How language impacts political opinions

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Words have power, but so does the language in which they're spoken, according to Margit Tavits, the Dr. William Taussig Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

In their groundbreaking book, "Voicing Politics," published by Princeton University Press, Tavits and Efrén Pérez, professor of political science and psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, uncover the

many ways in which linguistic peculiarities of different languages can have meaningful consequences for political attitudes and beliefs around the world.

"The book explores how the language we speak affects the way in which we express our opinions and specifically focuses on political opinions," said Tavits, who is also the chair of the Department of Political Science at WashU.

"The central argument is that the small quirks and differences across languages matter because they direct our attention to certain things and away from others. Those little nudges are then reflected in how we express politically relevant opinions."

Take gender, for example. In heavily gendered languages—like Spanish and French—objects are designated as either masculine or feminine, Tavits explained. In these languages, it's often impossible to construct a gender-neutral sentence. In the English language, masculine nouns and pronouns are often automatically used if the gender of the subject is unclear or changeable (i.e., alumni, alumnae). But genderless languages—like Hungarian, Estonian, Finnish—neither classify objects as masculine or feminine nor use gendered pronouns.

"In gendered languages, you start to see gender differences everywhere, because that's the way you speak," Tavits said. "You always have to differentiate between people, even objects, and the language directs your attention to the fact that they are different and not equal," Tavits said.

"If language doesn't make gender salient, however, our research shows people are less likely to express gender bias and more likely to support ideas of gender equality."

Throughout the book, Tavits and Pérez use carefully crafted experiments

and rich cross-national survey data, along with the latest findings from psychology and political science, to demonstrate how language shapes mass opinion in domains including gender equality, LGBTQ rights, environmental conservation, ethnic relations and candidate evaluations.

Implications for researchers, policymakers

From a research perspective, Tavits said the findings are fascinating because, until now, political scientists have largely ignored the effects of language when doing comparative studies.

"The language of the interview is typically treated as background noise. Surveys are translated to different language without much thought about how the respondent's language impacts his or her opinion on the issue. With this research, we show that language actually directs the opinions people express in subtle and important ways," Tavits said.

"Our research demonstrates why it's important for scholars of political behavior to take linguistic nuances more seriously and charts new directions for researchers across diverse fields. A stronger grasp of linguistic effects on political cognition can help us better understand how people form political attitudes and why political outcomes vary across nations and regions."

The findings also have implications for policymakers.

"Language sets some boundaries. It's important for policymakers to understand that the same approaches may not work in different contexts simply because of the language people speak," Tavits said.

Environmental policy is one such example. Tavits and Pérez found that people whose language didn't have a future tense and who therefore used the present tense to talk about the future, were less likely to perceive

future as distant and distinct from today. As a result, they were more likely to see climate change as an immediate concern and support environmental policies that may have immediate costs but promise future payoffs. By comparison, people who spoke a language with a separate future tense perceived more distance between today and tomorrow, making climate change seem as something too distant to worry about and reducing support for these policies.

"Policymakers in these countries should use language that emphasizes the more immediate threats of climate change," Tavits said.

Likewise, the research offers validation for activists who urge the use of gender-neutral pronouns. They found that people who used such pronouns were subsequently less likely to express prejudice toward the LGBTQ community.

"Some people say it's just political correctness, but if the goal is to be inclusive, our research supports the idea that adopting gender-neutral pronouns will positively shift political attitudes toward inclusivity," Tavits said.

Unlimited possibilities for future research

Because linguistics within politics is a largely untapped well of research, many of the findings in the book lead to more questions than answers. The possibilities for future research topics are endless, Tavits said.

For example, Tavits and Pérez found that language status can direct people's attention in politically relevant ways. In multilingual countries, those who spoke the majority language looked at politics differently—they're more likely to focus on left vs. right, liberal vs. conservative, Tavits explained. But when bilingual individuals were assigned to speak the minority language—even if they were a part of the

ethnic majority themselves—suddenly ethnic concerns become more salient.

Along these same lines, the language in which certain political messages—like campaign messages and civics lessons—are mostly delivered matters, too, Tavits said. In the U.S., for example, people learn about civics in English, regardless of their native language, almost exclusively. As a result, it's easier to retrieve this information in English because it's stored in their memory that way.

Even the common use of passive voice in languages such as Spanish has implications. Political scientists could study whether these speakers are less likely to assign blame to political leaders for negative outcomes like a downed economy, Tavits said.

Cross-disciplinary research leads to unchartered territory

The potential influence of a language's grammatical quirks has long fascinated Tavits, whose first language, Estonian, does not have gender or future tense. Because she speaks multiple languages, Tavits was keenly aware of these idiosyncrasies.

The project exemplifies Arts & Sciences' current focus on cross-disciplinary scholarship, Tavits said. Linguistics and cognitive science are out of the typical realm for political scientists, so Tavits teamed up with Pérez, a political psychologist, who brought the cognitive science expertise to the project.

"I think this project is a good example of how bringing different disciplines into the conversation can lead to something new and fascinating in terms of discovery," Tavits said.

It's also an important reminder of the importance of reading outside of your own discipline, Tavits said.

"Reading outside of your discipline opens your eyes to different concepts and ways of thinking. If you stay within your own discipline, there are things you will miss because it's not part of the discourse within your own discipline. You have to look outside to find new ideas and bring them back. That's how you create something new," Tavits added.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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