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SUBTLE LINGUISTIC MANIPULATION, GENDER, AND EYEWITNESS MEMORY ACCURACY: A SPLIT-PLOT EXPERIMENT

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Abstract
Eyewitness accounts remain central to criminal adjudication in Nigeria, yet the way witnesses are questioned can reshape what they go on to report. This study examined whether subtle linguistic manipulation, operationalized as replacing mild verbs with more forceful ones in post-event questions, affects eyewitness memory accuracy, and whether accuracy differs by gender. Eighty part-time psychology students at Nasarawa State University, Keffi (40 men, 40 women) watched a brief video of a road traffic accident, answered five questions worded with either forceful (n = 47) or neutral (n = 33) verbs, and completed a 12-item Eyewitness Observation Scale immediately and again after one week. A split-plot analysis showed a large decline in accuracy across the week (ηp^2 = .48) but no significant effect of linguistic manipulation on memory accuracy, F(1, 78) = 1.03, p = .314. Men and women did not differ, t(78) = 0.22, p = .826. The findings are interpreted through schema theory, and implications are drawn for the design of future misinformation studies and for witness interviewing in Nigeria.
Keywords: **eyewitness memory, linguistic manipulation, misinformation effect, gender, forensic psychology, Nigeria**

Introduction
Few forms of evidence feel as persuasive to a judge or jury as a person saying, “I saw it happen.” Eyewitness testimony helps courts establish what occurred and who was responsible, and in Nigeria, as in many jurisdictions, trials for robbery, assault and homicide frequently turn on what someone remembers having seen. Decades of experimental work, however, suggest that this confidence is only partly deserved. Memory does not record events the way a camera does. What a witness reports is assembled at the moment of recall from fragments of the original experience, general knowledge, and whatever information has arrived since (Bartlett, 1932; Schacter, 1999).
None of this means eyewitness memory is worthless. Mickes et al. (2025) argue that memory is not inherently unreliable but is, like other forensic evidence, open to contamination, and that a witness’s first, uncontaminated report can be remarkably informative. The practical question, then, is what contaminates memory and how easily. Language is a leading candidate. In the classic demonstration, Loftus and Palmer (1974) showed that changing a single verb in a question (“smashed” rather than “hit”) shifted participants’ speed estimates and made them more

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likely to report broken glass that was never there. The effect was striking precisely because the manipulation looked so trivial.

Much of the literature that followed has relied on overtly misleading information, such as a false detail slipped into a narrative or supplied by a co-witness. Subtler manipulations, where the question is the same but the verb is more or less forceful, have received less attention, even though they are closer to what actually happens in police interviews and courtroom questioning, where interviewers rarely lie but often frame. Whether such framing is enough, on its own, to degrade accuracy is still an open empirical question. A second variable that deserves attention is witness gender. Reviews suggest that men and women differ little in overall accuracy but may differ in what they remember (Russell et al., 2024), and findings on susceptibility to misleading information have been mixed.

The present study therefore asked whether subtle, verb-level linguistic manipulation reduces eyewitness memory accuracy among Nigerian university students, and whether accuracy differs between men and women.

Statement of the Problem

Courts and investigators in Nigeria depend heavily on witness accounts, and the conditions under which those accounts are obtained are sometimes far from ideal. Amnesty International (2014) documented the routine use of coercive interrogation to extract confessions, and while coercion is a different problem from subtle wording, it shows how much interview conduct can shape what ends up on the record. High-profile trials, such as the 1995 proceedings before a special military tribunal against Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders, which relied on contested witness evidence and drew widespread criticism for their fairness (Human Rights Watch, 1995), have reinforced concern about how testimony is gathered and weighed.

Three gaps in the literature motivate the study. First, most research on misleading language has used explicit or strongly suggestive information, so the effect of subtle verb-level framing is less well established. Second, relatively little experimental work on this question appears to have been published with Nigerian samples, which makes it hard to know how far findings from Western laboratories travel. Third, evidence on gender is inconsistent, with some studies reporting differences in what men and women recall and others reporting none. The problem this study addresses is whether subtle linguistic manipulation measurably lowers eyewitness memory accuracy in a Nigerian sample and whether witness gender plays any part.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of subtle linguistic manipulation on the memory accuracy of participants?
2. Is there a gender difference in the memory accuracy of participants?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of subtle linguistic manipulation on participants' eyewitness memory accuracy.
2. To determine whether eyewitness memory accuracy differs between male and female participants.

Hypotheses

H1. Participants exposed to subtle linguistic manipulation will show lower memory accuracy than participants who are not exposed to the manipulation.

H2. There will be a gender difference in the memory accuracy of participants.

Review of Literature

Conceptual Review

Subtle Linguistic Manipulation

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Subtle linguistic manipulation refers to the use of carefully chosen wording that nudges how a person interprets or later remembers an event without any overt deception and, usually, without the person noticing. It differs from outright misinformation in that no false fact is asserted; the manipulation lies in connotation, intensity or presupposition. Asking how fast a bus was going when it "crashed" into another vehicle, as opposed to when it "bumped" into it, carries the same literal question but a different implied severity.

Eyewitness Memory Accuracy

Eyewitness memory accuracy is the extent to which a witness's report matches what actually happened. It is usually scored against a checklist of verifiable details, with correct reports, omissions and false reports counted separately. Accuracy is not the same as completeness, because a witness can report little and be right, or report a great deal and be wrong, a distinction that Koriat and Goldsmith (1996) formalized in their work on how people regulate what they volunteer.

Empirical Review

Loftus and Palmer (1974) remain the reference point. In their first experiment, 45 students watched film clips of traffic accidents and estimated speed; those asked about cars that "smashed" gave higher estimates (40.8 mph) than those asked about cars that "hit" (34.0 mph). In a second experiment, participants questioned with "smashed" were more likely to say, a week later, that they had seen broken glass (32%) than those questioned with "hit" (14%), although none was present.

More recent studies show that the phenomenon extends well beyond the original paradigm. Chan et al. (2024) found that participants interviewed by a generative AI chatbot that introduced misleading suggestions developed more than three times as many immediate false memories as a control group. Kękuś et al. (2023) paired participants who had watched slightly different versions of a film and found that those who accepted misinformation raised in discussion were more likely to answer incorrectly later, whereas those whose partners challenged it were more likely to answer correctly. Gabbert et al. (2003) reported a similar conformity effect in face-to-face discussion, with most witnesses reporting at least one detail they had learned only from their discussion partner.

Not every question format has the same effect. Wade and Spearing (2023) found that negative and double-negative questions reduced the accuracy of adult witnesses' answers, whereas leading questions and leading questions followed by feedback did not, and that witnesses who could better discriminate their correct from incorrect initial answers were more likely to benefit from cross-examination. Likewise, Zaragoza and Mitchell (1996) showed that repeated exposure to a suggestion increased false reports, which implies that dosage matters, and Blank and Launay (2014), in a meta-analysis, found that warning witnesses about possible misinformation substantially reduced the misinformation effect. The strength, repetition and processing of the manipulation all appear to condition its impact.

On gender, Russell et al. (2024) synthesized 22 studies in a scoping review and concluded that neither sex shows a clear overall advantage in eyewitness accuracy. Women tended to recall more person-related details such as clothing and physical features (see also Areh, 2011; Longstaff & Belz, 2020), men showed a small advantage for details about the surroundings, and the most consistent finding was an own-gender bias, in which witnesses were more accurate about people of their own gender (Areh & Walsh, 2020; Palmer et al., 2013; Wright & Sladden, 2003). Evidence on misinformation was mixed; Loftus et al. (1992) found men more susceptible, whereas another study in the review found no sex difference (Russell et al., 2024).

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Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in schema theory (Bartlett, 1932). Bartlett argued that remembering is an act of reconstruction guided by organized prior knowledge, or schemas, rather than a replay of stored traces. Schemas help people encode and retrieve efficiently, but they also invite error because gaps are filled with what is expected. Brewer and Treyens (1981), for example, found that participants waiting in an office later "remembered" objects that fit the office schema but were not there.

Applied to the present design, a verb such as "crashed" or "slammed" can activate a more violent accident schema than "bumped" or "hit", and details consistent with that schema, such as higher speed or shattered glass, become more likely to be reported. The source monitoring framework (Johnson et al., 1993) adds that errors are most likely when people cannot tell whether a detail was perceived or merely suggested. On this view, forceful wording should lower accuracy, and the effect should persist or grow with time as the original trace weakens, which is the basis for H1.

Methods

Design

The study used a split-plot (mixed) factorial design. Question wording was the between-subjects factor, with two levels (forceful wording, labelled manipulated, and neutral wording, labelled non-manipulated), and testing occasion was the within-subjects factor, with two levels (immediately after viewing and one week later). Eyewitness memory accuracy was the dependent variable. Gender was examined as a separate comparison.

Participants

Eighty part-time students of the Department of Psychology, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, took part, comprising 40 men and 40 women. The age distribution was 18–22 years (n = 16), 23–27 years (n = 25), 28–32 years (n = 25), and 33 years and above (n = 14). Thirty-four participants were single, 41 were married, and 5 were divorced. Forty participants identified as Christian, 37 as Muslim, and 3 as belonging to other religions. Participants were drawn by stratified random selection and assigned at random to wording conditions, which produced 47 participants in the manipulated condition and 33 in the non-manipulated condition. Eligibility required normal vision, which was checked by asking participants to read a projected text from a set distance, English proficiency, no diagnosed memory impairment, and no personal experience of a road accident. Persons with professional training in observation, including intelligence and military personnel, and those who had seen the stimulus before were excluded.

Instruments

Linguistic Manipulation Scale. Five questions about the video served as the manipulation. Each question had a forceful and a neutral version that differed by one verb: "crashed" versus "bumped" (speed of the bus), "shattered" versus "broken" (glass), "swung" versus "turned" (the bus entering the road), "slam" versus "hit" (the motorcyclist), and "zoom" versus "drove" (a second car). Four experts (three in forensic psychology, one in linguistics) rated the scale, with face validity ratings of 50% to 86% and content validity ratings of 65% to 80%. In a pilot sample of 30, internal consistency was $\alpha = .67$ and three-week test–retest reliability was .74.

Eyewitness Observation Scale (EOS). The EOS has 12 items in four domains: road and vehicle conditions, accident scene and environment, collision and human response, and traffic control and impact severity. Items are mostly yes/no, with a few categorical options (for example, dry or wet). Each correct response scores 1 and each error or omission scores 0, giving a possible range of 0 to 12. The same four experts rated face validity at 65% to 90% and content validity at 72% to 95%. Pilot internal consistency was modest ($\alpha = .56$) and three-week test–retest reliability was .62, a limitation addressed below.

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Video stimulus. A brief video clip showed a road traffic accident at an intersection involving a school bus, other vehicles and a motorcyclist, with dense background detail.

Procedure

A letter of introduction was obtained from the Head of the Department of Psychology. Participants were briefed in general terms (without revealing the manipulation), given time to ask questions, and signed informed consent forms. They were randomly assigned to a wording condition, watched the video, and then answered the five Linguistic Manipulation Scale questions in the version for their condition. They completed the EOS immediately afterwards (Time 1). All participants returned exactly one week later, having been asked not to discuss the video, and completed the EOS again in the same room under the same conditions (Time 2). At the end, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study and the wording manipulation, and were offered support if the content had been distressing. Responses were coded to protect anonymity, and data were stored securely.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in SPSS. Demographic characteristics were summarized with frequencies and percentages. Effects of wording, testing occasion, and their interaction on EOS scores were tested with a mixed-design repeated-measures general linear model; because the within-subjects factor had two levels, the multivariate (Wilks' Λ) and univariate tests are equivalent. Partial eta squared (ηp^2) was computed from the sums of squares in the output. Box's *M* and Levene's tests assessed covariance and variance assumptions. Gender differences were tested with an independent-samples *t* test. The significance level was .05 throughout.

Results

Assumption checks were satisfactory. Box's test was not significant, $M = 2.48$, $F(3, 335{,}443.91) = 0.80$, $p = .492$, and Levene's tests were non-significant at Time 1 ($p = .322$) and Time 2 ($p = .442$). Table 1 presents the cell means.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Eyewitness Observation Scale Scores by Wording Condition and Testing Occasion

Testing occasion	Wording condition	*M*	*SD*	*N*
Time 1 (immediate)	Manipulated	7.62	1.66	47
	Non-manipulated	6.85	1.88	33
	Total	7.30	1.78	80
Time 2 (one week)	Manipulated	4.98	2.08	47
	Non-manipulated	5.06	1.90	33
	Total	5.01	1.99	80

Note. Scores range from 0 to 12. Manipulated = forceful verbs; non-manipulated = neutral verbs.

At Time 1, the manipulated group recorded a higher mean score ($M = 7.62$, $SD = 1.66$) than the non-manipulated group ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.88$), which is the opposite of the direction predicted by H1. At Time 2, the two groups were almost identical (manipulated $M = 4.98$, $SD = 2.08$; non-manipulated $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.90$), and the difference of 0.08 points, although in the predicted direction, is negligible. Both groups declined over the week, by 2.64 points in the manipulated group and 1.79 points in the non-manipulated group.

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Hypothesis 1: Participants exposed to subtle linguistic manipulation will show lower memory accuracy than participants who are not exposed to the manipulation.

Table 2

Mixed-Design ANOVA: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects on Eyewitness Observation Scale Scores

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	ηp²	Noncent. parameter	Observed power
Intercept	5820.97	1	5820.97	1308.37	< .001	.94	1308.37	1.00
Linguistic manipulation	4.57	1	4.57	1.03	.314	.01	1.03	.17
Error	347.02	78	4.45					

Note. SS = Type III sum of squares. ηp² = partial eta squared.

Table 2 presents the between-subjects tests from the mixed-design analysis. The between-subjects effect of linguistic manipulation on memory accuracy was not statistically significant, $F(1, 78) = 1.03$, $p = .314$, $\eta p^2 = .013$. Hypothesis 1 was therefore not supported. The within-subjects effect of testing occasion was large: Wilks' $\Lambda = .524$, $F(1, 78) = 70.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .476$, reflecting a fall in mean accuracy from 7.30 at Time 1 to 5.01 at Time 2. Because testing occasion had only two levels, the multivariate and univariate tests are equivalent.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a gender difference in the memory accuracy of participants.

Table 3

Independent-Samples t Test of Gender Differences in Memory Accuracy

Variable	**Gender**	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***
Memory accuracy	Male	40	1.53	0.51		
	Female	40	1.50	0.51	0.22	78

***Note. p* = .826.**

Male participants ($n = 40$) obtained a mean accuracy index of 1.53 ($SD = 0.51$) and female participants ($n = 40$) a mean of 1.50 ($SD = 0.51$). The difference was not significant, $t(78) = 0.22$, $p = .826$, mean difference = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.20, 0.25], $d = 0.05$, and Levene's test indicated equal variances ($p = .755$). Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Discussion

This study asked whether replacing mild verbs with forceful ones in five post-event questions would lower eyewitness memory accuracy, and whether accuracy differed between men and women. Neither hypothesis was supported. The effect of wording was small and not significant ($\eta p^2 = .013$), and the two groups converged at one week (4.98 versus 5.06). At Time 1 the manipulated group in fact scored higher than the non-manipulated group. Because participants were assigned at random, this is best read as sampling variation rather than as evidence that forceful verbs help memory, but it means the descriptive pattern lends no support to H1. The one robust finding was forgetting: mean accuracy fell by about 2.3 points on the 12-point scale (from 7.30 to 5.01) over the week, regardless of wording.

The null result is compatible with schema theory but does not confirm it. Loftus and Palmer (1974) measured speed estimates and the report of a single false detail, whereas the Eyewitness Observation Scale scores accuracy across 12 items covering road conditions, the scene, the collision and traffic control. A forceful verb may bias the few details it touches without moving a

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global score, so the measure may have been insensitive to the effect. The wider literature also suggests that the strength of a manipulation matters: Zaragoza and Mitchell (1996) found that repeated exposure increased false reports, and Wade and Spearing (2023) found that leading questions did not reduce answer accuracy in the way negative questions did. Five single-verb substitutions are a light dose by comparison. The absence of a gender difference agrees with the conclusion of Russell et al. (2024) that neither sex shows a clear overall advantage, but a single total score cannot show whether men and women remember different kinds of detail, such as people versus surroundings.

Several limitations should be kept in mind. First, the reliability of the outcome measure was low (pilot $\alpha = .56$; test–retest = .62), which adds noise and works against detecting any effect. Second, with 47 and 33 participants, the design had 80% power only for an effect of about $d = 0.64$ (two-tailed, $\alpha = .05$), so a small or moderate wording effect cannot be ruled out; the observed power reported in Table 2 is a function of the p value and adds no information beyond it. Third, the groups were unequal in size despite random assignment. Fourth, the sample consisted of part-time psychology students from one university who watched a video rather than witnessing a real event, which limits generalization to Nigerian witnesses in criminal proceedings.

Conclusion

Under the conditions of this experiment, subtle verb-level manipulation of question wording did not significantly lower eyewitness memory accuracy among Nasarawa State University students, and men and women did not differ in accuracy. Memory accuracy did decline substantially over one week regardless of wording. The study therefore adds a cautionary data point to the misinformation literature: the effect of language on memory may depend heavily on how strong the manipulation is and on how it is measured, and a null result here should not be read as showing that suggestive framing is harmless.

Recommendations

Although this study did not detect a wording effect, the wider literature continues to show that suggestion can contaminate memory under some conditions (Chan et al., 2024; Gabbert et al., 2003; Kękuś et al., 2023). The following recommendations are made with that broader evidence in view.

1. Police officers, prosecutors and lawyers should continue to prefer open-ended, neutral questions, and training in structured approaches such as the cognitive interview should be strengthened (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992).
2. Witness interviews should be recorded in full so that the wording used can be reviewed, extending to witnesses the electronic recording that the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015) provides for in the case of suspects' confessional statements.
3. Witness gender should not be used as a shortcut for judging reliability.
4. Future studies should use stronger and more graded wording manipulations, more reliable outcome measures, larger and more diverse Nigerian samples, and separate scoring of person-related and scene-related details.

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