
Cognitive model of ethnic situations


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Abstract---This study explores the role of **situational models** in the construction of social memory, specifically in the context of ethnic prejudice and stereotypes. We argue that these models, which are formed after understanding and evaluating a social situation, serve as cognitive frameworks for discourse production. These models, structured hierarchically and categorically, contain knowledge and beliefs that shape how individuals communicate. These schemas are not arbitrary; they emerge from social interactions and shape how ethnic groups are perceived. **Ethnic attitudes** are primarily negative, driven by negative representations formed from past experiences. Thus, ethnic prejudices are reinforced through **subjective representations** stored in **ethnic situation models**, which are activated in social contexts, shaping the dominant group's views.

Keywords---situational models, frames, scripts, episodic models.

Introduction

At a critical moment in the evolution of linguistic theory, language was no longer seen as a static entity, but as an active system. The key aspect of the linguistic sign became its pragmatic dimension—shaped by the linguistic personality within the cultural and national context from which it originates.

Language shapes consciousness and provides access to the mental and spiritual core of an ethnos. It plays a central role in forming national character, much like individual tones combine to form a melody. Thus, nationality is more than a collection of individuals, and language reflects the inner world of its speakers.

Advances in psychology and artificial intelligence have shown that understanding discourse requires more than linguistic knowledge; it demands cognitive representations of social situations. Discourse is an exchange of meanings shaped by these mental models, yet research on how such models function in practice remains limited. Their role is particularly important in analyzing discourse domains—specific contexts such as everyday talk about ethnic minority groups.

Establishing how social situations, cognition, and discourse interact requires an interdisciplinary approach involving cognitive psychology, social psychology, microsociology, and discourse analysis. Key research traditions include:

1. **Cognitive theories of strategic information processing**, emphasizing the flexible, multi-level structure of discourse (Kinch, Van Dijk, 1978),
2. **Sociocognitive theories**, which link mental models to social attitudes (van Dijk, 1982).
3. **Theories of social cognition**, which outline the cognitive dimensions of social situations (Argyle, Furnham, Graham, 1981; Forgas, 1979, 1981; Furnham, Argyle 1982)

4. **Research on ethnic stereotypes**, exploring how prejudice operates at cognitive and discursive levels (Hamilton, 1981a;)

Review

This study explores how **ethnic situational models** stored in memory shape beliefs and discourse about minority groups, using conversations with white Dutch residents in Amsterdam about "foreigners," particularly immigrants from Turkey, Morocco, and Suriname. These discussions reveal how stereotypes are perpetuated by the dominant majority, while minorities become targets of misunderstanding and discrimination.

According to **psycholinguistic and cognitive theories**, **semantic models** stored in memory are essential for understanding and interpreting discourse (Van Dijk, 1982). These models, similar to **episodic memory models**, act as **cognitive maps** of reality, helping to make sense of specific social situations. **Situational models** integrate personal knowledge, experiences, and views, forming abstract frameworks or "scripts" that guide interpretation.

These models are shaped by past experiences, creating cognitive structures that include beliefs and evaluations. **Scripts** represent decontextualized knowledge and help organize understanding. Earlier theories of discourse comprehension (Kinch, Van Dijk, 1978) suggested that comprehension involves constructing models of situations described in the text. Reproducing discourse means retrieving and updating these models, especially when specific details are difficult to recall. Models play a crucial role in **understanding texts** and discourse. The process of **textual representation** involves detecting and reproducing specific fragments of a text, especially when its exact meaning is difficult to recall. **Text reproduction** often requires **updating episodic models** and transforming the information for future use.

A distinction is made between **specific** and **general models**. **Specific models** represent unique information about particular situations, while **general models** collect information from similar situations across different contexts. Specific models can update general models with new information. **Shank's (1982)** concept of "reminding" involves recalling either a specific model or a general model related to a familiar situation. These general models, which are relevant to social situations, can evolve into **frames** or **scripts** in **semantic (social) memory**—abstract frameworks of experience and judgments. Over time, **personal experiences** give rise to broader **social scripts**, which reflect the dominant social relations and beliefs. Additionally, mental models for future situations can be created by combining fragments of existing models, helping guide behavior, motivations, and goals.

Ethnic prejudice involves negative social attitudes toward ethnic minority groups, shaped by historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors, particularly in

Northwestern societies. These prejudices are not individual beliefs but shared attitudes of the dominant social group, developed through group interactions within a social context. Research in this area often examines ethnic stereotypes and relationships within ethnic groups, drawing on American and European frameworks (Hamilton, 1981).

Prejudices and beliefs about ethnic groups can be understood through social cognition and cognitive structures like **attitudes**—complex frameworks of beliefs stored in semantic or social memory. These attitudes are activated in specific contexts, such as everyday conversations, and are influenced by both personal experiences and social interactions. When there is limited direct interaction with ethnic minorities, **social representations** fill in the gaps, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices.

Models of social situations operate on both global and local levels, with hierarchical structures that allow efficient information retrieval. These models, similar to **component analysis**, categorize situations into participants, goals, rules, behaviors, and environmental factors. Such representations are episodic and localized in **semantic memory**, influencing unconscious application of social rules during interactions.

In discourse production, categories like **setting**, **complication**, **resolution**, **evaluation**, and **coda** (Labov, 1972) emerge, which align with the structural features of situational models in memory. Narrative stories reflect these models, with the **addressee** selecting models tied to pleasant or interesting experiences. The discourse process also faces cognitive and **pragmatic** obstacles, such as contextual or communicative barriers, that influence how the models are formed and interpreted. Episodic models of ethnic situations reflect subjective experiences shaped by social relationships between ethnic groups, influencing both **understanding** and **evaluation** of those situations. These models are interpreted based on prior experiences and generalized **stereotypical attitudes**. When encountering new ethnic situations, these models often lead to a **biased evaluation**, particularly when influenced by negative stereotypes. If a situation is already negatively represented in memory, this bias stems from previous beliefs and false views, which are supported by experimental findings (Hamilton, 1981a). Ethnic minorities are often perceived and remembered more negatively, with negative actions or traits being more memorable and prominent in social perceptions. One common strategy for processing information based on prejudice involves **scapegoating**, where negative aspects of one social situation are transferred to an entire minority group. This process is driven by **stereotypical schemas** and **situational models** stored in memory, which prioritize negative perceptions and influence how people represent and interpret ethnic situations. The use of **transference** allows negative evaluations to be applied to environmental or situational factors involving ethnic minorities, reinforcing stereotypes and biases.

These cognitive strategies help explain why negative attributes and associations related to ethnic minorities are more readily accessible and highlighted in social discourse.

Conclusion

Situational models play a crucial role in the formation of attitudes, particularly in how ethnic prejudice is conveyed in everyday discourse. These cognitive models organize knowledge and beliefs that influence communication and perpetuate **ethnic stereotypes**. Conversations about minority groups reflect cultural biases and highlight the **intergroup dynamics** that fuel prejudice. Understanding how these models function provides insight into the cognitive and social processes behind the reinforcement of ethnic attitudes and offers pathways for addressing the persistence of ethnic prejudice in society.

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