



American Expression E2758 Frequency illusion

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Frequency illusion is a cognitive phenomenon in which something you have recently learned, noticed, or become interested in suddenly seems to appear everywhere, although its actual frequency in the surrounding environment may have remained completely unchanged over time. It is also commonly called the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. For example, after learning an unfamiliar word, you may notice that word several times in conversations, articles, or advertisements and wonder why it has suddenly become so common in your life.

The phenomenon does not usually mean that the thing has actually become more frequent. Instead, your attention has changed. Before learning about the object, word, brand, idea, or event, you may have encountered it many times without consciously noticing it. Once it becomes meaningful to you, your brain begins selecting it from the enormous amount of information constantly competing for your attention each day.

Two psychological processes help explain frequency illusion. The first is selective attention. Human beings cannot consciously process every sound, image, word, and event around them, so the brain prioritizes information that seems relevant. After something captures your interest, you become more likely to notice it again. This increased attention creates the impression that the item itself is appearing more often than before.

The second process is confirmation bias, our tendency to notice and remember information that supports an existing belief or expectation. After seeing the newly noticed item several times, you may begin thinking, "I am seeing this everywhere." Each additional encounter seems to confirm that belief. Meanwhile, occasions when the item is absent receive little attention, so your impression of its unusual frequency becomes even stronger.

Frequency illusion can occur in many areas of everyday life. Someone considering buying a particular car may suddenly notice that model on every street. A student who learns a new English expression may begin hearing it in movies and conversations. Expectant parents may notice babies everywhere, while someone studying a new concept may repeatedly encounter references to it. These experiences demonstrate how personal relevance influences perception.

Understanding frequency illusion can help people think more critically about their experiences. Repeatedly noticing something does not automatically prove that it is becoming more common or that some mysterious force is causing it to appear. When frequency matters, objective evidence such as statistics, records, or systematic observation is more reliable than personal impressions. Recognizing the illusion can therefore reduce mistaken conclusions about trends, coincidences, popularity, and patterns.

In conclusion, frequency illusion is the experience of suddenly noticing something repeatedly after first becoming aware of it. It arises mainly because attention and memory have changed, not necessarily because the outside world has changed. Selective attention makes relevant information easier to notice, while confirmation bias strengthens the belief that it is appearing unusually often. The phenomenon illustrates how actively the human mind filters reality. By understanding frequency illusion, we can appreciate the efficiency of attention while also recognizing its limitations, helping us distinguish genuine increases in frequency from changes in what our minds have recently learned to notice.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever experienced frequency illusion in your daily life, and what did you suddenly start noticing?
2. Why does something seem to appear more frequently after we first learn about or become interested in it?
3. How do selective attention and confirmation bias contribute to frequency illusion?
4. In what situations could frequency illusion cause people to make incorrect assumptions or decisions?
5. How can understanding frequency illusion help us think more critically about coincidences, trends, and patterns?