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Word choice—hidden meanings can influence our judgment

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Why is it worse when someone causes work for us rather than produces work for us? Why does each word prompt a different interpretation of "work," with "caused" work seeming burdensome and "produced" work seeming advantageous?

The two words, cause and produce, seem synonymous, but they could

nudge an individual to make different inferences because of a phenomenon known as semantic prosody, according to researchers at the University of Michigan and University of Southern California.

"Some words have a meaning to them that we don't often think about but yet still affects us, which has applications to persuasion, social influence and bias in our judgments and decisions," said David Hauser, a doctoral candidate in the U-M Department of Psychology.

In a new article, Hauser and colleague Norbert Schwarz, a USC provost professor of psychology and marketing, conducted five experiments to uncover how the everyday context of a word sways people's judgment and decision making.

For example, most people do not associate cause with negativity. But because it is often followed by negative words in everyday language, such as "death," "problems," "pain," "cancer," "harm" or "disease," cause conveys negativity.

"Some words tend to occur in a certain context and that context bleeds into the word's meaning. Those same words can frame our judgment," Hauser said.

One experiment randomly assigned 400 people to read either the "produce" or the "cause" version of a sentence; "Surprisingly, ingestion of the substance produces (causes) endocrination of abdominal lipid tissue."

They then identified whether "endocrination of abdominal lipid tissue" was a good or bad thing. Endocrination is a fictional medical outcome, but most respondents (73 percent) thought it was bad when it was caused, compared to 48 percent who had a similar view when it was produced.

Another experiment asked participants to read a sentence about a senator who initiated legislation that either produced or caused additional work for middle class families. They rated how they thought the families felt about the legislation and estimated the likelihood he would be re-elected.

Participants believed the families liked the legislation far less when it caused additional work. They also thought the senator was less likely to be re-elected when he caused rather than produced additional work. Other experiments showed similar framing effects with other words.

Schwarz said that society often uses words automatically, especially those that seem like a good fit.

"When people hear the word, they infer we're trying to convey that additional meaning but the other person might not be intending it," he said.

The word meanings are not restricted to English; they have also been identified in other languages, such as Chinese, Portuguese and Italian. But when individuals learn English as a second language, they often use the dictionary's definition, which might not have the same connotation, Hauser said.

Hauser said sometimes people don't consider how a word is typically used, which can leave a positive or negative impression.

"Simply be aware of the words that you use, because people will make inferences that might not match your intended meaning," he said. "It's a matter of word choice. You might be better off finding the right word by looking at how most people speak rather than looking in a dictionary or thesaurus."

The findings appear in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* General.

More information: David J. Hauser et al. Semantic Prosody and Judgment., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2016). DOI: 10.1037/xge0000178

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