant. In the favorable-attitude conditions, this information was highly redundant, and, additionally, the recommendation of sentences may have suffered a floor effect (subjects were restricted to a minimum of .5 year—a score chosen by 4 and 5 subjects, respectively, out of 15). Both the redundancy and the floor effect could account for the failure to obtain a significant differentiation in the grammatical-form variation in the conditions of favorable attitude. The conditions of unfavorable attitude show a markedly weaker impact of the persuasive communication, with the statement version as particularly less effective.

Resistance to Counterpersuasion

The change brought about by the countercommunication was highly consistent throughout all experimental conditions. The analysis of variance performed on the two prison terms as repeated measures yielded a significant change, averaging 2.5 years, toward longer sentences ($F = 81.1$, $df = 1/84$, $p < .001$). This change did not interact with the experimental variables to any appreciable degree (all interactions yielding $F < 1$). In order to test more directly for differential effects in the amount of change brought about by counterpersuasion, an analysis of variance was performed on the change scores, defined as the increase in the length of prison terms from the first to the second recommendation. The experimental variables, grammatical form and initial attitude, and their interaction failed to produce notable effects (all being associated with $F < 1$). The observed negligible differentiation between the means of difference scores must be considered trivial.

Given the significant differentiation between experimental conditions as a function of the critical persuasive communication, on the one

hand, and the homogeneous effect of the countercommunication throughout all conditions, on the other, it may be expected that the residual impact of the manipulated persuasive communication; that is, the impact remaining after counterpersuasion, would exhibit, generally speaking, the significant differentiation found prior to counterpersuasion. This expectation was confirmed in analyses performed on the second prison-term recommendations.

DISCUSSION

The rationale that agreement questions become associated with assertions characterized by relatively high degrees of subjective significance and certainty, and consequently "mark" relatively powerful arguments, best accounts for the findings obtained. The only inconsistency occurs under conditions of initially neutral attitude. This inconsistency, however, may be explained by the relatively uninformed communicatee's motivation to attend carefully to the content of the message in order to fulfill his assignment. In the absence of conflicting information, the arguments are acceptable, even when given in the potentially weaker statement form. Positive connotations due to the greater strength associated with arguments presented in the form of agreement questions cannot manifest themselves under these conditions. Given positive affect, there also exists the readiness to accept consistent assertions. The presentation of somewhat redundant assertions in the form of agreement questions, under such circumstances, may be more persuasive, not by being more readily acceptable, but rather by serving more pronouncedly as a reassurance for the attitudinal position taken. This reasoning on the significance-marking function of the agreement question suggests its persuasive effect to be most pronounced under conditions of initially opposed attitude. Attitudes slightly polarized against the position advocated may be considered most vulnerable to the implication of significance and certainty of arguments, and the individual holding such a position should be swayed to adopt suggested opinions more readily than individuals initially holding other attitudinal positions. It should be kept in mind that the present

findings were obtained under conditions of only moderately opposed initial attitude. The persuasive effect of rhetorically elicited agreement responses under conditions of extremely opposed initial attitude remains to be empirically explored before more general statements can be made.

In contrast, the results obtained do not bear out the expectations derived from considerations of cognitive involvement. Under conditions of initially unfavorable attitude, the outcome is clearly counter to predictions. Also, the negligible effect under conditions of initially neutral attitude is inconsistent with expectations. The failure to demonstrate reliable differences in support of the facilitation of resistance to counterpersuasion further calls this explanation into question.

With respect to the third rationale proposed, the results in no way support the argument that the use of agreement questions yields an awareness of persuasive intent, which, in turn, activates defensive decoding behavior. On the contrary, it may be argued, consistent with the findings reported, that the rhetorical use of questions creates the impression of minimal intent to persuade. The communicator does not simply state assertions to be adopted, but apparently, by asking questions, "leaves it to the people to decide." As a direct consequence, the communicatee may feel secure and lower his defenses, becoming more susceptible to persuasion. In fact, this reasoning constitutes an alternative explanation of the findings.

Both suggested mechanisms, the significance-marking function of agreement questions and the lowering of defenses due to the perception of minimal intent to persuade on the part of the source, adequately account for the results. In this sense, the explanations are alternative. This does not mean, however, that the two suggested mechanisms need be mutually exclusive. It is conceivable that both operate simultaneously and relatively independently of one another. Most recently, under experimental conditions extremely similar to those of the present investigation, source perception as a function of grammatical variation has been implicated as a mediating factor (Zillmann & Cantor, 1970). A speaker using questions to rhetorically elicit *concession* (the

yielding to the speaker's argumentation for lack of immediately available effective counterarguments) was perceived as exhibiting more pronounced intent to persuade. His audience experienced him as exerting greater pressure to change particular positions held—greater than in a control condition involving the identical argumentation, but without this rhetorical technique. Under conditions of initially opposed attitude, the impact of a persuasive communication was found to decrease as rhetorical means perceived as "pressuring" were involved, and the results may be viewed as consistent with expectations derived from reactance theory (Brehm, 1966). However, since the assumption made in the post hoc explanation of the present study is that of less rather than more perceived persuasive intent associated with the rhetorical elicitation of agreement, a choice between rationales in favor of source mediation would be premature. It appears that the direct empirical assessment of source perception as affected by the rhetorical elicitation of agreement responses, and, equally important, the perception of the degree of significance of arguments conveyed in the form of rhetorical agreement questions versus their expression in statement form, is needed to aid in making a choice between the alternatives, or to help determine the degree to which both mechanisms contribute to the persuasive effects observed.

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(Received August 7, 1970)