



Words Matter: The Impact of Specific Language on Traffic Stop Interactions

[Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)

October 2019

The most common form of citizen complaint filed against the police involves officer demeanor during a traffic stop encounter.[1] While law enforcement officers disproportionately encounter the criminal element of society, vehicle stops for traffic violations are one of their duties that puts officers in contact with a typical cross-section of the community.[2] Traffic stops can involve criminals, but also involve a lot of average citizens too. Most Americans have been stopped for a traffic violation at some point in their lives. It is crucial, therefore, that we do what we can to keep the support of the average citizens and avoid unnecessarily offending average citizens with inappropriate behavior during traffic stops.

One recent study examined the specific words officers used on traffic stops and explored how these words influenced citizen attitudes about the legitimacy of the stop, and their overall support for the police. In this study, 486 average citizens were recruited to watch a video of a traffic stop encounter, and then answer questions about their opinions of the stop. The participants were asked if they thought the officer had been polite, fair, and acted appropriately. They were also asked questions about their own willingness to cooperate with the police, obey the law, and trust the police.[3]

Each participant was shown a video recording of a staged traffic stop encounter. The recording was from the perspective of a body-worn camera, so the viewer could only hear the officer's words and not see the officer's race, age or nonverbal behavior. The officer was played by a real law enforcement officer, and the driver was an actor who was compliant but only stated "yes" and "no" during the encounter. However, there were three different versions of

the traffic stop and each participant was assigned to view only one of the three versions. This was done so that the researchers could determine if different communication styles produced different reactions among the viewers.[4]

Version One – The Minimum

A total of 162 participants viewed a version of the stop in which the officer only stated the minimum words necessary to complete the stop. When the officer approached the driver, he did not greet the driver. Instead, as an opening, the officer stated, “You were going 48 miles per hour and the speed limit here is 30 miles per hour. Give me your license and registration.” The officer’s tone was calm, even, and not harsh. The officer returned to his patrol car, then returned with a citation. The officer handed the driver an ink pen and showed the driver the citation while stating, “You are getting a ticket. Sign here.” After the driver signed the citation, the officer stated, “You are free to go.” At no time did the officer raise his voice, use profanity, or insult the driver. Nevertheless, the officer also failed to greet the driver, say “please” or “thank you,” explain his reasoning for issuing the citation or ask the driver if there was any reason why the driver was speeding.[5]

When answering the survey questions after this video, the participants indicated that they generally trusted the police, respected the law, and were willing to cooperate with the police. In terms of rating this specific interaction, the participants generally thought that the officer was fair, respectful, and unbiased, but only a few thought the officer had been polite.

Version Two – Polite

Another 162 participants observed the second video encounter instead. This interaction differed in that the officer displayed behaviors that linguists have revealed are key to communicating politeness in American culture. The first of these keys was a greeting. In the second recording, the officer opened the interaction by saying “Good evening, sir. You were going 48 miles per hour and the speed limit here is 30 miles per hour.” A second key to politeness in American culture is use of terms of respect. Throughout the second interaction, the officer consistently addressed the driver as either “Mr. Johnson” or “Sir.” A third key to politeness is making requests rather than demands. In the second version of the stop the officer stated, “Could you please give me your license and registration?” The officer also stated, “Could you please sign here?” A fourth key to politeness is displaying regret for causing another person discomfort. Examples of this include saying we are sorry when bumping into others, or a nurse apologizing for giving an injection (“I’m sorry, but this is going to feel like a pinch”). During the traffic stop, this was manifested through the officer saying, “Unfortunately, I have to give you a ticket for

that high of a speed.” Finally, the last key to politeness was the use of “please” and “thank you” where appropriate. The officer included the word please in every request and concluded the stop by saying, “Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Johnson.”[6]

Compared to the group who viewed the first version of the traffic stop, those who viewed the second version of the stop indicated much higher levels of trust in the police, respect for the law, and willingness to cooperate with the police. The participants who viewed the second version of the stop rated the officer much higher in terms of fairness, respectfulness, and being polite. In summary, all of the participants who viewed the second version of the stop displayed more positive views of this officer, and the police in general, than did the participants who viewed the first version of the stop.

Version Three – Polite & Friendly

The final 162 participants viewed a third version of the stop. In the third condition, the officer applied all of the politeness characteristics of the second version of the video, but also added social similarity between the officer and the driver by trying to build rapport and explaining his actions. To open the traffic stop, the officer greeted the driver informally by saying, “Hey there. Good evening, sir. You were going 48 miles per hour and the speed limit here is 30 miles per hour. Could you please give me your license and registration?” The officer continued his informal language by saying, “Hang tight, sir, and I’ll be back in a moment” before returning to his patrol vehicle. Upon returning to the driver with the citation, the officer gave an explanation to show that he and the driver shared the same concerns for safety. “Unfortunately, I have to give you a ticket for that high of a speed. Here’s the deal, Mr. Johnson. Every year people die on this particular road from speeding and we’re just trying to keep that from happening. Could you please sign here?” The officer finally closes by saying “Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Johnson. Okay, sir, drive carefully.”[7]

Compared to the responses from the first two groups of participants, those who viewed the third version of the stop provided the most positive responses to the survey questions that followed. Among the three groups of participants, those who had viewed the third version of the stop recorded the highest scores of support, trust, and willingness to cooperate with the police. They also produced the highest rating scores for the officer in terms of fairness, respectfulness, lack of bias, and politeness. Clearly, the words the officer used in each version of the stop made a difference to the people who witnessed the police-citizen interaction.

Take-Away Lessons

This experiment revealed some key findings that officers can easily apply when interacting with the public to increase citizen support for the police and reduce the likelihood of citizen complaints.

Greet People – It is a norm in every culture that we greet people we meet before we interact with them.

Say Please and Thank You – When people fail to say “please” and “thank you” we consider them uncouth or rude, so avoid acting that way yourself.

Use Terms of Respect – We teach our kids to treat people (especially adults) with respect by requiring them to say “sir,” “ma’am,” or use titles such as Mr. or Ms. When did that stop applying to us?

Make Requests before Making Demands – Nobody, especially Americans, likes being ordered to do something. Sometimes in law enforcement we have to make demands, especially in emergency situations. In all other circumstances, why not ask first?

Give Reasons – **People want to know why things are happening to them. If you do not explain why, you are leaving the real reasons for your actions up to their imaginations or biases. You are making a just and legitimate enforcement action decision, so be willing to explain that.**

Empathize – Even though it is your job to enforcement the law, and it is the citizen’s own fault for being in this situation, you can always realize that it is no fun to be in their shoes. While it does not change the enforcement action you take, having empathy can help you soften the blow by using words to show you realize this is an uncomfortable and embarrassing situation for the citizen.

Always remember that your words matter.

References

[1] Harris, C. J. (2010). Problem officers: an analysis of problem behavior patterns from a large cohort. *Journal Criminal Justice*, 38(2), 216-225; Hassell, K., & Archbold, C. (2010). Widening the scope on complaints of police misconduct. *Policing: An International Journal of Police*

Strategies and Management, 33(3), 473-489; Johnson, R. R. (1998). Citizen complaints: What the police should know. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 67(12), 1-5; Terrill, W., & Ingram, J. R.

(2016). Citizen complaints against the police: An eight-city examination. *Police Quarterly*, 19(2), 150-179.

[2] Engel, R. S., & Calnon, J. M. (2004). Examining the influence of drivers' characteristics during traffic stops with police: Results from a national survey. *Justice Quarterly*, 21(1), 49-90; Johnson, R. R. (2004). Citizen expectations of police traffic stop behavior. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 27(4), 487-497.

[3] Lowrey-Kinberg, B. (2019). Experimental results on the effect of politeness strategies on perceptions of police. *Language & Communication*, 69(1), 42-53.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.