

REQUEST SOLICITATION AND SEMANTIC EVOCATION OF
FREEDOM: AN EVALUATION IN A COMPUTER-MEDIATED
COMMUNICATION CONTEXT¹

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Summary.—The “But you are free of . . .” technique is a compliance procedure which solicits someone to comply with a request by simply telling him that he is free to accept or to refuse the request. This semantic evocation leads to increased compliance with the request. A new evaluation of the generality of this technique was tested in an experiment in which subjects received an anonymous electronic mail which asked them to consult the site of a humanitarian association for children. Analysis showed that, when the semantic evocation of freedom is included in the message, a higher compliance rate was observed than in a situation in which this evocation was omitted.

Telling someone that he is free to accept a request made by a solicitor leads to increased compliance with the request compared to a situation without this semantic evocation of freedom. Guéguen and Pascual (2000) found that, when confederates asked subjects in a street to give them money, 10.0% of the solicited people accepted the request in the control condition, whereas 47.5% did in the experimental condition when the confederates asked money of the subjects and finished their request with “but you are free to accept or to refuse.” This technique, called by these authors the “But you are free of . . .” technique, leads to increased compliance with a request but also to subjects’ increased involvement. Guéguen and Pascual (2000) have also found in their experiment that the average amount of gifts granted by the subjects was more in the experimental condition than in the control condition. The “But you are free of . . .” technique is also efficient to induce people to respond to a street survey or to give money to a prosocial organization (Pascual & Guéguen, 2002).

Such results are consistent with the literature on compliance without pressure such as the “foot-in-the-door” (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), “the door-in-the-face” (Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Lee Darby,

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1975), the "low-ball" (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978), but also the technique of the "lure" (Joule, Guillaud, & Weber, 1989). In most of these studies, the request traditionally ended with such sentences as: "it is up to you to see," "up to you to choose," or "but you are free of . . ." Surprisingly, the effect of these sentences was never tested alone even though scientists know that the feeling of freedom is one of the main factors predisposing to compliance (Kiesler, 1971). Some studies have shown that the linguistic aspects of the requests influence compliance. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) have reported that the addition of the sentence "even a penny helps" in a request for the profit of a charitable organization leads to an increase in the amount of donations. This sentence also increases the number of donors (Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987; Reeves & Saucer, 1993). In the same way, Enzle and Harvey (1982) showed that indirect negation in a rhetorical request, e.g., "You will help me, won't you?" elicited greater helping than either a direct negation in a rhetorical request, e.g., "Won't you help me?" or control positive form, e.g., "Will you help me?" Asking someone how he feels improves compliance with a request for help formulated immediately after the subject's response (Howard, 1990). In a similar way, Burger (1986) succeeded in obtaining more purchases from the subjects in his experiment when he gave first a price for a product to a customer, and then, having left him some seconds, he apparently did not offer the remaining content of the offer, saying instead "and that's-not-all." He observed, repeatedly, that this "that's-not-all" technique turns out to be more effective than a situation where no decomposition of the contents of the offer is made. So, overall, such studies seem to attest that the innocuous semantic characteristics of a request can increase subjects' compliance.

Since the effect of the "But you are free of . . ." technique has been replicated in other experiments (Pascual & Guéguen, 2002), the generality of this technique needs to be evaluated in further studies. Moreover, the theoretical explanation of such effect still remains in question. We do not know yet if the semantic evocation of freedom is simply a sufficient condition for increased compliance to the request or if this evocation leads the subject to evaluate positively such a "democratic" solicitor, a positive evaluation which, in return, facilitated compliance with the solicitor's request. Studies have found that positive perception of the solicitor increases compliance with requests (Takemura, 1993). If the semantic evocation of freedom is sufficient enough to enhance compliance, then the efficacy of the "But you are free of . . ." technique could be obtained in a situation where the solicitor is impersonal. So, a situation where subjects receive an e-mail sent by an unknown organization seems an appropriate context in which to test this hypothesis.

METHOD

Subjects

Nine hundred men and women were solicited through their electronic addresses found in different sets of addresses available on the Internet. All the addresses had the ".fr" extension, i.e., were located in France.

Procedure

Subjects were sent electronic mail with the following message, "Would you give five minutes of your time for children in the world who are victims of the mines?" An address for an HTML page was given with the mail. This page was blank except for a 1-cm \times 7-cm button which appeared on the top of the page. According to a random procedure, the following was written on the button: "Enter" for the control group, "Click here!" for the direct solicitation group, and "You are free to click here!" for the "But you are free of . . ." indirect solicitation group. A hypertext link was associated with the button. A one-page Web site containing information about the children who were victims of the mines all over the world appeared on the first half page. An HTML form was presented on the other half page, which solicited people to sign a petition against the mines. A message encouraging people to sign the petition by sending their first names and last names and their e-mail addresses was written on the top of the form. After receiving the e-mail, 48 hours was allowed for the subject to access the Web site and to sign the petition. Two dependent variables were used in this experiment to test the subjects' compliance, (1) the number of subjects who clicked on the button when the e-mail was sent to them and (2) the number of subjects who sent the petition form after visiting the Web site.

RESULTS

Three hundred subjects were tested in each group. In the "Enter" group, the rate of subjects who clicked on the button was 52.7%, whereas it was 65.3% in the "Click here" group and 82.0% in the "You are free" group. An overall difference in distribution of the groups was significant [$\chi^2(N=900)=58.44, p<.001, d=0.18$]. There were statistically more in the "You are free" group than in the "Enter" group [$\chi^2(N=600)=56.68, p<.001, d=0.31$] and in the "Click here" group [$\chi^2(N=600)=21.48, p<.001, d=0.19$]. The two control groups ("Enter" and "Click here") were also statistically differently distributed [$\chi^2(N=600)=9.95, p<.002$]. The second dependent variable was the percent of subjects who sent the petition form. This rate was calculated among the subjects in each condition. In the "Enter" group, the distribution of rate of petition signing was of 4% (12/300), whereas it was 5.67% (17/300) in the "Click here" group and 7.33% (22/300) in the "You are free" group. No overall difference in distribution was

found among the three groups [$\chi^2(N=900)=0.21$, ns, $d=0.01$]. A nonsignificant distribution characterized the "Enter" group and the "You are free" group [$\chi^2(N=600)=3.12$, $p<.077$, $d=0.07$].

DISCUSSION

Our results show that the "But you are free of . . ." technique leads to increased rates of people visiting the site. Findings from face-to-face interactions (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002) confirm the efficiency of this technique in a computer-mediated communication context where the social relation between the solicitor and the person requested is asynchronous and impersonal. This result suggests the efficiency of the "But you are free of . . ." technique can be explained by the semantic evocation of freedom. This hypothesis is consistent with other studies which have shown that the semantic characteristics of the request manipulated by an additional sentence affect the subjects' compliance (Enzle & Harvey, 1982; Howard, 1990; Reeves & Saucer, 1993). Contrary to the findings of Guéguen and Pascual (2000) that with the "but you are free of . . ." technique their subjects gave more money to a panhandler-confederate, our findings did not lead the subject to more involvement in the request; no more petition signing was found in our experiment. The dichotomy of the petition request may explain this result, whereas in Guéguen and Pascual's experiment the dependent variable was continuous. Furthermore, in our experiment, the petition request might have been perceived by the subject as a second request. Because no new evocation of freedom was held on the Web page, no difference was found between the three experimental conditions.

Several factors could explain our results. First, politeness theory could explain the effect of the semantic evocation of freedom. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness refers to phrasing one's remark so as to minimize face threat. Because a polite request is perceived as less threatening for the subject, this may lead to a decrease in reactance and increased compliance to the request. Reciprocity theory (Gouldner, 1960) could also explain our results. Perhaps the semantic evocation of freedom used in our experimental condition reflected consideration for the subject. Then, the subject may have wanted to reciprocate this consideration by visiting the Web site of the solicitor. Several studies have shown this activation to reciprocate is a good technique for obtaining compliance with a request for help (Regan, 1971; Cialdini, *et al.*, 1975; Guéguen & Pascual, in press). Finally, our results are also consistent with commitment theory (Kiesler, 1971): the volition perceived by the subject in performing an act increases the probability of performing this act. In our experiment, the semantic evocation of freedom could have the function of increasing the volition and then increasing the act of visiting the Web site.

Of course, the explanations proposed above are still speculative and other experiments are now necessary to try to point out the processes or cognitive states activated by the semantic evocation of freedom. This opens new interesting issues for further research.

The findings of the study should be interpreted cautiously given the preliminary nature of the study and there are several limitations of the study that should be addressed in later studies. The experiment was conducted with large samples of subjects but we know nothing else about these subjects except that they live in France. Replications in other cultures and with control of sex, status, and age are now necessary.

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