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TITLE: Effects of word valence on number of synonyms are mediated by perceived disgust

AUTHORS (LAST NAME, FIRST NAME): Yong, Jose<sup>1</sup>; Tan, Yvonne<sup>1</sup>

AUTHORS/INSTITUTIONS: J. Yong, Y. Tan, Singapore Management University, Singapore, SINGAPORE|

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**ABSTRACT BODY:**

**Abstract:** Negative words tend to have more synonyms than positive words. This study predicts that as word negativity increases, number of synonyms also increases in order to facilitate the avoidance of negative words. Results show that perceived disgust mediates the effect of valence on number of synonyms.

**Supporting Summary:** The variety and number of lexical expressions for a construct can vary as a function of the nature of the construct. For instance, the lexical hypothesis argues that the number of alternative words (synonyms) for a trait differs as a function of the trait's importance. Another established finding is that negative words tend to have more synonyms than positive words. Negative words are more aversive than positive words, and euphemizing in order to avoid the negativity of negative words may lead to a proliferation of synonyms for negative words. The use of a negative term is avoided by using a more neutral synonym that, however, becomes more negative over time and is replaced with a third neutral term that in turn becomes negative, and so forth. Disgust is one such aversive reaction from which avoidance behavior is reliably elicited. It is thus hypothesized that as word negativity increases, the number of synonyms also increases, and perceived disgust of the word mediates this effect of word valence on number of synonyms.<br />

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The words used in this study were compiled from three studies that provided lists of words whose positive-negative valence had already been validated (Palazova et al., 2011; Tse & Altarriba, 2009; Yao & Wang, 2013). The number of synonyms for each word was determined by referencing synonyms from Thesaurus.com and the perceived disgust for each word was determined through participant ratings. Bootstrapping was conducted to examine the mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; 2008), and the results show that the total effect of valence on number of synonyms ( $b = 5.49$ ,  $SE = 2.16$ ,  $p = .012$ ) becomes non-significant after disgust as the mediator is included in the model ( $b = .46$ ,  $SE = 3.70$ ,  $p = .99$ ). Moreover, the indirect effect of valence on number of synonyms with disgust as the mediator is significant ( $b = 5.44$ ,  $SE = 2.27$ ,  $p = .017$ ). Thus, the results show that disgust mediates the effect of word valence on the number of synonyms, supporting our predictions.<br />

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The results of this study provide a preliminary empirical basis for further research along similar lines. Future directions include analyzing occupational titles and whether perceived prestige of occupations, similar to valence of words, is correlated with the number of alternative versions of occupational titles (i.e., whether there are more ways to refer to low status jobs than high status jobs in order to mask the lower prestige of low status jobs).