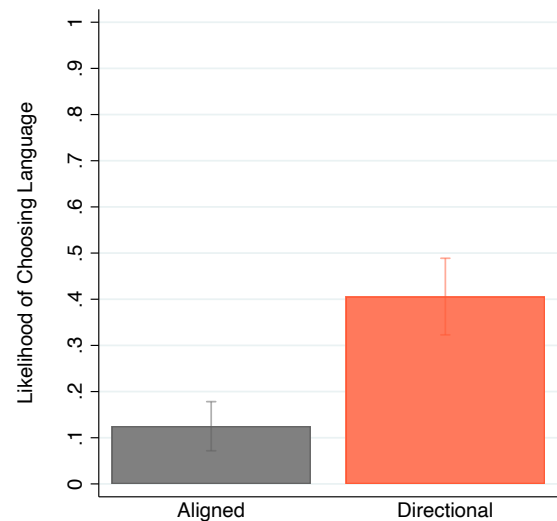


Numbers Tell, Words Sell: Understanding the Use of Language in Expert Communications

Overview

When policymakers evaluate research evidence on policy programs, how the data are communicated can play a critical role in shaping their perceptions of the research. In an experiment, [Michael Thaler](#) (UCL), [Mattie Toma](#) (Warwick), and [Victor Yaneng Wang](#) (MIT) find that **experts are more likely to use vague language—rather than precise numbers—when trying to persuade policymakers that research shows that a policy program is effective.** This strategy stems from a psychological discomfort with lying: using language allows experts to suggest larger effects without technically overstating the truth. Indeed, experts in our study rarely stray from the truth when using numbers to communicate but are comfortable slanting language communications. This imprecision can cause policymakers to systematically overestimate policy effectiveness, highlighting the importance of transparency and communicating numbers and language side-by-side.



In the experiment, experts are more likely to use language to communicate research results when they are aiming to persuade their audience that a policy program worked well (orange bar) rather than to communicate research results accurately (grey bar).

Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Highlights

Experts are **29 percentage points more likely to use language instead of numbers when their goal is to persuade** rather than accurately communicate the true effect size to policymakers.

This arises because experts prefer to avoid explicitly overstating the facts, and language allows them to overstate their claims without being dishonest.

Policy takeaways:

- Raise awareness of how language can be strategically used to persuade.
- Encourage experts to report numbers alongside words.

The Study

Researchers conducted a randomized experiment involving:

- **145 academic social scientists** (experts sample)
- **66 policymakers** (recruited via Warwick's [Policymakers Lab](#))

Each expert described the effect size of real policy interventions as estimated by researchers, using either a precise number (e.g., '3 percentage point increase'), or a descriptive phrase (e.g., 'moderate effect').

Experts were incentivised to either accurately communicate the true effect size or persuade policymakers that the effect was large. Policymakers then received messages from experts and predicted the true effect of the policy program.

Key Results

- When accuracy was the goal, experts used words instead of numbers 12.5% of the time.
- When persuasion was the goal, this rose to 41%.
- Experts preferred to use ambiguous language instead of numbers that explicitly overstated the truth.
- As a result, experts communicated effects that were 49% larger when they use language,

The study and all results reported here were replicated in a more abstract environment among the general public, pointing to the broader applicability of the findings.

Policy Communication Takeaways

This study shows how strategic use of language can shape policy decisions: Experts use vague language to imply larger impacts without feeling dishonest. This can mislead policymakers, such that they interpret the same data as indicating a larger policy effect when words are used *because* experts are more comfortable slanting their communications that use language.

This points to the value of **raising awareness about the strategic use of language** to help policymakers navigate research communications. Future work can also explore the impact of imposing **structure on communications** to help mitigate the effect. For instance, a strategy of dual-format reporting—combining language with numerical benchmarks—may offer transparency while retaining narrative accessibility.

Further Information

This briefing is based on: Thaler, M., Toma, M., Yaneng Wang, V. (2025) "[Numbers Tell, Words Sell](#)," Working Paper.