

Language Norm Project for “Psychology of Language” Course

I was interested in violating a language norm that could be translated verbally and into text. The first norm I could think of was yelling: I could adjust the volume of my voice such that I was speaking louder than I normally would; in text, I would type in all caps, which is commonly associated with yelling. (e.g., READERS' INNER VOICES WILL MORE THAN LIKELY READ THIS SENTENCE LOUDLY than if I were to type normally like I am now.) I am often told to speak louder and have become accustomed to typing all lowercase letters when interacting with friends and family over IM services, so I would be speaking and typing opposite how I normally do. Additionally, I was curious to see whether people would react differently to the typed yelling than the verbal yelling, and how they might react if I alternated how I typed (e.g., if I spoke to them in all caps for a while, then switched to typing as I normally would, then switched again).

Testing my language norm violation was not too difficult. On my laptop and iPad, I turned caps lock on so I did not have to constantly hold down the Shift key while typing. For speaking louder, I had to open my mouth wider than usual and needed to take frequent deep breaths so that I would not hurt myself talking. I also made sure to monitor how much I talked when I yelled because I have found in the past that I would become hoarse if I spoke loudly too much. For the setting, I decided to select one private and one public place to yell—a phone call in my dorm room and the Grill at Guilford College respectively—to see if reactions would vary. Online, I picked two private settings: an IM group chat consisting only of me and a couple of my friends, and emails between me and one person. I chose to email and call the same person—my mother—in order to see if her reaction would vary between the two. Since she is one of the people I am closest to, I thought her reactions would be most interesting, especially if I tried yelling at her both verbally and in text and switched between using all caps and “normal” typing in two separate emails (i.e., I responded to one email without caps lock on and one with it enabled). I later found out from her that she showed some of her coworkers my emails. I selected my friends to be recipients of my all caps speak not only because we are frequently chatting, but also because I have found that the specific

individuals have previously reacted aversely to being “yelled at” (unless it is clear the speaker is excited). Finally, I selected the Grill as my public space because I wanted to see how people would react to my yelling in an indoors setting—particularly one that offered some kind of paid service—but did not want to run the risk of getting into trouble in an off-campus facility (such as Harris Teeter or Walmart).

My mother’s initial reaction to my typing in all caps was that she thought I accidentally had caps lock enabled on my iPad. (I typed the email on my laptop.) She also asked whether I was yelling at her; I took that response as her joking since she included a smiley emoticon at the end of her sentence. However, when I sent the aforementioned two emails, she called me asking why I was yelling at her, her tone showing concern. When I called her the following day, I yelled at her while maintaining a neutral tone (so she would not think I was angry). My mother first thought I was doing so to retaliate against some of the other people on my floor (who are frequently loud); after I denied it, she asked if I was mad at her. Afterward, I returned to my normal volume and continued my conversation. I found out that after receiving the two separate emails, she became concerned that I was upset because the email I was responding to in all caps given its content—something I had not realized prior to her mentioning it. She ended up showing her coworkers, who also displayed concern over my response. Since that phone conversation, I wondered if my mother would have reacted differently had I switched to typing normally in the email she became concerned over and used all caps in my response to her other email, which had more lighthearted content.

While my mother had a negative response to my typing and yelling, my friends’ response to my speaking to them in all caps was neutral. I expected them to be surprised the moment I began typing as if I were yelling (despite carrying on the conversation as I normally would) and would question why I was doing it. I also thought at least one of them might think I was yelling at them and get mad. Instead, only one of them pointed out that I was speaking in all caps, saying nothing else about it after. Since my mother’s reaction changed after I emailed her again, I decided to try typing in all caps while interacting with my friends a second day. Just like my mother, they responded differently: they asked whether my Caps Lock key might be broken and then joked that I was celebrating “Caps Day” when I denied my key

being broken. Again, their reaction was not what I predicted; however, this may mean that I do not completely know my friends as well as I thought I did.

While the reactions I received from my mother and friend were unexpected, the reactions—or lack thereof—I got at the Grill were true to my prediction: neither the staff nor any of the patrons around me to react while I was shouting my order. Before entering, I made sure to put my iPod away so that my yelling would not seem to be due to loud music. Unfortunately, my timing was bad, as I entered while the area was busy. With many people waiting either to order or to pick up their food, it is not surprising that there would be no reaction when I yelled. I was unable to return when there were fewer people. However, I do not think that would change how the staff and patrons would react to my yelling because I have seen others talking just as loudly even with fewer than ten people. The staff are more than likely accustomed to similar behavior and thus probably would not react even if I were the only person (aside from them) in the area.

Personally, I found it rather difficult to yell. Since I seldom speak louder than what is considered appropriate, I struggled to figure out how I would go about shouting without seeming like I was angry. When yelling at my mother, I found I could not go longer than a few minutes and ended up switching back to my normal voice. Interestingly enough, the longer I typed in all caps, the more I found I wanted to shout. I probably felt that way because I read each and every one of my words as if I were yelling them. Additionally, I found typing in all caps oddly fun, possibly because it was something different for me and thus seemed thrilling. Regardless, I sometimes forgot to turn the caps lock off, so it is not something I would continue doing on a regular basis.

Since I found yelling hard, I imagine others would have the same issue. Yelling seems to take more effort than speaking at what is considered an acceptable volume—or even talking softly—and would likely tire others out in the way it tires me out. Shouting at someone could also potentially harm them or make them less trusting, especially at close distance. It could hurt their ears (particularly if they have sensitive hearing), they might be spat on (since some people spit when they shout), et cetera. Furthermore, in quieter environments, yelling is indicative of anger. If everyone yelled, the only way

someone would be able to tell if another person is mad at them is by looking at their facial expressions and body language. However, if yelling were not normative, then the recipient is more likely to pick up on the speaker's anger without needing to look at them.

Typing without the Caps Lock key on (or without the Shift key indefinitely held), while giving the illusion that the writer is talking at room volume, is not as easy as actually speaking at that volume. The writer needs to use more keys to type in what is considered a “professional” way than if they were to type in all caps (or in all lowercase). However, considering how yelling all the time is not normal, it is likely the verbal norm was translated into text. A comic by the Oatmeal compares the two: the person who types “professionally” is perceived as being normal, while the person who types in all caps is portrayed by an elderly man shouting. Even though the Oatmeal exaggerated the latter's appearance, it is probable that people would perceive someone typing in all caps to be shouting at them (much like my mother did). Thus, typing “normally”—despite taking slightly more effort—is preferable to typing in all caps.

Language norms—both verbal and textual—serve as indicators for various aspects of human interaction. They can let people know how someone is feeling, they can show whether someone is listening to a conversation (e.g., by making backchannel responses), they can help employers decide whether an interviewee is suitable for the job (e.g., by observing how they respond to interview questions, what kinds of questions they ask, etc.), and so forth. Without language norms, people may be more prone to misunderstanding something or being misunderstood. For example, if someone were to yell, one person might perceive that person as being angry whereas another person might think it is normal for them to speak that way. (Of course, some language norms vary by culture or region, so miscommunication is still possible.) Language norms are essential in everyday life, as they help people understand one another (and potentially form bonds) and help them get through the day.