What You Are Getting and What You Will Be Getting: Testing Whether Verb Tense Affects Intertemporal Choices

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Background

- Chen (2013) relates savings behavior of the people from a country to the primary language of that country.
- According to the literature, languages are, broadly, of two types:
  - Strong Future Time Reference (FTR)
  - Weak Future Time Reference (FTR)
- Main claim of Chen (2013): Savings rate of countries with weak FTR languages > Savings rate of countries with strong FTR languages.

Approach:
- To test whether Chen’s findings of financial impatience can be explained by the verb tense used to describe choice options at the time of decisions.
- To test whether people favor reward options described using an earlier tense framing in intertemporal choices.

Main aim: To test whether verb tense matches time of event.

Language used for testing the question: English
- Reason: Flexibility in whether verb tense matches time of event.

Results

- Sample Study:
  - Question: Please choose between: “You get $19” vs “You will get $21”
  - Absent any timing information, people chose options described in the present tense significantly more than options described in the future tense.
  - There is a 35 percentage point difference in probability of choice.

- Combined results from 9 studies (N=2759, 125 choices), manipulating:
  - Tense: Present tense (“get” or “are getting”), future tense (“will get” or “are going to get”)
  - Objective timing (up to 8 days)
  - Types of vague timing information: different time (e.g., soon vs. later), same word (e.g., soon vs. soon) and different words for the same time (e.g., promptly vs. quickly)
  - Difference between amount: Small differences (up to $3) to Large differences (up to $20)

- Are people more likely to choose options described in a prescriptively earlier tense?
  - Yes, when there is no other timing information, and when the difference between amounts is small.
  - Presence of any timing information blocks the effect of earlier tense on choice.

Conclusion

Limitations

- In all the studies, tense was examined in brief, specific stimuli (choice options) rather than natural language (like conversation).
- These studies test contextual difference in tense, rather than long term effects of learning languages that differ in tense structures.

Selected References


