

Aggressive Interaction in Perspectival Discourse¹²

Sommer, Carlo Michael, Freitag, Burkhard & Graumann, Carl F.

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"Sprache und Situation", Heidelberg/Mannheim

Psychologisches Institut
der Universität Heidelberg
Hauptstr. 47-51
D-6900 Heidelberg
Germany
phone.: 06221/547380
fax: 06221/547734

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² The verbal material analysed in this study stems from an experiment by Mummendey and Otten (1989). We would like to thank very much Amélie Mummendey and Sabine Otten who kindly provided their data.

Aggressive Interaction in Perspectival Discourse

Abstract

Research on linguistic perspectivity has shown that a speaker's/hearer's perspective on a given object, person or event results in differential text production/comprehension.

The present study analyses linguistic perspectivity in verbal reports on aggressive interactions shown in a video. The verbal material stems from an experiment by Mummendey & Otten (1989). In this experiment, subjects were instructed to take the perspective of one of two target persons ("initiator", "recipient") or an observer's perspective. Then they saw a video showing aggressive interactions between the two target persons. After that, subjects gave free verbal reports on the events shown in the video, segmented the interaction sequences, and evaluated the target persons' behaviour on rating scales. Mummendey and Otten found perspective-specific differences in the evaluation of the appropriateness of the critical behaviour and in the subjective definitions of the beginning of the aggressive interactions. In the present study, the verbal reports were reanalysed with respect to linguistic perspectivity.

Significant differences in several syntactic and semantic variables (e.g., choice of grammatical subject, verb selection, qualifications) are interpreted as a validation of the theory of linguistic perspectivity and as a demonstration of the uses of linguistic analysis in social psychological research.

INTRODUCTION

The term perspective is widely used in social psychology and linguistics (for an overview, cf. Graumann, 1989; 1992; Graumann & Sommer 1988). Although conceptualizations of perspectivity and applications of the term vary, one can give a basic definition of the concept. Perspectivity means that perception/cognition is related to a specific - spatio-temporally or cognitively definable - position or viewpoint. This results in a perspective-specific structuring of the represented object, event or state of affairs.

Such a perspective is also reflected in the linguistic representation of the world referred to. By means of specific linguistic features, the speaker sets a perspective that the listener is suggested to take. Verbal interaction, thus, is a dynamic interaction of perspective setting and perspective taking.

Evidence for this conception of linguistic perspectivity comes from experimental studies demonstrating that a speaker's/hearer's perspective on a given object, person or event results in differential - i.e. perspective-specific - text production/comprehension (cf., e.g., Graumann & Sommer, 1988). In those studies, subjects are usually instructed to take one of two or more perspectives and are then confronted with a text or film, in which all of the perspectives are relevant. After this presentation, comprehension, recall, or reproduction is analysed for perspective-related differences.

The present study makes use of the same paradigm and analyses perspectivity in verbal reports on aggressive interactions. In this context, Mummendey and collaborators have demonstrated perspective-specific differences in the evaluation of the critical behaviour (cf. Mummendey et al., 1984; Mummendey & Otten 1989). To the present authors, this context gives the opportunity to study evaluative aspects of linguistic perspectivity which have not been considered explicitly before. Moreover, we tried to examine whether a linguistic analysis of perspectivity reveals perspective

differences on a descriptive level, where ratings or content analysis did not show perspective-related effects (cf. Mummendey & Otten 1989). For this purpose, the linguistic material of the present analysis was taken from an experiment done by Mummendey and Otten (1989). Procedure, stimulus material, and sample of this study are the basis of our analysis.

METHOD

Procedure

164 pupils (114 boys and 50 girls at the age of 14 to 22 years)³ watched a video showing an aggressive interaction of two schoolboys:

A group of pupils (13 - 16 years, i.e. approximately at the age of the subjects) arrives at the schoolyard. One of them (called the initiator) pushes another one's (called recipient) bag from the bicycle. The viewer has no unambiguous information, whether this was intended or not. The resulting argument is continued in the classroom, where the recipient throws the initiator's books down to the floor. The sequence ends by an intervention of the teacher who separates the two.

Before watching the video, two experimental groups were instructed to take either the initiator's or the recipient's perspective. A control group was instructed to take an observer's perspective.

Having seen the video, subjects were asked to answer written questions and to give a free recall of the depicted events. Mummendey and Otten found perspective-specific differences in the evaluation of the appropriateness of the critical behaviour and in the subjective definitions of the beginning of the aggressive interactions. No perspectival effects were found on the descriptive level. This analysis was based upon the subjects' responses on bipolar scales, upon their segmentation of the

³Mummendey and Otten (1989, p. 38-39) report a sample of 152 subjects. The difference is due to the fact that 12 of the subjects did not fulfill the requirements for Mummendey and Otten's analysis.

events and upon a content analysis of their verbal reports (for details of design and results, cf. Mummendey & Otten, 1989).

In the present study, the subjects' free verbal reports on the events shown in the video were analysed by means of categories for linguistic perspectivity which had been identified and (partly) validated in earlier studies (cf., e.g., Graumann & Sommer, 1988).

Dependent Variables and Hypotheses

1. Grammatical subject

There is evidence in linguistics as well as in psychology that speakers choose those entities for grammatical subject that they are empathising with (Dik, 1978; Ertel 1977; Graumann & Sommer, 1988; Kuno & Kaburaki, 1977).

So, speakers who take the initiator's perspective should more often put the initiator into the subject position than speakers with the recipient's perspective, and vice versa. "Neutral" grammatical subjects ("*they*", "*both*") should be preferred by the control group.

2. Use of mental terms

Verba sentiendi (cf. Uspensky 1973) are words that describe acts and states of feeling, thinking, perception, i.e., mental processes which, to an observer, are not directly accessible. Examples for verba sentiendi are "*hope*", "*feel*", "*perceive*". Corresponding adjectives and adverbs are, e.g., "*angry*", "*sorry*". A speaker who attributes such processes to a protagonist, mentally puts him/herself in his/her place, i.e., takes his/her perspective (cf. Fowler 1982).

Consequently, subjects with the initiator's perspective should use such terms more often with respect to the initiator than to the recipient, and they should use more initiator-related verba sentiendi than subjects with the recipient's or the observer's perspective, and vice versa.

3. Spatial orientation

Terms of spatial orientation - verbs as "come" and "go" or terms like "behind X", "to the left of Y" - indicate that the speaker reconstructs space from the standpoint of one of the protagonists. It was hypothesized that "initiator-subjects" use such terms more often initiator-related than "recipient-subjects" and vice versa.

Examples:

- "*The initiator **comes** to the recipient.*" (recipient's perspective)
- "*The initiator **goes** to the recipient.*" (initiator's perspective)
- "*beside the initiator*" (initiator's perspective)
- "*in front of the school entry*" (neutral perspective).

4. Cognitive orientation

This variable comprises linguistic markers for the speaker's orientation in cognitive space, i.e. his/her identification with the cognitive standpoint of one or both of the protagonists.

Example:- "*I had to **face** his revenge*".

The hypotheses correspond to those for spatial orientation.

5. Norm violation

Physical or verbal transgressions of social norms were coded with respect to the target person (initiator, recipient, both) they were ascribed to.

Example: "*He **kicked** me.*"

It was hypothesized that speakers ascribe less norm violations to the "own" protagonist than to the opponent.

6. Qualification of norm violations

This refers to linguistic qualifications that either **intensify** or **tone down** norm violations ascribed to the protagonists. This is done mainly by adverbial modifiers,

such as "perhaps", "a little", "really", or "all the time", and verbal modifiers ("may"): "*only pushed him a bit.*"

Hypothesis: Norm violations of own protagonist are toned down, those of the opponent are intensified.

7. Appropriateness of emotional reactions

Emotional reactions ascribed to the protagonists can be interpreted as **appropriate** or **inappropriate**. This is linguistically manifested by **qualifiers** which are connected to verba sentiendi or corresponding adjectives or adverbs: "*All of a sudden, he got angry.*", "*Of course, I was upset.*"

It was hypothesized that emotions ascribed to the protagonist whose perspective was taken were seen as more appropriate than those ascribed to the opponent.

8. Evaluation

This category includes **positive** or **negative** evaluations of one or both of the protagonists or of their behaviour. Linguistic markers are evaluative adjectives or adverbs, but also invectives.

It was hypothesized that the protagonist whose perspective was taken was evaluated more positively than the opponent.

9. Nominalism

Use of nominal instead of verbal constructions in the description of actions is considered to be an indicator for non-immediacy, for the speaker's lack of involvement in the reported event (cf. Sommer & Vorderer, 1987; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Hence, the control group which is supposed to see things not through one of the actor's eyes, i.e., not from "inside", should use nominalistic constructions more frequently than the experimental groups.

Another function of nominalistic speech is the self-serving reconstruction of ag

gressive acts by harmdoers. By linguistically extinguishing aggressor and victim and by turning (aggressive) acts into states, the speaker suggests that there was no aggressor, no victim and no aggressive act, and, consequently, that there is no one to blame (cf. Sommer & Vorderer, 1987). Hence it was assumed that subjects taking the initiator's perspective would more often use nominalistic constructions with respect of the initiator's acts.

Examples:

"They hit each other.", "I hit him." (verbal constructions)

"A fight took place." (nominalistic construction)

10. Attributions of general responsibility

Here, utterances were coded that explicitly ascribed responsibility for the fighting to one of the opponents or to both of them. ("He started the whole thing."). It was expected that explicit attributions of responsibility for the whole incident should depend on the perspective taken. Responsibility should be attributed to the opponent.

RESULTS

The subjects' reports were analysed by trained raters according to the above listed set of categories and subcategories. Interrater-reliability of this procedure ranged from .61 to .97. The resulting frequencies were adjusted to text length, which was defined either as number of words or as number of predicate complexes (grammatical subject). This ratio was the input for a 3 x 3 - ANOVA. The factors were **perspective** (initiator, recipient, observer) and **linguistic reference to target persons** (initiator, recipient, both) with repeated measures on the last factor. For the variables 'qualification of norm violations', 'evaluation', and 'appropriateness of

emotional reactions', the design was extended by a third factor with two levels (toning down vs. intensifying of norm violations; positive vs. negative evaluations; appropriate vs. inappropriate emotional reactions).

1. Grammatical subject

Results show a main effect for grammatical subject type ($F(2, 322) = 340,3; p = .0001$), which is due to the small number of grammatical subjects that cover both of the protagonists. This seems to be typical for complex action sequences with competing actors. The interaction between perspective and subject type ($F(4, 322) = 4,22; p = .0024$) shows the predicted pattern: Speakers with the initiator's perspective chose more "initiator-subjects" and less "recipient-subjects" than speakers with the recipient's perspective, and vice versa. The control group shows no difference between both types and slightly more neutral grammatical subjects (they, both) than the experimental groups.

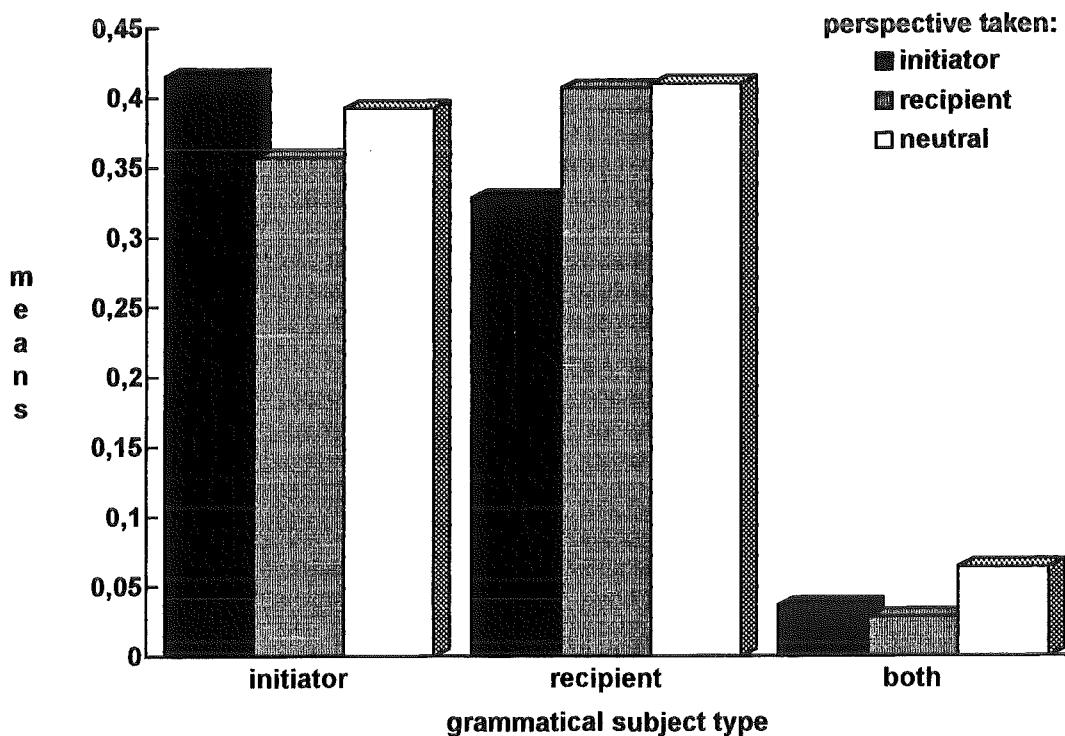


Fig. 1: perspective and grammatical subject type
 $F(4, 322) = 4,22; p = .0024$

2. Use of mental terms

Results are congruent with the hypothesis. There is a main effect for linguistic reference to target person ($F(2,322) = 89.15$; $p = .0001$): verba sentiendi and the like are nearly never used for both of the protagonists. This is plausible because of their conflicting positions in the interaction. As expected, the interaction between perspective and linguistic reference to target persons ($F(4,322) = 24.62$; $p = .0001$) is significant. Speakers with the initiator's perspective mentioned more mental states and processes of the initiator and fewer of the recipient than speakers with the recipient's perspective. This does not only demonstrate that the subjects really empathized with "their" protagonist, but also that even mere descriptions of the events are affected by this empathizing.

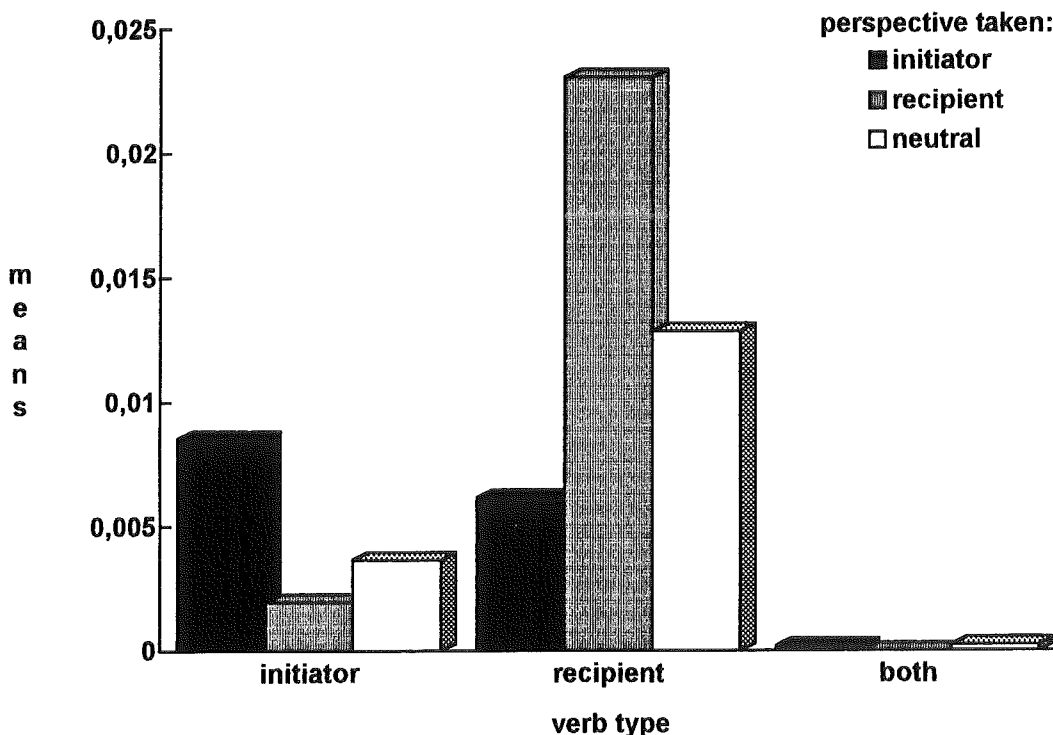


Fig. 2: perspective and verba, adjectiva, adverbia sentiendi
 $F(4, 322) = 24,62$; $p = .0001$

3. Spatial orientation

Results show the predicted pattern, but the interaction between perspective and spatial orientation is not significant ($F(4,322) = 1.76$; $p = .1357$). This may be due to the very low number of coded cases in that category, a problem that had already shown in earlier studies (cf. Graumann & Sommer, 1988). A significant main effect for spatial orientation ($F(2,322) = 8.67$; $p = .0002$) shows that subjects, if they use spatial terms at all, locate the protagonists not on a common position but on discrete points in their linguistically reconstructed space.

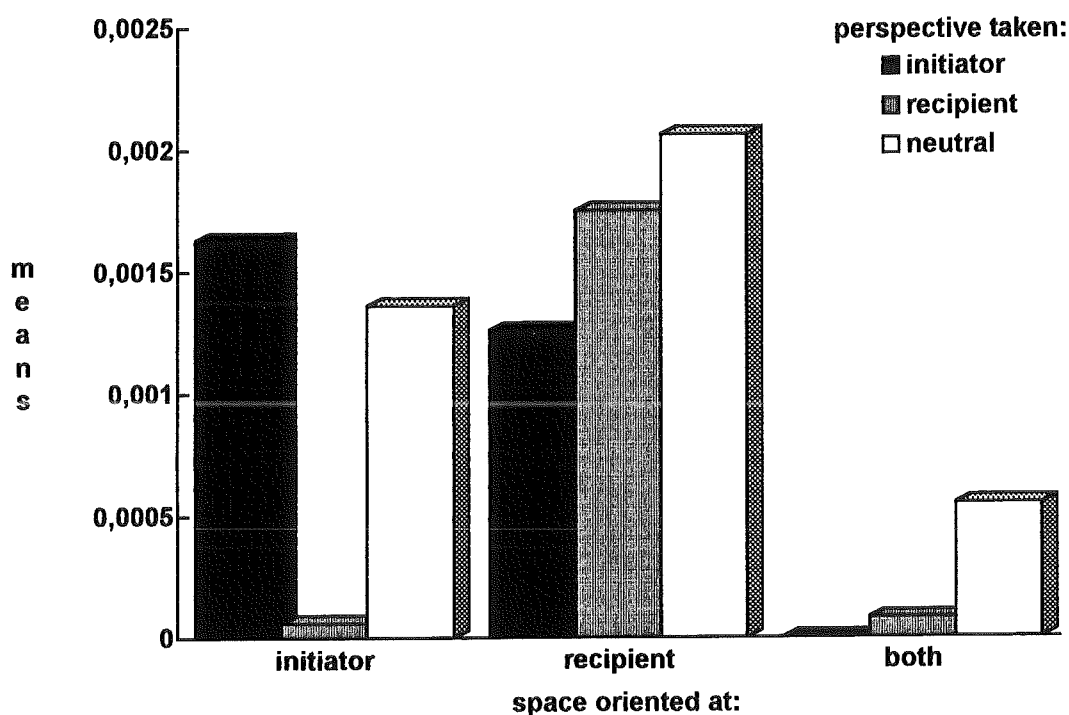


Fig. 3: perspective and spatial orientation

$F(4, 322) = 1,76$; $p = .1357$

4. Cognitive orientation

There are no significant differences, which may again be due to the low number of coded cases.

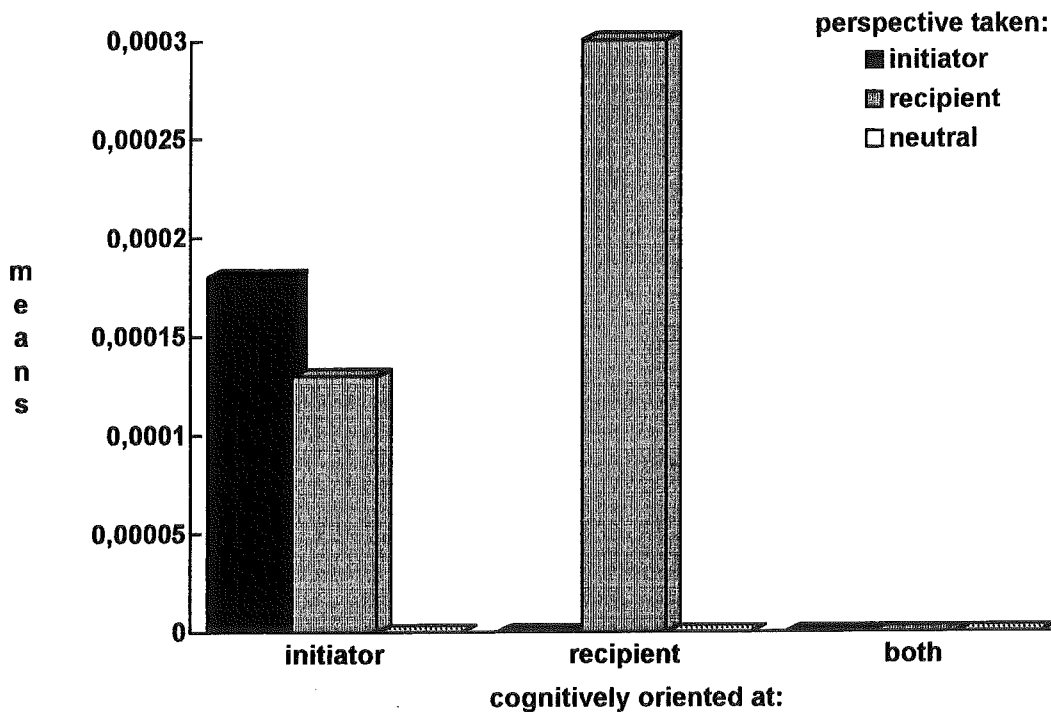


Fig. 4: perspective and cognitive orientation

$F(4, 322) = 1,00; p = .4094$

5. Norm violation

There is a significant main effect for source of norm violation ($F(4,322) = 170,13; p = .0001$). Subjects discriminated between transgressions of either partner and did only exceptionally reconstruct acts as norm violations committed by both opponents. The distribution of norm violations shows a significant interaction between perspective and the attributed source of transgression ($F(4,322) = 4,62; p = .0012$). This distribution does not perfectly match the expected pattern. Subjects with the perspective of the initiator report fewer norm violations by the initiator than the recipient group and the control group, and the control group attributes more

transgressions to both of the actors than the experimental groups. This conforms to the hypotheses. The results, however, concerning the recipient's norm violations are less plausible: the initiator group attributes the same number of transgressions to the recipient as the recipient group, and much less than the control group. We have no explanation at hand, but a closer analysis of the types or positions of the transgressions might clear this pattern.

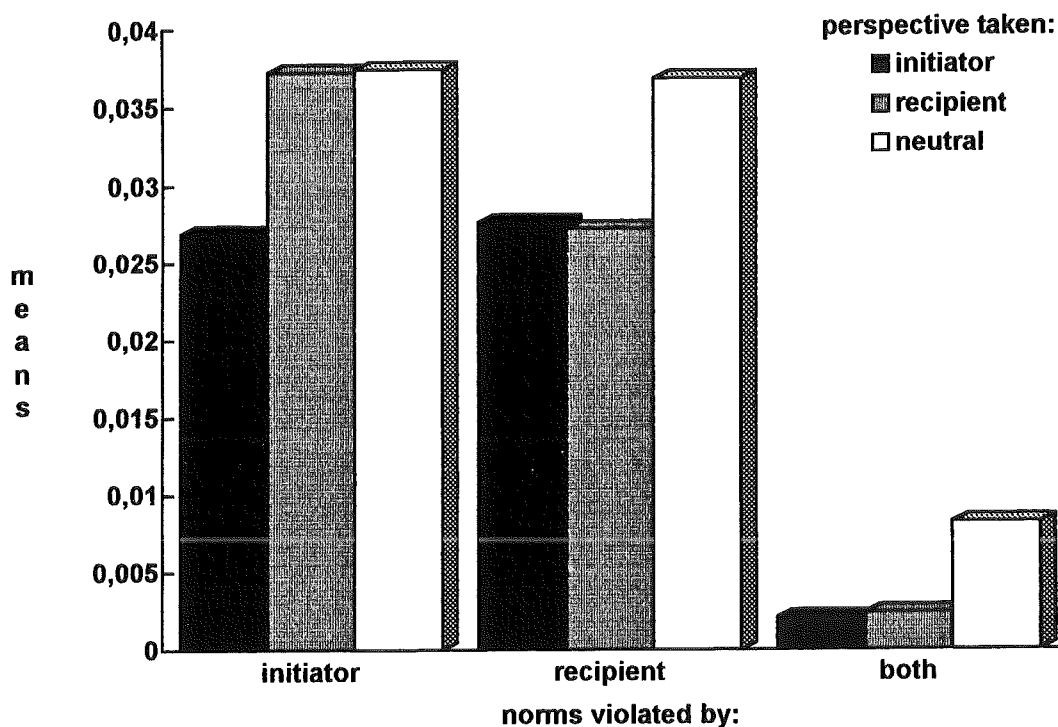


Fig. 5: perspective and ascription of norm violations

$F(4, 322) = 1,69; p = .1518$

6. Qualification of norm violations

Results show the predicted distribution. There is a significant interaction between perspective, type of qualification, and target person ($F(4,322) = 28,63; p = .0001$). Norm violations by the protagonist with whom subjects have identified, are toned down, norm violations by the opponent are intensified.

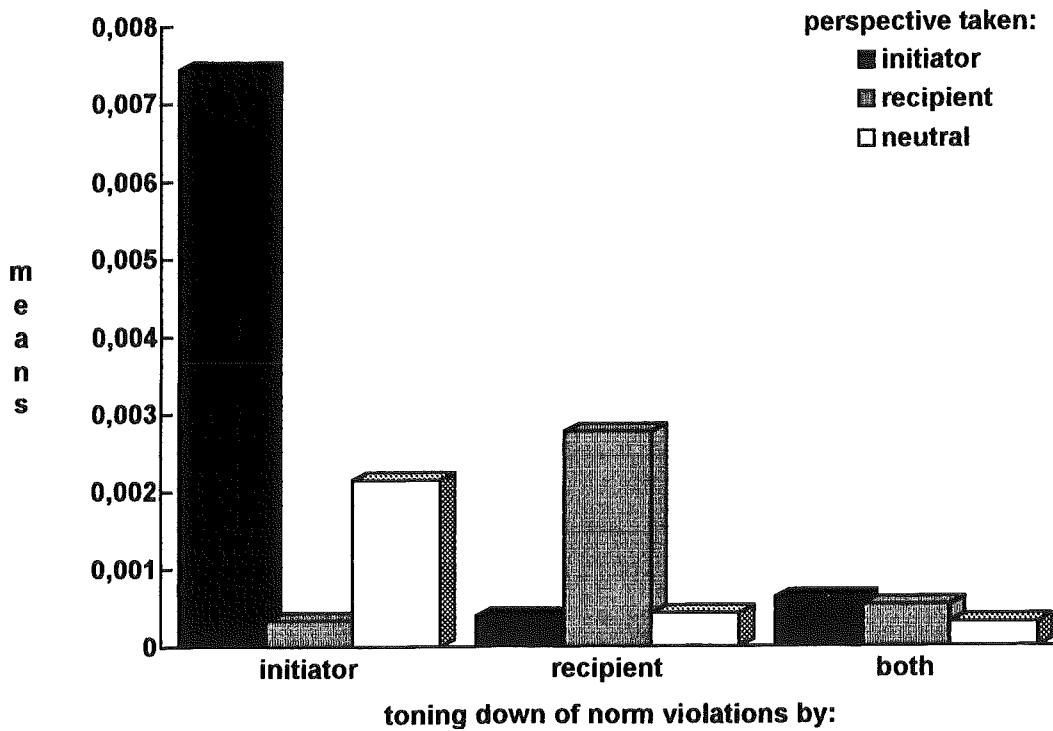


Fig. 6: perspective and toning down of norm violations
 $F(4, 322) = 28,63; p = .0001$

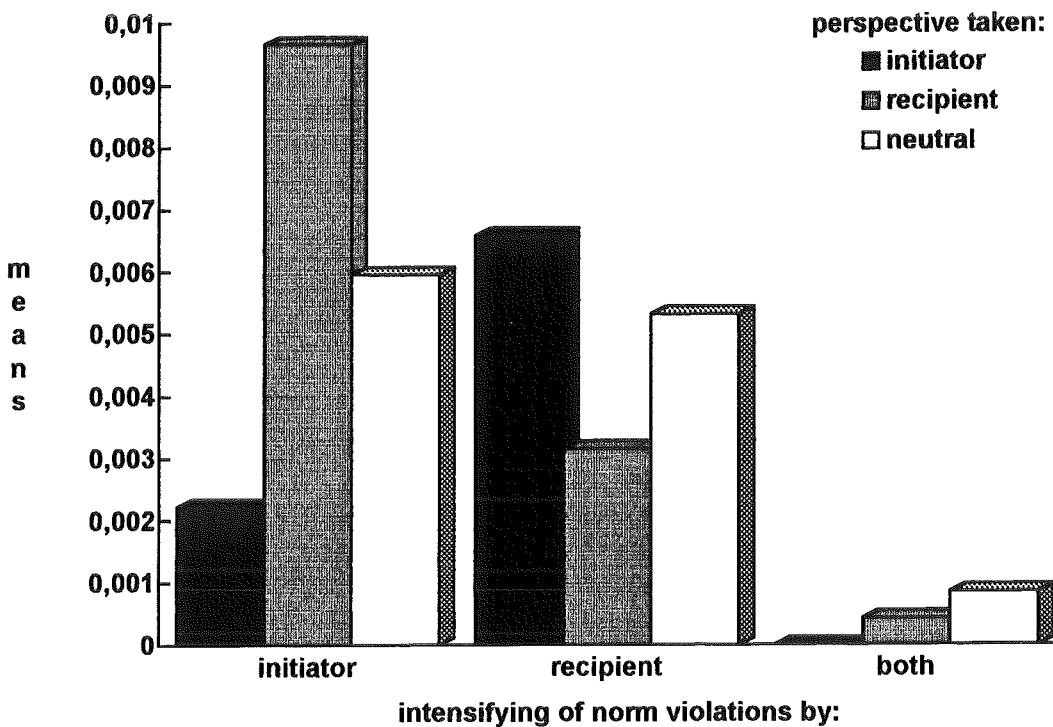


Fig. 7: perspective and intensifying of norm violations
 $F(4, 322) = 28,63; p = .0001$

7. Appropriateness of emotional reactions

A significant main effect for the target person to whom emotions are attributed shows that by far the most of the emotional reactions - appropriate or inappropriate - are ascribed to the recipient ($F(2,322) = 25,65; p = .0001$). This is plausible because a manifest emotional reaction of the "victim" of an aggressive act is a highly probable effect, whereas an initiator need not have or, at least, need not show such reaction. The emotional reactions both of the recipient and of the initiator are interpreted very differently by the experimental groups: emotional reactions of one's "own" protagonist are seen as appropriate, those of the opponent as inappropriate. Only subjects identifying with the initiator consider emotions of this character as appropriate, whereas "recipient-subjects" are the only ones to interpret the initiator's emotions as inappropriate. This interaction between perspective, target person, and appropriateness is significant ($F(4,322) = 17,35, p = .0001$).

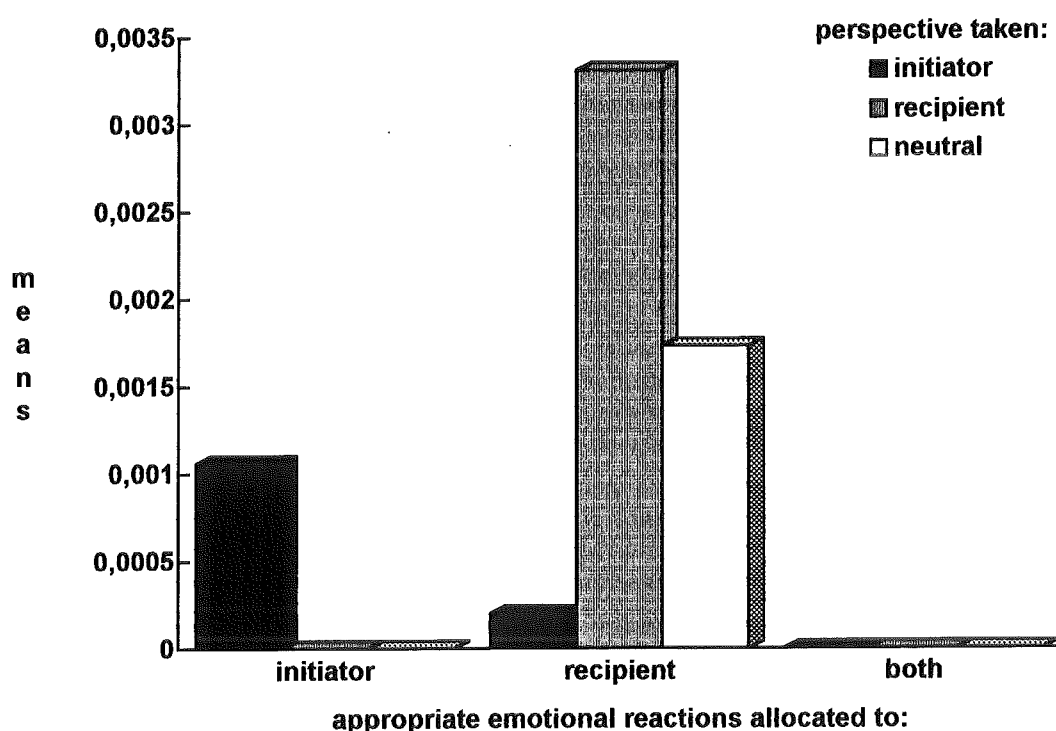


Fig. 8: perspective and judgement of appropriateness of emotional reactions
 $F(4, 322) = 17,35; p = .0001$

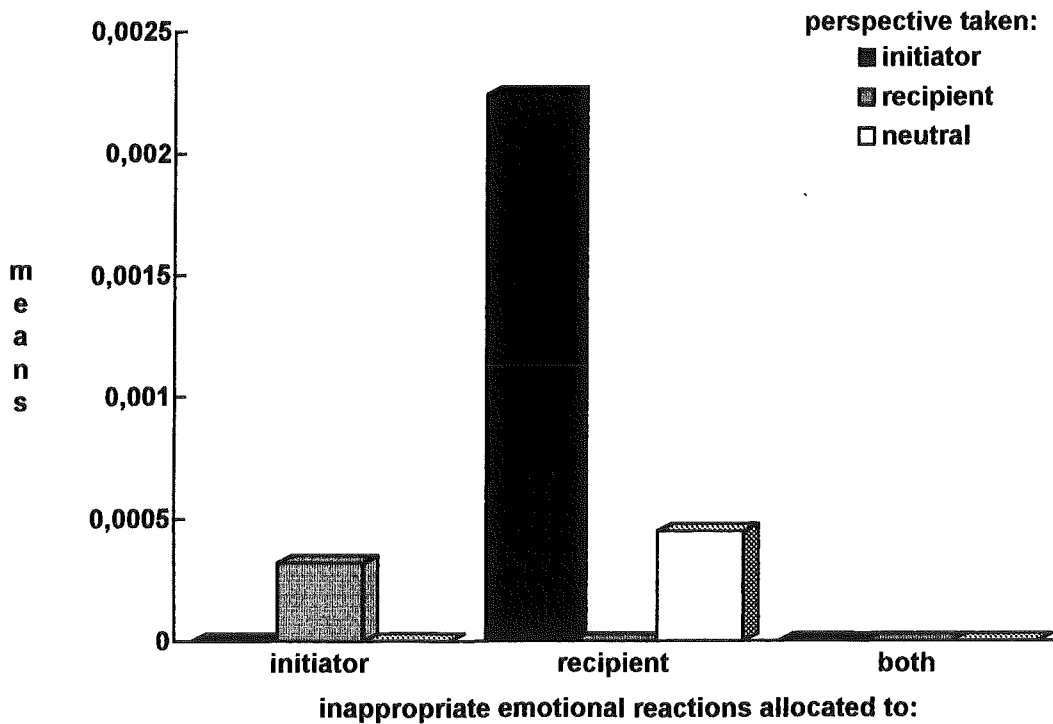


Fig. 9: perspective and judgement of inappropriateness of emotional reactions
 $F(4, 322) = 17,35; p = .0001$

8. Evaluation

Results show a significant main effect for type of evaluation ($F(1,161) = 13,99; p = .0003$). In the context of aggressive interaction, of course, there are more negative than positive evaluations. Positive evaluations are only given to the own protagonist. By far the most of the negative evaluations are given to the opponent. The only evaluations given by the control group are negative judgments about the initiator. This interaction between perspective, target of evaluation and type of evaluation is significant ($F(4,322) = 8,77; p = .0001$).

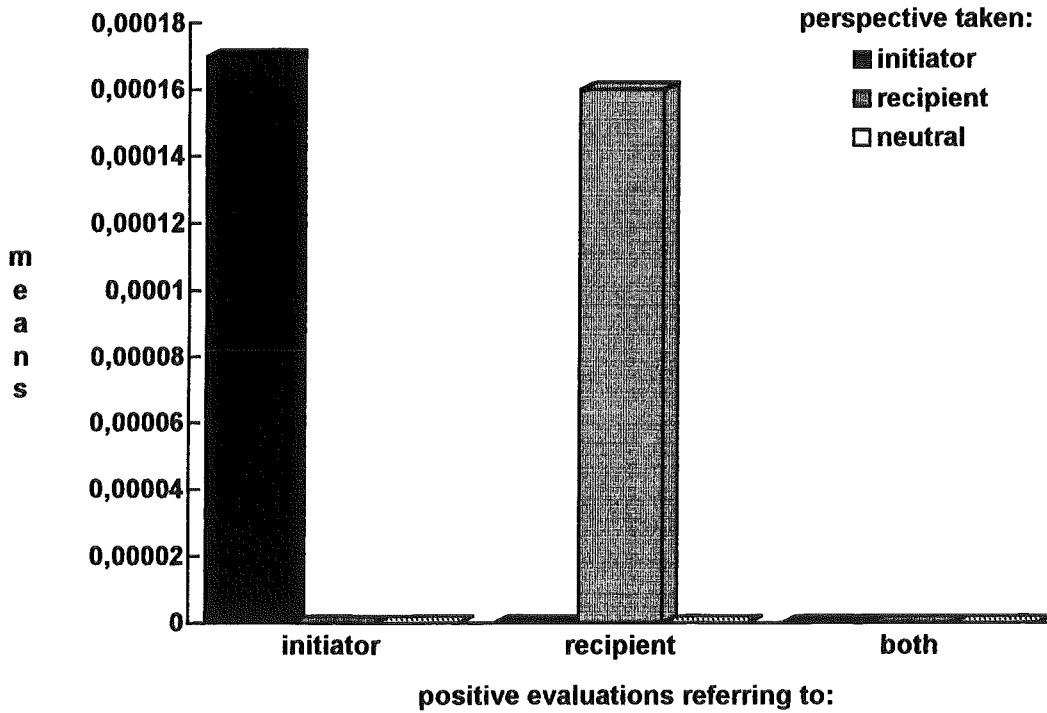


Fig. 10: perspective and positive evaluations
 $F(4, 322) = 8,77; p = .0001$

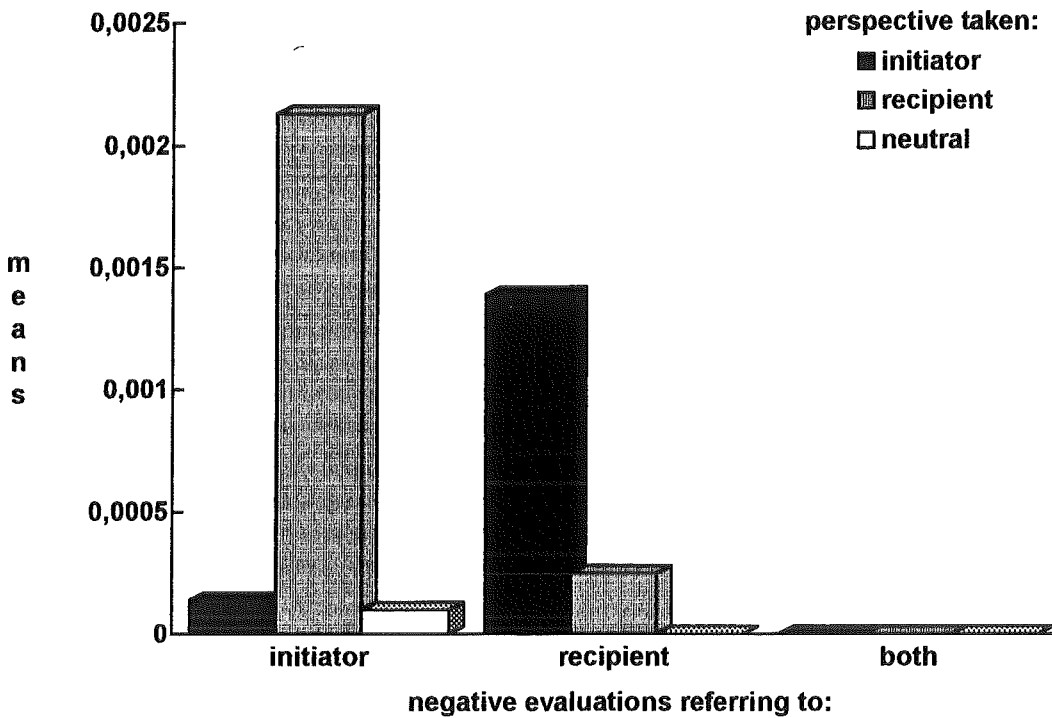


Fig. 11: perspective and negative evaluations
 $F(4, 322) = 8,77; p = .0001$

9. Nominalism

There is a main effect for target person ($F(2,322) = 17,62$; $p = .0001$). Actions of both protagonists are more often nominalised than actions of a single protagonist. Those nominalisations are most often used by the control group. This supports the assumption that neutral observers describe events in a less immediate and less dynamic manner than involved persons.

If actions of a single protagonist are nominalised, it is the initiator-subjects transforming the initiator's actions into states without actors and, thus, without responsible agents. This result does not reach a sufficient level of significance ($F(4,322) = 2,22$; $p = .0670$), but is congruent with other studies that demonstrated the self-defending functions of nominalisation (cf. Sommer & Vorderer, 1987).

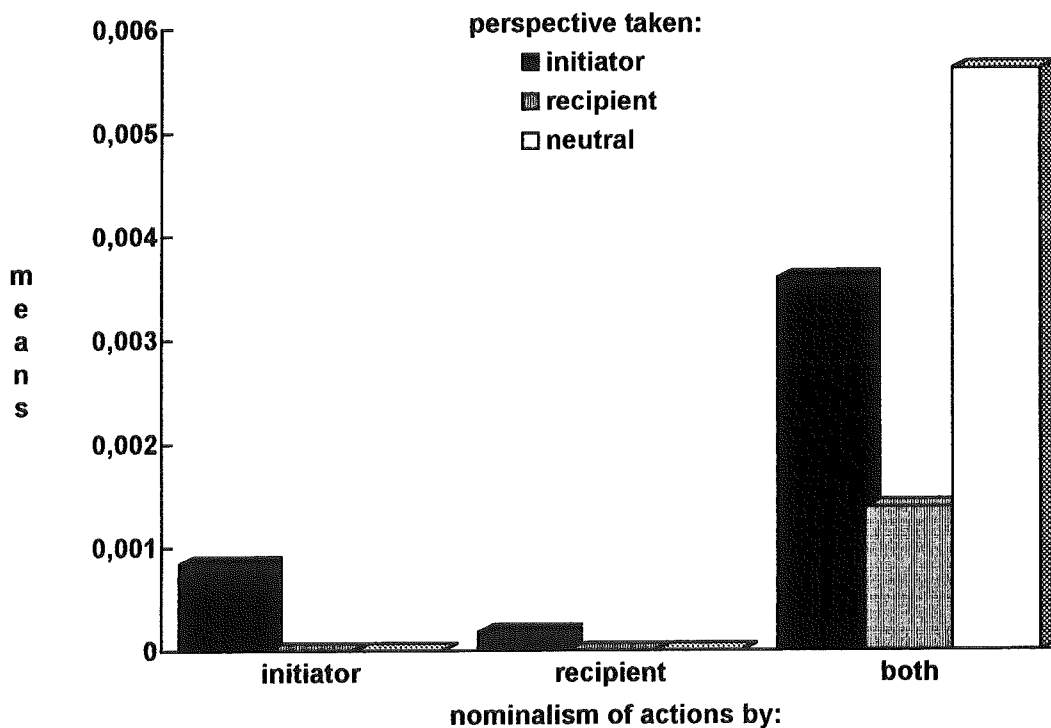


Fig. 12: perspective and nominalization
 $F(4, 322) = 2,22$; $p = .0670$

10. Attributions of general responsibility

A significant main effect for target person is based on the fact that none of the subjects attributed responsibility to both protagonists ($F(2,322) = 7,51; p = .0007$). The attributions, however, to single protagonists show the predicted pattern: recipient-subjects attribute responsibility to the initiator and vice versa. But this interaction misses significance ($F(4,322) = 2,14; p = .0753$).

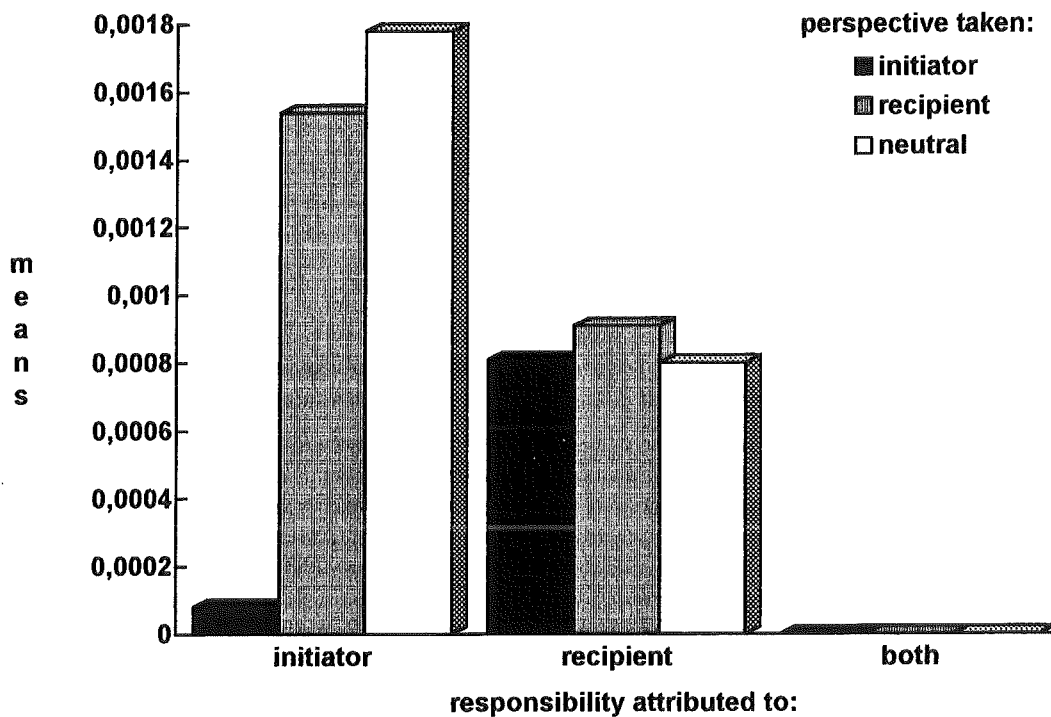


Fig. 13: perspective and attribution of general responsibility

$F(4, 322) = 2,14; p = .0753$

DISCUSSION

The results confirm the perspective effects found by Mummendey et al. (1984) and Mummendey and Otten (1989). Judgments on aggressive interactions are influenced by the judging person's perspective. This perspectival divergence does not only show in rating scales or questionnaires but also in free verbal descriptions of the critical events.

Here, the variables 'evaluation', 'appropriateness of emotional reactions', and 'attribution of general responsibility' can be considered as text variables that directly correspond to rating scales and questions used by Mummendey et al.. The parallel results, then, confirm Mummendey's model of aggression focussing on the diverging evaluations of actors, recipients, and observers.

The results on the variables 'grammatical subject' and 'verba sentiendi' give additional evidence for the theory of linguistic perspectivity. The predicted but not significant results on the variables 'spatial' and 'cognitive orientation' are in line with earlier studies (Graumann & Sommer, 1988). These variables seem to represent a way to express perspectivity, but in the text types studied until now, they have rarely been used.

The significant differences with respect to the other variables demonstrate that perspectivity not only affects the description of perceived events but also the interpretation of such events and the evaluation of the involved persons and their actions.

The present study gives evidence of two types of perspectival speech characteristics. The first type manifests perspectivity more or less explicitly in content: Norm violations are mentioned or omitted, acts or actors are evaluated positively or negatively, the blame is explicitly attributed to either protagonist. Those variables can be analysed by traditional content analysis, which will usually lead to similar results as by direct questions.

The second type of perspective-related speech characteristics is less explicit and is based not on content, but on linguistic structure. Choice of grammatical subject and nominalisation are mere syntactical operations. Qualifiers used to tone down or to intensify norm violations or to subtly express the appropriateness of emotional reactions are unobtrusive tonings of the reported content. *Verba sentiendi* can be considered as a combination of the first and the second type. They extend the content to the mental activities of an actor, but this can also be considered as a subtle comment to the undeniable facts.

Particularly the second type of variables supports the conceptualization of perspectivity put forward in the beginning of this article. This position states that perspectivity is not just selecting (perceiving, remembering, retelling) some aspects or elements of a given object, person or event - a conception which is suggested by some authors who equate perspective with schema (e.g., Pichert & Anderson 1977). Perspectivity means structuring and weighting the different aspects of an object from a specific viewpoint.

This is evident in the choice of grammatical subject. Perspectivity is not realised by omitting one of the protagonists but by putting one of them into the position of the sentence subject: "He was asked by the boy."

Of particular interest in the context of aggressive interactions is the attribution of norm violations. The present analysis as well as that of Mummendey and Otten (1989) reveals that subjects do not simply omit aggressive acts committed by "their" protagonist. Only in extreme cases, an actor will deny that he/she had hit the opponent. In most cases, he/she will admit the facts, but in a way that the committed offence appears harmless (toning down) or that negative actions are turned into states without actors and actions (nominalization).

This sensitivity of linguistic variables demonstrates the advantage of psycholinguistic analysis in social psychological studies. As compared to questionnaires, free descriptions are the most common way to express perspectivity in everyday life.

Even if they are gathered in experimental situations, they are not so consciously subject to reactivity. Nevertheless, they leave quite a lot of interpretational freedom to the speakers who use their perspective-specific interpretation - consciously or not - to reach their goals in interaction.

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