Chapter 6
Lexical Basis of Causal Attribution and Explanation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explains how laypeople generate and evaluate explanations. Traditionally, deliberate processing is assumed to be involved in generating and evaluating explanations. However, the author proposes two stages account for causal attribution and explanation to explain how laypeople generate and evaluate explanations quickly: a semi-autonomous processing stage which is primarily dependent on the lexical information of the verb, and a deliberate processing stage that takes many factors into account. The author proposes that verb types play an important role in determining the type of explanation and calls it verb cue hypothesis. In addition, the author proposes that verb cue hypothesis works as a cognitive shortcut that comprises the first stage of the two-stages account. Empirical evidence for the verb cue hypothesis was found in studies on causal attribution and explanation type preference.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where change is regarded as a norm, not an exception. Furthermore, new rules and new instruments are introduced in a record setting speed. In this rapidly changing world, we need to understand people, objects and events, especially those that are unusual, in order to survive. For instance, we need to know why my friend behaves differently today, why the doorknob is placed where it is, or why it rained heavily yesterday. If the problem at hand is important, we try to get the reasonable answer. And when we do not know the reasonable answer, we either try to find the answer for ourselves or ask other people to give the answers and try to explain why the answers might be right. The processes of figuring out the cause, reason, or the explanation have been studied as causal attribution and explanation in social psychology and cognitive psychology.

One interesting thing in the process is that we are quite good at generating and evaluating the explanations (Cimpian, 2015). As most of the questions we want to know is either why question (e.g., why the accident happened or why coins are round in most cases) or the how question (e.g., how ice melts into water (Lombozo & Wilkenfeld, forthcoming), the fact that we are good at evaluating explanations suggests that there can be some easy way to figure out the type of explanation that is adequate in the situation at an early stage of processing, such as at the lexical level. I will call the idea that verbs play important role in determining the type of explanation as the verb cue hypothesis. However, we also need some mechanisms that check the validity of the initial judgment because we sometimes look for reasons other than the one we initially thought. So in this chapter, I am going to propose a two processing stages account for causal attribution and explanation: A semi-autonomous processing stage which is primarily dependent on the lexical information, and a deliberate processing stage that takes many factors into account.

There will be two sections in the chapter. The lexical basis of causal attribution related with the interpersonal verbs will be covered in the first section. More specifically, the characteristics of interpersonal verbs, the interpretational bias of interpersonal verbs, and the time course of the interpretation bias of interpersonal verbs will be covered. The lexical basis of explanation type preference will be covered in the second section. In the second section, basic issues related with explanation and explanation type preference will be covered. Afterwards, lexical basis of explanation type preference, which will be the first stage of the two stages account will be proposed. Finally, in the concluding section, implications of two processing stages model of causal attribution and explanation and ideas for future research will be proposed.
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