APPLICATIONS OF A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF
MOTIVATION TO THE LANGUAGE OF DEFENSIVENESS
AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION

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It is a well-established finding in social psychology that people often seek to claim responsibility or credit for actions they perform that have good implications, and to disclaim or avoid responsibility for actions that might seem to have bad consequences (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Weary, 1978; Schlenker, 1980). One would assume, then, that the seeking of credit and the avoidance of blame would play an important role in natural language. This point, especially the side of it involving the use of language to avoid blame, has been recognized for some time. For example, Austin (1961) discusses the use of language to generate excuses and justifications for the performance of actions such as those that are challenged as being unpleasant, immoral, stupid, thoughtless, or negative in some other way.

Given the importance of the motivation to avoid negative beliefs about oneself, and the many possible ways that language might be imagined to come into play in the service of this motivation, it is clear that there would be benefits to both disciplines of mutual exchange between social psychology (and, of course, other social sciences) and linguistics (and other disciplines focusing upon language) on the topic of the use of language for self-justification, as well as the broad topic of the motivations for language usage. This paper is one step in the effort to integrate social psychologically oriented and language oriented approaches to the topic of defensiveness and self-justification. It is complementary to existing social psychological work, most clearly to classic papers from the sociological side of social psychology by Sykes and Matza (1957) and Scott and Lyman (1968) and a recent research note by Schönbach (1980).

A theory of language usage must be able, at some point, to handle 'self-justificatory' or 'defensive' usages of language at two levels of analysis -- that of individual utterances and in the wider context of connected speech and dialogue (spoken or written). Such an account will require a formal theoretical framework for specifying, first, what constitutes a 'threatening' situation
to which a person would be motivated to respond 'defensively' and, second, a set of possible ways -- linguistic and otherwise -- for rendering initially threatening states less negative.

A framework that meets these two requirements and has promise in this social/linguistic area of application is the theory of subjective competence (Bowerman, 1978, 1979, 1980). Since it has been treated in some detail in the sources just mentioned, the theory will be described here only briefly before being applied in the interpretation of several examples of actual language usage: from a newspaper report on the bombing of Hiroshima, brief verbal exchanges between children where one alleges that the other has performed a negative action, and a letter that explains and attempts to make good on an error.

The rationale underlying this subjective competence analysis is as follows. A person is faced with an initially negative (and thus threatening) self-referent belief about his/her actions. The person will attempt to reduce this threat, restructuring the belief so that it becomes less negative. As a speaker or writer, the person has available a variety of linguistic devices by which to communicate (either to the self or to an audience) that such a restructuring is taking place, and what his/her alternative perceptions of the situation are. The goals of the analysis of the linguistic illustrations to be presented here are, then: (1) to suggest how a number of subtle linguistic devices can be understood as being employed to restructure initially negative self-referent beliefs to make them less negative; (2) to move toward a coherent account, both within and across sequences of utterances, of a set of such linguistic devices; (3) to stimulate further conceptual and empirical research on the topics introduced here; and (4) to stimulate further interdisciplinary research connecting social psychology (my own home base) and linguistics more generally.

SUBJECTIVE COMPETENCE THEORY

For present purposes, all that is needed is an understanding of the broad scope of the theory, with special attention to ways in which it deals with cognitive structures, motivations to hold or reject particular cognitive structures, and means of reaching or avoiding these cognitive states. The hope is that after a brief treatment of the theory at this cursory level, it will be possible to see how the cognitive bones can be fleshed with linguistic meat.
The theory of subjective competence offers one way of organizing cognitive and social-psychological factors that appear to be involved in the sorts of threats to self-esteem arising in the language examples to follow. The theory claims that threats to self-esteem, and other negative beliefs about the self, arise because a person has certain kinds of cognitive representations of him/herself as an actor performing actions associated with positive or negative consequences. Actions one performs can be more or less closely associated with oneself as an independent originator of them, and actions can have affective consequences that are more or less positive or negative for oneself and/or others. The first task of the present theory is to develop a way of organizing collections of such beliefs and connecting them to self-evaluations.

Structure

Figure 1 (see Figure 1, next page) begins the task of breaking these complex cognitions into manageable components. It shows a schematic representation of three kinds of simple causal beliefs that together make up complex cognitive representations. Each of these simpler beliefs has the form of a causal attribution linking together two elements.

The top panel of Figure 1 shows the first kind of causal attribution, an action attribution, in which a person A is seen as being causally linked to the occurrence or nonoccurrence of some event, X. The elements of the action attribution are then an actor, an action, and a causal link between them. The belief that person A freely causes, or is personally responsible for, the occurrence of event X is a positive action attribution; the representation of person A as causing the nonoccurrence of (i.e., preventing) event X is a negative action attribution. (Note that the belief may be held by person A or by someone else, and that A may represent another person's representation of A.) So the action attribution is a causal cognition -- which may concern the past, the present, the future, or even a timeless fantasy or a tentative plan -- that connects an actor to an action. A second kind of causal cognition, shown in the middle of Figure 1 and called an effect attribution, is a belief about connections between two states of the world. Its elements are event X, another event, Y, and a causal link between them. If the occurrence of event X is seen as causing the occurrence of some other event, Y, the effect attribution is positive; and the belief that the occurrence of event X causes the nonoccurrence of (i.e., prevents) event Y is a
Figure 1: Kinds of causal attributions

a) **Action attribution:** A person causes the occurrence or non-occurrence of an event

- **occurrence of:** event (X) → **positive action attribution**
- **non-occurrence of:** event (X) → **negative action attribution**

b) **Effect attribution:** The occurrence of one event causes the occurrence or non-occurrence of another event

- **occurrence of:** event (Y) → **positive effect attribution**
- **non-occurrence of:** event (Y) → **negative effect attribution**

c) **Affect attribution:** The occurrence of an event causes the occurrence of positive or negative affect

- **occurrence of:** positive affect → **positive affect attribution**
- **occurrence of:** negative affect → **negative affect attribution**
negative effect attribution. A third sort of causal cognition, shown in the bottom panel of Figure 1, is an affect attribution. This connects the occurrence of an event Y with the occurrence of an affective state, produced in some sentient being whose identity need not be considered here. The affect in question may be a simple one such as pleasure or pain, or more complex, as in pride or shame. When positive affect is involved, the affect attribution itself is said to be positive; negative affect makes the affect attribution negative.

Figure 1 has represented in the abstract certain kinds of causal cognitions that people can have. In Figure 2 (see figure 2, next page), these three types of causal beliefs are illustrated with concrete examples. A hypothetical, and very rudimentary, cognitive map of a person who smokes cigarettes is schematized at the top of the figure. The three belief components in this simple system are: (1) On the left, an action attribution, such as 'I am responsible for my action of smoking cigarettes.' So in this case the action attribution is positive because the person is representing him/herself as the origin of the action of smoking. (2) In the middle, an effect attribution about the immediate, direct, physical effects of the occurrence of the action of smoking, such as the belief that 'Smoking leads to getting lung disease.' This effect attribution is positive, since the occurrence of the action (smoking) is seen as causing the occurrence of lung disease. (3) On the right of the figure, an affect attribution, having to do with the affective consequences of the occurrence of lung disease. This illness is seen as intensely painful. So the occurrence of lung disease is viewed as causing negative affect, and the affect attribution itself is therefore negative.

The middle panel of Figure 2 takes the next step of joining these three different causal cognitions together. While these are three separate beliefs (each with sub-components), they can be linked in the cognitive map of the smoker, to form a single sequence of causal cognitions. The more complex, multiple component, belief, shown in the middle panel of Figure 2, 'starts' at the left with the representation of the actor and passes through the intermediate steps of smoking and the occurrence of lung disease to the representation of negative affective experience. In short, the sequence shows that, via an intermediate action and its effect, the smoker is causally linked to intense pain.

While there is a rather obvious negative flavor to this whole sequence ("I, by my own free actions, will cause myself intense
cigarette smoker

occurrence of:

smoking cigarettes

occurrence of:

lung disease

occurrence of:

pain

cause

[AND]

cause

[AND]

cause

a) A self-referent causal attribution sequence

(value of sequence) = (positive action attribution) \times (positive effect attribution) \times (negative affect attribution) = negative subjective competence

c) Definition of subjective competence: action \times effect \times affect attributions

Figure 2: Sequences of causal attributions and subjective competence
pain'), we need more than just intuition to establish what makes it negative. This sequence, and all others containing the same kinds of basic elements, can in fact be characterized formally with a single parameter -- a value that, moreover, has motivational and affective significance for the holder of the belief sequence.

The bottom panel of Figure 2 shown how this is accomplished. The value of the whole sequence is defined as the product of the values of the separate causal attributions that go to make it up. In the case of Figure 2, the entire sequence is negative because it contains a positive action, a positive effect, and a negative affect attribution, yielding a negative product when multiplied together.

We have now connected three different kinds of belief components and assigned a value to the whole string of beliefs. The entire string is called a subjective competence sequence, and the product of its component beliefs is the subjective competence value of the sequence.

The foregoing example illustrated only one particular kind of subjective competence sequence, one giving a negative sense of competence (or some other negative self-referent evaluation -- the kinds of evaluations do not need to be discussed here). In fact, the definition of subjective competence just given generates a typology of four different kinds of positive and four negative subjective competence structures, shown and illustrated in Figure 3 (see Figure 3, next page). For example, negative sequence N-2 involves the belief that one has responsibility for the occurrence of an action that causes the nonoccurrence of another event which is believed to produce positive affect then it does occur (e.g., A performer intentionally speaks unclearly and prevents playgoers from hearing the punchline of what is known to be a funny comedy routine.) This typology of positive and negative sequences, and these illustrations of the different types, need no discussion here, but it is important to be aware of them when one wishes to consider the different sorts of threats to which a person might be responding and the different sorts of positive beliefs about himself that a person might be seeking. Longer and shorter sequences are possible, as are ones with more complicated combinations of causes and effects.
Figure 3: Kinds of positive and negative causal attribution structures
Motivation

The description of the theory thus far has centered entirely on how to organize certain kinds of causal cognitions in a common structural framework. In itself, this has no motivational power. However, with the formal structural organization that has been established, we can now easily add the motivational, or functional, claim of the theory. This assumption is simply that people seek positive kinds of belief structures and try to avoid negative ones; that is, that they will be motivated to think and act in ways that will enable them to make their beliefs about themselves as positive as possible.

The following analyses will focus exclusively on the threat to competence inherent in the kinds of negative belief structures discussed above and on the use of language as such threats are reduced. Note that the preceding structural and motivational features of the theory offer a formal definition, as was promised at the beginning of the paper, of what constitutes a negative, threatening situation to which 'defensive' or 'self-justifying' responses may be expected.

Since the following analyses are going to be about the avoidance of 'threats' by 'defensive' language, it is worth emphasizing here that this focus on the negative is by no means intended to suggest that people are being viewed as always behaving defensively. They clearly do not. The present theoretical perspective recognizes this and allows the possibility of a person's holding negative beliefs about him/herself (see Bowerman, 1978 -- especially, section on subjective competence about subjective competence). And, as suggested in Figure 3, the theory has as much to say about the seeking of positive states as about the avoidance of negative ones (note that such strivings may also be defensive, but need not be). It is designed to facilitate the search for the different conditions under which people will be defensive or not, so the present effort is ultimately to be complemented by examinations of the uses of language (and action) in the search for positive subjective competence structures (defensive and nondefensive) as well.

Process

Given that people seek positive structures and try to avoid negative ones, and that they will think and act in ways appropriate to these ends, the next question is then: What means
are available to people for reaching those goals? This is the question of cognitive processes, involving the ways that cognitive structures can change over time in the service of the motivational goals of seeking positive states and/or avoiding negative ones.

Figure 4 (see Figure 4, next page) shows three kinds of possible changes to an initially negative subjective competence structure. These ignore changes in attributes such as time markers and physical extension markers, which are considered non-structural changes for present purposes. Also, these process changes could equally well be applied to an initially positive sequence. In the center of each panel of Figure 4 is repeated the original threatening sequence used in Figure 2, consisting of a positive action attribution ('I choose to smoke cigarettes'), a positive effect attribution ('I believe that smoking causes lung disease'), and a negative affect attribution ('Having lung disease causes one to experience intense pain').

None of these three beliefs is particularly threatening on its own, but, as argued above, in combination they create a serious threat to the sense of competence: 'Why am I smoking, if it will bring me intense pain?' It is these particular beliefs in combination that poses the threat. A person holding other views about smoking will, as a function of the content of those other beliefs, have a different self-evaluation vis-a-vis smoking.

One way of reducing a threat to subjective competence is to find some other cause, another origin, for any (one or more) of the original elements in the negative structure. This is called a type A change. The top panel of Figure 4 gives an example: if one becomes convinced that pollution is a potent source of lung disease, this would reduce the threat to competence originally posed by the causal connection between oneself and the pain. The pain caused by lung disease can now be attributed to the pollution instead of one's own actions. Although still experienced or anticipated, the pain now originates from the environment, not the self, and no longer threatens one's sense of competence. To blame smoking on an 'addiction' would be another way of reducing the initial threat by pointing to a causal origin beyond one's control. (Note that the question of whether the new target for blame is or is not realistic or socially acceptable is a separate issue.)

A second kind of reaction to a threatening belief sequence is to reduce the absolute value of any part of the initial structure,
Type A change: finding a new cause for an element

Type B change: lowering value of original element

Type C change: finding a new effect of an element

Figure 4: Kinds of reactions to threats
so that the product of its components becomes closer to zero. These are type B changes. Some serve to weaken or sever a causal link between two elements in the sequence, as illustrated in the middle of Figure 4: 'Smoking doesn't cause lung disease,' 'Lung disease will not cause intense pain,' or 'I am not responsible for smoking.' Changing a belief about the occurrence of one of the events involved in the initial sequence, or changing the amount of attention paid to one of them, is also a type B change: as in, 'I am not smoking,' or 'Let's not talk about pain.'

Type C changes form the third class of reactions to a threatening sequence. Illustrated at the foot of Figure 4, these consist of adding representations of some new benefits that at least partly offset the costs originally in the foreground: 'Smoking produces pleasure,' increases attention to a benefit of an event -- smoking (i.e., the action event). Type C changes involving perceived or claimed benefits due to causal connections between elements are also possible, as in: 'My being seen as choosing to perform a risky action leads to positive responses to me from devil-may-care friends.'

The pieces are now assembled to complete the framework called for in the introduction. Earlier, the theory of subjective competence was shown to define a set of initial 'threats' that could produce 'defensive' or 'self-justificatory' reactions. Now it is seen also to provide, simultaneously, a formal delineation of the kinds of reactions available for making an initially threatening belief less threatening. Negative beliefs can be conceptualized as comprising the kinds of causal belief elements shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 (with more or less elements in any given case), and there are three kinds of cognitive changes, or processes, that can be applied to any of these elements in an initial belief sequence. These conceptual distinctions can be used to generate a typology of structural changes that will reduce an initial threat to subjective competence (for an illustration of 21 structurally distinct kinds of reactions to an initial negative sequence, see Bowerman 1978:59.)

ANALYSES OF EVERYDAY LANGUAGE EVENTS

The theory of subjective competence provides the machinery for analysing samples of language use in terms of (possible) reactions to (possible) threats involving beliefs about one's actions. To the existing discussions of pragmatic reasons, functions, or
illocutionary forces of language (e.g., Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Dore, 1979; Bruner, 1975; Halliday, 1975; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; and Bates, 1976), we can now add another class of motives for utterances: to react to threats to subjective competence in ways that reduce those threats. Armed with the subjective competence framework for specifying the underlying structure, motivation, and process of self-referent causal cognitions, we can now proceed to show how particular utterances, or particular features of utterances, can be plausibly attributed to the motivational force of avoiding a threat to subjective competence. This will be done by giving three illustrations of the use of this theory to interpret and organize certain characteristics of everyday language.

I. Reactions to the bombing of Hiroshima

The first example comes from a newspaper report occasioned by the 30th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima (see Bowerman, 1978:47). Three quotes from interviews with members of the bombing crew serve to illustrate the three major kinds of responses to threats proposed in Figure 4. It is inferred that these utterances follow from a common, initially negative belief sequence, shown in the central string of Figure 5.

President Truman said:
'I told you to do it and you did it.'

'That was not for me to think about.'

'I'm proud of saving all the lives we did.'

Figure 5. Reactions to bombing Hiroshima
Here, the threat to the bomb-crew member's self-evaluation arises from the perception of having originated the bombing that killed tens of thousands of people. Note that the threat could result from the crew member's private thoughts about himself and/or from what he thinks someone else (e.g., the interviewer, the public, a critic) believes about him. In this particular case, the bombing was so massive, so public, and so controversial in its consequences that it is reasonable to suppose both factors may be operating in the interview.

As shown in Figure 5, the three responses to threat characterized here are: (1) a type A utterance that has the effect of asserting a new source for the original causal sequence: the pilot of the mission recollects that after the bombing President Truman had said to him, 'I told you to do it [drop the bomb] and you did it...'; (2) a type B utterance that reflects an attention-deployment strategy for reducing awareness of the affective consequences in the original sequence: the pilot depersonalizes the victims when he looks down at the 'white puffs' on the ground, thinks, 'Hey -- someone's getting killed down there. I wonder who and why' and then tells himself that 'that was not for me to think about.' and (3) a type C utterance that demonstrates a restructuring of the threatening belief sequence by adding an explicit, positive consequence of the bombing: 'I'm not proud of what we did, but I'm proud of saving all the lives we did.' (Presumably, this was the conception of the action that caused it to be taken in the first place. Whether or not it is a realistic or socially acceptable view is not relevant to the present analysis.)

II. Children's verbal exchanges

The present framework can be usefully applied to the language generated in interpersonal dialogue in which a person (or group) implicitly or explicitly raises an issue that creates a threat to another participant (or group). Two mini-dialogues of this type are analyzed in Figure 6 (see Figure 6, next page), each a brief interchange between two children.

In the first example, Rebecca and Isabell are playing on some stairs (other children are downstairs). Panel a of Figure 6 shows what happened when Isabell throws her doll down the stairs. Rebecca calls out to announce Isabell's action to the others: 'She threw her doll down the stairs.' Since these children treat their dolls as animate, sentient creatures ('babies'), we can reasonably assume that being thrown downstairs is to be regarded as un-
a) claim by Rebecca

Isabella (she) causes threw doll down the stairs causes negative affect consequences (to doll).

"She threw her doll down the stairs"

b) counter-claim by Isabell

Isabell (I) causes threw doll down the stairs causes positive affect (to doll)

"I meant to do it. She likes it"

c) Reaction by Rebecca (said with apparent skepticism)

threw doll down the stairs causes (doubt about) positive affect consequences (to doll)

"She likes it"

**A)** The doll likes it

older sister

younger sister caused broken floor causes negative affect

"[Younger sister] broke the floor"

younger sister

I did NOT cause broken floor

"No, I didn't ...

**B)** The floor broke

I caused stepped on floor and floor broke caused negative affect

"I stepped on it and it broke"

Figure 6: Natural language situations -- 'threats' and reactions to them in children's dialogue
pleasant for the doll. The initial, negative subjective competence structure presumed to underly Rebecca's report of the deed is shown in sentence (1), with the inferred negative affective consequences to the doll represented in a dotted circle. That Isabell recognizes the implicit challenge to her doll-caring practices is reflected in her response, displayed in sentence (2): she makes a claim that serves to invert her action from a negative one to a positive, 'I meant to do it, she likes it.' An interesting rejoinder follows, having the character of a social comment on Isabell's effort at self-justification, a test of whether her claim holds weight as a reasonable explanation of what happened. In this case, Isabell hasn't quite succeeded. The reporter, Rebecca, as if in the role of judge, indicates that she does not accept Isabell's account without question. With a skeptical laugh, she remarks (to no one in particular), 'She likes it!'

Were this a more serious matter, we could expect the dialogue to continue, perhaps with a series of efforts on Isabell's part, in response to a series of counter-claims by Rebecca -- and, very likely, with some retaliatory claims by Isabell about Rebecca. So this is a microcosm of a larger set of social events, involving both linguistic and paralinguistic information (e.g., the laugh to indicate incredulity), that could be examined to determine when and how threats enter discourse, what sorts of reactions and counter-reactions ensue from those threats, and which of them are regarded as acceptable or implausible accounts of actions.

A second example of apparent challenge and response to challenge in child discourse is analyzed in panel b of Figure 6. Two children and their parents are together in a room with a carpeted floor. The younger child (age 3:5) steps out onto the wooden floor in the next room, whereupon a sound easily interpretable as a crack is heard by all. The older child (age 6) says, '[Younger sister] broke the floor.' As shown in the diagrammatic representation of sentence (1) in Figure 6b, the older girl has used a particular linguistic string to connect her sister tightly to a negative event, breaking the floor. The younger sister, however, responds immediately to the challenge: 'No, I didn't.' This is a primitive 'undoing' device -- one of the type B changes described above -- to remove an initial causal connection between two entities. The younger child then elaborates, creating a new construction of the event. First, she rephrases the description of the situation so that she is connected to an innocuous, 'neutral' action ('I stepped on it [the floor]...'). Then she makes a
separate event, unconnected to herself, out of the cracking sound ('... and it [the floor] broke.') Notice, in this last utterance, the use of an intransitive verb construction to avoid responsibility, one of the strategies of 'syntactic exploitation' discussed by Bolinger under the heading of 'non-neutrality in grammar' (1975:261).

III. The computer did it

Protecting one's self-image, at least in public, occurs not only in spoken language, but is common in written communication too. The last illustration of the application of subjective competence theory to language usage deals with such an instance, found in a letter sent by a professional organization to its members. It reads as follows (with sentence numbers added and identification removed).

Dear Directory Buyer:

(1) It was intended that members in private practice would be identified with a dagger symbol in the 1978 Directory's Geographic Index. (2) However, due to reversed logic in the typesetting contractor's computer programs, the dagger symbols were omitted for the private practitioners and were assigned in some instances to licensed persons who are not in private practice.

(3) To prevent misinterpretations which may result from this error, all buyers of the 1978 edition are being sent the enclosed error notice for attachment to page 1071, facing the Geographic Index.

(4) Please attach the notice with tape or adhesive so that you and others who may use your Directory will be reminded to ignore the dagger symbols if reference is made to the Geographic Index.

(5) We apologize for the error and the inconvenience.

Thank you.

[group name] Directory Editor

In the previous examples, the initial threatening cognitive structure, to which the speaker is presumed to be reacting, has
been largely inferred. Now the negative sequence is more explicit, since the letter writer overtly announces the occurrence of an error and attempts to compensate for it. The threatening belief may be held by the letter writer (Directory Editor) or it may be what the writer thinks directory users might potentially believe about him or her (with or without justification). It has the following presumed structure: The Directory Editor is seen as responsible for the occurrence of the error (i.e., a positive action attribution); the existence of the error (before it is dealt with) will cause misidentifications of persons listed in the Index (i.e., a positive effect attribution linking the occurrence of the error to the occurrence of 'misidentifications'); and the occurrence of misidentifications will cause inconvenience to Directory users and listed people (i.e., negative affect attribution). The product of the values of these beliefs, two positive and one negative, is negative, so this string is defined as implying negative subjective competence for the Editor/letter writer. According to the present view of motivation, the letter might be expected to contain more or less subtle evidence that the writer is dealing with a threat to his or her competence, as well as with the professional matter at hand.

For a detailed discussion, with diagrams, of the subjective competence structures that appear to underly the overt content of this letter, see Bowerman (1980). The broad point that language is often used, and in many different ways, to reduce potentially negative views about oneself can be made here by briefly noting five distinct, but functionally linked, linguistic 'moves' in the letter, each of which appears to be generated in response to a threat to subjective competence.

(1) The use of the passive (with an impersonal pronoun) to shift focus off of the 'self/author' as the origin of the events to be covered in the letter (i.e., in sentence 1, 'It was intended...,' rather than 'I intended...'). This strategy for avoiding blame is discussed by Bolinger (1975:260) and in present terms is a type B response to threat, serving to reduce the value of an element (i.e. oneself as origin) of the initial negative sequence.

(2) The use of an introductory phrase to foreground something other than oneself (i.e., in sentence 2, 'However, due to reversed logic in the typesetting contractor's computer programs...'). In present terms, this is a type A 'move', adding a new origin for the occurrence for the error, so
now the error can be attributed to the computer (or its keeper). The earlier-noted use of the passive to lower attention to the self/author paves the way for this claim about external responsibility for the error.

(3) Selection of particular lexical items to shift some of the blame for further mistakes to the users, the letter readers and potential clients, rather than to the directory's producers (i.e., in sentence 3, 'To prevent [users'] misinterpretations ...' -- with 'misinterpretations' signifying cognitive errors of users based upon correct information, whereas something like 'To prevent further errors...' would have kept the focus on the fact that incorrect information is present and is going to be the reason for incorrect assumptions people make).

(4) Use of a verb that exaggerates the benefits one can reasonably expect from the letter: saying, 'To prevent [future errors]...', rather than something like 'To reduce or minimize [future errors]...'

(5) Pronoun selection and omission, used to spread the blame for the error and depersonalize the presumed damage done by the letter writer (i.e., in sentence 5, 'We apologize for the error and the inconvenience' rather than something like 'I apologize for my error and your inconvenience.' In present terms, sentence 5 minimizes the negative implications to the writer of the error by operating on both ends of the original negative sequence, so we lose sight of both the cause and the effect of the error.

A look back at the analysis just made of this letter can be used to raise an important point about the subjective competence framework for analysing language use. Consider the ways that I have 'framed' my analysis of this letter: Am I making things look as bad as possible for the letter writer? For example, my comment on sentence 5 refers to 'damage done by the letter writer, a word selection and construction that foregrounds about as much as possible the letter writer and his/her connection to very negative consequences (i.e., 'damage') of the error. Would it not have been just as accurate for me instead to have referred simply to 'the consequences of the error'? If so, why did I use my description of it? This line of thought raises the topic of attributions about attributions. An important feature of any subjective competence analysis of language usage is that the same conceptual framework can be made reflexive and turned to an analysis of the analysis (and so on).
CONCLUSION

'Defensive' usages of language are often fairly easy to recognize (and agree on) as such on an intuitive basis. But the scholar who is interested in this in the pursuit of a formal explanation of the pragmatics of language, as it is either acquired by children or used by adults, requires comparably rigorous means of characterizing what constitutes a 'threatening' situation liable to provoke a defensive or self-justificatory response, what constitutes such a response, and how the response enables the language-user to cope with the situation, reducing its threat. The theory of subjective competence (Bowerman, 1978, 1979, 1980) goes some way towards meeting these needs. The present paper explains how these definitions are reached, viewing a 'threatening' situation as one in which a person is faced with a negative belief about him/herself (a belief held either by oneself or thought to be held by another about oneself). The theory is then applied in analyses of three actual cases where language appears to have been employed in response to a threat to competence.

The present exercise must be recognized as a preliminary analysis of this kind of language usage. It suggests a strategy that can be pursued in more sophisticated ways (e.g., by exploring and extending connections between the subjective competence framework and other formal systems for representing language and/or cognition). By starting with a conception of the underlying forces that can generate a class of negative states (i.e., negative beliefs about oneself), and with a conceptual framework that also provides a typology of functionally equivalent responses to an initial state, it becomes possible to make new, more refined attributions about the functional significance of particular linguistic events.

This point can be illustrated by reconsidering Figure 5, where we looked at three quotes from an interview with members of the crew that bombed Hiroshima. Here, the theoretical analysis of the source of threat and kinds of reactions to it enables us to see three otherwise wholly dissimilar utterances — utterances with no referents in common — as being three different ways of achieving the same broad end of communicating a less negative understanding of the bombing than a highly threatening one, which might be held, wherein the speakers are responsible for killing thousands of people. Common sense would also generate a certain coherence among these utterances, since each clearly has something
to do with excusing or justifying an action. But the present formal conceptual framework offers precision, testability, and breadth well beyond anything that our intuitions alone could offer (see Bowerman, 1980, for a discussion of 'common sense' and subjective competence).

In addition, it is now possible to go beyond some existing categories of verbal reactions to threats. For example, consider the well known dichotomy of 'excuses and justifications' (Austin, 1961; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Schlenker, 1980), where an 'excuse' avoids responsibility for the performance of an action and a 'justification' argues for the worthwhileness of an action. The subjective competence typology of reactions to threats places both of these kinds of utterances into a common, theoretically generated, framework (e.g., the excuse of following orders is one kind of type A change; the justification that the bombing saved lives is one kind of type C change), while also distinguishing several sub-types of each as well as other reactions to threats that are neither excuses or justifications (e.g., the type B response of lowering awareness of negative consequences of one's actions).

A theoretical framework such as that presented here could be fruitfully employed together with both experimental and naturalistic observation methodologies in formal analyses of just how various syntactic (and semantic) 'exploitations' achieve their effects, in terms of helping to remove some initially negative state. An obvious line of further experimental research would be to investigate verbal responses under manipulation of different kinds of threat, where the original negative structure is known to the researcher because it is experimentally induced. See Bowerman (1973) for an early effort along these lines that manipulated the pleasantness or unpleasantness of news that one person was to pass to another and then looked for differences as a function of this in the selection of words to use in the passing of the message.

It appears likely that experimental work would be more appropriate for exploring usage of individual features of language in particular threatening situations, while naturalistic methods (including analysis of text) might be more often appropriate for exploring the coherence of a series of threats (and opportunities) and reactions to them. Using the same conceptual framework for both levels of analysis would be a step towards the goal, laid out at the beginning of the paper, of accounting both for individual utterances and for sequences of utterances with the same
theoretical framework. A next step would be to use and expand the present framework, to pursue both experimental and naturalistic studies of capacities and inclinations to perform the cognitive, linguistic, and interpersonal feats that are necessary for one to be able to (1) recognize 'threats' of different sorts, (2) develop a range of possible responses -- both private and to others -- to a given kind of 'threat', and (3) sustain or successfully modify claims made during cycles of the sort that Schönbach (1980) classifies as involving: (a) a failure event, (b) a reproach, (c) an account, and (d) an evaluation.

The examples of language analyzed here all involve situations in which one person, presumed to be experiencing a threatened sense of competence, communicates with another party as the threat is reduced. No attempt is made in this analysis to clarify the exact significance of the speaker's or writer's utterances, beyond that they show that cognitive restructuring is taking place and what the resulting structure is. This, too, is a topic for further investigation. Language may serve one (or more) of several functions in such interpersonal contexts. Negative beliefs of the type illustrated here are often created in moments of social interaction, as when one suspects or anticipates criticism or is overtly challenged, or when one cannot help but heed another person's beliefs about factors relevant to one's own life (and/or one's effects on other peoples' lives). Language then may serve not just to communicate to another person about one's own, less negative conception of an originally threatening situation. The speaker/writer may seek actively to persuade the other that the situation is not in fact as bad as it may seem. Further, one may communicate privately with oneself, or have internal dialogues with others. The very availability in the human linguistic repertory of devices for claiming or disclaiming responsibility, shifting blame, denying or justifying, and so on, may facilitate or even prompt cognitive restructuring when one is faced with a negative self-referent belief, even if one is alone. In connection with this last point, one would clearly wish to look at cross-cultural and developmental issues, with a view to examining effects of different linguistic, cognitive, and social systems on the creation and reduction of threats to competence.

NOTE

* I wish to thank the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, The Netherlands, and
the Bureau of Child Research, University of Kansas, for support during the planning and writing of this paper, and Carolyn Roy for discussions of the topics of the paper and much editorial assistance with it.

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