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The effect of jargon on perceptions of explanation quality: Reconciling contradictory findings

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Abstract

How can non-experts evaluate expert explanations despite their limited understanding? The present research explores this question by focusing on one facet of expert explanations: the role of jargon and its effects on perceptions of an explanation's quality. Specifically, we aim to reconcile contradictory findings from past research. While some authors find that explanations with jargon are perceived to be better than those without, others find that jargon has detrimental effects. These studies differ in a number of properties that we investigate systematically across three experiments (N=737; N=734; N=733). We find that jargon can boost explanatory satisfaction for incomplete explanations, potentially because the jargon is taken to fill an explanatory gap. However, the benefits of jargon (for explanatory satisfaction and perceived learning) decrease as explanations become more complete. On the other hand, detrimental effects of jargon (on comprehensibility, confidence, and deference to experts) are found regardless of explanatory completeness.