

Salt Passage Research: The State of the Art

by Michael Pacanowsky

Conclusive evidence on the effects of the utterance "Please pass the salt" is found to be sadly lacking. Strongly rooted in the English speech community is the belief that the utterance "Please pass the salt" is efficacious in causing salt to move from one end of a table to the source of the utterance. In his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer notes:

Shee I asked
The salde to passe.
Ne surprissed was I
Tha shee didde (4, p. 318).¹

Similarly, Dickens writes:

Old Heep did not become disgruntled at my obstinacy. "Please pass the salt, Davey," he repeated coldly. I vacillated for a moment longer. Then I passed the salt, just as he knew I would (5, p. 278).

The question of whether the movement of salt is causally dependent on the utterance of the phrase "Please pass the salt" has occupied the attention of numerous philosophers (3, 9, 20). Empirical resolution of the validity of this belief, however, was not undertaken until the classic work of Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (8) on the American soldier. Since then, numerous social scientists have explored the antecedent conditions that give rise to this apparent regularity. In this article, we will summarize those efforts that shed some light on the complex phenomenon known as salt passage.

Many social observers have noticed the apparent regularity with which salt travels from one end of the table to the source of the utterance "Please pass the salt." Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (8), however, were the first to demonstrate empirically that the salt passage phenomenon was mediated by the presence of other people at the table. In a comparison of "others present" with "no others present" conditions, they found that when there were other people present at the table, there was a greater likelihood that the utterance "Please pass the salt" would result in salt movement toward the source of the utter-

ance. When there were *no other people* at the table, the utterance "Please pass the salt" had no apparent effect. To test the possibility of a time delay involved in the "no others present" condition, Hovland, *et al.*, arranged for 112 Army recruits, each sitting alone at one end of a table with salt at the other end, to repeat the utterance "Please pass the salt" every five minutes for 12 hours. The average distance the salt traveled was .5 inch, which the experimenters explained was due to measurement error. The result of these two studies was, therefore, to demonstrate the importance of the presence of other people in the salt passage phenomenon.

Once the presence of other people was established as a necessary condition for salt passage as a consistent response to the utterance "Please pass the salt," researchers began focusing on source and receiver characteristics that would affect salt passing behavior. Osgood and Tannenbaum (16) predicted greater compliance with salt passage utterances by high credible sources than by low credible sources. Newcomb (14) predicted greater compliance with sources who were perceived to have similar, rather than dissimilar, attitudes. Rokeach (17) predicted greater compliance for low dogmatic, rather than high dogmatic, people. McClelland (12) predicted greater compliance for high N achievers than low N achievers. Surprisingly, no significant differences were found along any of these dimensions. Differences due to race were found, however, in the original Hovland, *et al.*, study (8). Black soldiers were more likely to pass the salt to white soldiers, while white soldiers were less likely to pass the salt to black soldiers.²

Because source and receiver characteristics seemed to have little effect on the extent of salt passage, research attention turned its focus to the effects of message variables as the causal mechanism underlying this phenomenon. Janis and Feshbach (10) found that other utterances were just as effective as "Please pass the salt" in achieving salt passage compliance. No significant differences in the extent of compliance

1. I asked her to pass the salt. I was not surprised that she did.

2. However, in a replication of the original Hovland, *et al.*, study, Triandis (19) uncovered the opposite tendency due to race. That is, Triandis found that white soldiers were more likely to pass the salt to black soldiers, while black soldiers were more likely to tell the white soldiers to get the salt themselves.

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