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Assignment 3

Psych 306

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Part A: Synopsis

The study titled “Small Sounds, Big Deals: Phonetic Symbolism Effects in Pricing” from the Journal of Consumer Research examines the affect the sounds of different numbers can have on a consumer’s perceived magnitude of discounted pricing (Coulter & Coulter 2010). When a person searches for discounts at a store, they often remember the magnitude of the discount, rather than a specific numerical value. The recalled magnitude of the discount, ranging from discounted to expensive, can be influenced by other magnitude-based information that was stored along with this information, such as the size of the font used to display the prices (Coulter & Coulter 2005). The study describes phonetic symbolism as “the ability of particular word sounds or phonemes to convey information and hence influence perceptions” (Eysenck 1979). Different vowel and consonant phonemes, distinct units of sound, can give listeners different impressions of size (Sapir 1929). Front vowels position the tongue highest at the front of the mouth and include examples such as the sounds produced by the “i” in “six” or “ee” in “three” (Klink 2000). Back vowels position the tongue highest at the back of the mouth, such as in the pronunciation of the letter “o” in “two”. The first category of consonants are called fricatives and include sounds like those produced by the letters “s” or “f” and which are formed by the friction of air passing through parts of the mouth such as the lips or teeth. The second group are the stops and include sounds created by closing parts of the mouth, such as in the pronunciation of the letter “p” or “t”. Back vowels and stops feature a large resonance area that produces low frequency sounds perceived as larger in size than the higher frequency sounds created by front vowels and fricatives. The first experiment the study conducted hypothesized that when people verbally or mentally rehearse the auditory representation of a price in their minds, they will recall larger discounts for values composed of front vowels and fricatives and smaller discounts for prices featuring back vowels and stops. 201 participants were given a booklet of advertisements for ice cream scoops that differed only in discount pricing information from the regular price of $10. The booklet included separate ads featuring a front vowel discount price of $7.66, a back vowel price of $7.22, a fricative price of $2.33 and a stop price of $2.22. One condition in each group was instructed to rehearse the discounted prices in the ads for later recall. After a distraction task lasting 5 minutes, participants

recorded their recalled perceived discounts in a questionnaire. The results confirmed that the recalled discounts were larger in both the front vowel and fricative experiments where participants were instructed to rehearse the discounted prices. In the groups that were not instructed to rehearse the discounted prices, the magnitude of the perceived discounts matched the actual prices, indicating that rehearsal of the sound of the prices was responsible for altering the recalled magnitude of the discounts.

Part B: Proposal

I propose to perform a follow-up study to Coulter's 2010 study "Small Sounds, Big Deals: Phonetic Symbolism Effects in Pricing" (Coulter and & 2010) that examines the effect of differing dollar amounts in discount prices in combination with the cents values to determine if a further magnitude perception effect can be produced. In the "Limitations and Research Opportunities" of the aforementioned study, it is speculated that there will be no phonological effect from manipulating "straight-forward" dollar values, such as from $7 to $2 because of the little cognitive load required to remember this difference and the increased importance placed on changes in dollar values over changes in cents. For more complex price discounts such as those for large purchases like vehicles or real estate it is hypothesized that rehearsing the auditory representation of discounts that use numbers containing front vowels and fricatives in the lower dollar value digits as well as in the cent value digits will be perceived as a larger discount than a greater value discount that uses back vowels and stops. In Coulter's study, it was determined that fricatives and front vowels can create a smaller perceived discounts than the actual value, while stops and back vowels can create a larger perceived discount. The previous evidence from Coulter therefore supports the predicted results and suggests that it should be possible to create a perceived magnitude effect using the dollars digits as well. While the previous study was limited to examining changes in cent digits of discount prices, expanding this research to dollar digits offers greater potential gain for markets with expensive products that would not receive significant benefit from the strategic variation of cents values in discounted prices. The independent variables of front and back vowels and fricatives and stops are expected to influence the dependent perceived discount magnitude. An experiment of approximately 200 people will be conducted in order

to produce data at a similar scale to the work by Coulter. The experiment will show participants a booklet of advertisements from two competing car companies for 10 seconds each with discount prices $4822.22 and $4877.66 from a regular price of $27000. The number 2 is identified as a number consisting of a back vowel and a stop consonant, while 6 and 7 are composed of front vowel and fricative consonant sounds (Klink 2000). Similar to the group division established in Coulter's research, a subgroup of approximately half of the participants will be instructed to read and rehearse the values to themselves while a control group will not receive that instruction. Participants will then take part in a distraction task similar to the previous study in order to diminish direct recall of the prices. A questionnaire will be given to allow the participants to grade the magnitude of the discount on a scale of 1 to 7 from a small to large discount. The results of the questionnaire will be aggregated to determine which discount on average is perceived by participants as a greater deal.

References

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