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### **Language Usage in Relationships**

The words that people use in conversation convey information about who they are, their motives, their audience, and their situations. Findings from laboratory and naturalistic studies over the past decade suggest that the words that people use can yield clues about the quality of their relationships. This entry discusses the role of language usage in romantic relationships, focusing specifically on issues of analysis, the types of words that are important in relationships, data collection, and clinical implications.

Language serves a variety of functions in relationships. It can be an index of relationship status, an instrument of relationship maintenance or change, or the embodiment of essential relationship characteristics such as autonomy and interdependence. Some have gone as far as saying that relationships are simply language games, which change as language changes. In this view, a couple's language *is* the relationship. However, theorists in this area more often view language patterns and relationship beliefs as distinct phenomena that are intimately associated—seeing relationships as both a function of the words that couples use and a framework for future word use.

#### **Analysis of Language Usage**

There are three main quantitative approaches to linguistic analysis that have emerged over the past half-century. The first is judge-based thematic content analysis, which uses human judges to identify the presence various thematic references (e.g., love, anxiety, and motivation) on the basis of empirically developed coding systems. The second is latent semantic analysis (LSA), a bottom-up approach to language analysis that examines patterns of how words covary across large samples of text, akin to a factor analysis of individual words. LSA can be used, for

example, to examine patterns of word use among satisfied couples compared to those who are dissatisfied. The third is word count analysis, which examines the relative frequency of words in a given text or speech sample. Word count programs vary in their designed purposes and complexity of analyses. For example, the General Inquirer, which arose out of the psychoanalytic and need-based traditions in psychology, uses complex decision rules to clarify the meaning of ambiguous words that are used in multiple contexts. Researchers studying language use in politics (e.g., speeches, political advertising and media coverage) often use Diction, a word count program that characterizes texts by the extent to which they reflect optimism, activity, certainty, realism, and commonality. One of the most often-employed word count programs is Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), which was developed by social psychologists to investigate the words that people use when they write about emotional experiences. LIWC works by searching for words in a given text file that have been previously categorized into over 70 linguistic dimensions, including standard language categories (e.g., articles, prepositions, pronouns), psychological processes (e.g., positive and negative emotion words) and traditional content dimensions (e.g., sex, death, home, occupation). Research using computer programs such as the General Inquirer, Diction and LIWC has provided substantial evidence of the social and psychological importance of word use. Of particular relevance for intimate relationships are personal pronouns and emotion words. These two broad categories of words and their significance for relationships are described in turn below.

### **Personal Pronouns**

Much of the interest in the role of language in relationships has focused on pronouns, in particular first-person plural or *we* words (*we*, *us*, *our*) because they appear to be markers of shared identity and affiliative motivation. It has been argued that the extent to which couple

members think of themselves as a part of unit or larger group reflects cognitive interdependence and commitment, often termed “*we*-ness.” For instance, people increase their use of first-person plural pronouns after a large-scale collective trauma or after a home football team victory.

Among those in romantic relationships, highly committed partners use *we* pronouns more frequently when talking about their relationships (e.g., *We really have fun together.*) compared to less committed ones (e.g., *She’s really a lot of fun.*). Thus, the use of *we* may capture important ways that couples think about their relationships. However, in the published studies that have examined language use during interactions between romantic partners (as opposed to when people are describing their relationships to outsiders), *we* use is surprisingly unrelated to either relationship quality or stability. Why might this be the case? One possible explanation is that *we* use during couples’ interactions does not directly tap how they think of themselves as one unit, that couples’ feelings of interdependence simply are not reflected in their everyday use of *we*. Alternatively, contextual effects may be at work. Although *we* use during problem-solving interactions and naturalistic daily conversations seem unrelated to relationship quality, *we* use during other types of interactions, such as those discussions specifically geared toward positive aspects of relationships or discussions about the future, may very well tap aspects of interdependence.

Second-person pronouns (*you, your*) have been interpreted as indicative of other-focused attention. For example, high self-monitors—people highly concerned with how they are perceived by others—use *you* at higher rates than low self-monitors. Similarly, individuals high in trait anger use *you* at higher rates than those low in trait anger. With regard to romantic relationships, *you* use during problem-solving discussions has been found to be negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction and positively correlated with negative relationship

behaviors. Couples' use of *you* may be more important in the context of problem-solving discussions compared to everyday conversations. For example, *you* use in discussions about daily events (e.g., *Are you going to the basketball game tonight?*) may be quite different from *you* use during conflict (e.g., *You can be really difficult sometimes!*).

Clinical researchers have argued that *you* statements are indicative of blaming or psychological distancing, whereas *I* statements reflect healthy communication patterns, such as self-disclosure and verbal immediacy. There are a couple of possible reasons why higher *I* use may indicate better relationship quality. Some have speculated that *I* use reflects higher levels of self-disclosure, promoting intimacy and closeness. *I* use also may reflect positive aspects of autonomy within a relationship. Although experiencing interdependence or relatedness is one key to relationship closeness, managing a sense of independence or autonomy within a relationship also is important. From an interactionalist perspective, autonomy and interdependence are two separate constructs, with autonomy and interdependence at a balance in which each allows or enables the other.

In contrast to *I*, use of *me* appears to be linked to relationship dysfunction. For example, previous studies have shown *me* use to be positively related to negative interaction behaviors and negatively related to relationship satisfaction. While the frequency of *I* use reflects self-disclosure and perspective taking, frequency of *me* use may reflect passive strivings or victimization narratives that are characteristic of poor-quality interactions and less satisfying relationships.

### **Emotion Words**

The other broad category of words linked to relationship quality is emotion words. In everyday life, when we want to know how a person is feeling, we usually just ask them. The

specific words that they use to respond—words such as *happy*, *sad*, *angry* and *nervous*—often indicate their emotional state. Emotion words measured by word count programs such as LIWC appear to generally reflect people’s underlying emotions. Preliminary evidence suggests that they may play a key role in romantic relationships.

Although one would expect greater use of positive emotion words and lower use of negative emotion words to be related to relationship quality, there are a number of contextual issues to consider when taking a word count approach. The first issue relates to the person at whom emotion words are directed (e.g., *I am so angry with **Sally**.* vs. *I am so angry with **you**.*); emotion words can have very different meanings depending on their targets. The second issue relates to when an emotion word is preceded by a negation (e.g., *I am **not** mad at you* vs. *I am mad at you.*). Although studies show that variations in emotion word use are positively associated with variations in trait-level emotional expressivity even when not taking negations into account, separating emotion words into separate categories based on co-occurrences with negations is useful in disentangling associations between emotion word use and relationship quality. The third issue relates to sarcasm (e.g., *oh great*). Word count approaches typically are unable to distinguish between emotion words that are used to express genuine emotion from those laced with sarcasm. By first identifying when emotion words are used in the context of couples’ interactions and then coding them for relational context, co-occurrences with negations and sarcasm, a clearer picture of the relevance of emotion words for relationships is possible.

Emotion words that couples use in everyday conversations with each other are associated with relationship satisfaction and stability in a variety of ways, with important distinctions depending on whether these words are used genuinely, preceded by negations or used sarcastically. Genuinely expressed positive emotion words are positively related to people’s own

satisfaction and their partners' satisfaction. Perhaps surprisingly, preliminary evidence suggests that genuinely expressed negative emotion words are unrelated to satisfaction or stability.

However, positive emotion words preceded by negations are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Further, both positive and negative emotion words used sarcastically are negatively related to satisfaction and stability. Thus, the current evidence suggests that associations between negative emotion words and relationship health may be obscured unless contextual issues of language such as sarcastic tone and co-occurrence with negations are taken into account.

### **Collection of Language Data**

There are a number of sources of language data in the context of relationships. Most previous research has assessed word use during laboratory problem-solving discussions, but there are a wide variety of contexts in which word use during couples' interactions can be assessed. These include other types of laboratory interactions such as those geared toward eliciting social support, naturalistic conversations recorded at home, phone calls, and emails. One relatively new technology—Instant Messaging (IM)—has recently been used to measure couples' everyday language use. Unlike email, IM allows its users to chat with each other in real-time so that a conversation can unfold much in the same way that spoken conversation does. With regard to studying language use in relationships, IM provides an opportunity to examine the associations between word use and relationship quality in the absence of nonverbal cues. During IM conversations, the attributions that couple members make about each other are based solely on the words that they use and offer an exciting new approach to studying the words that couples use in their everyday lives—across conflicts as well as more positive moments.

Obviously, the language that couples use in their IMs represents only a fraction of the words that most couples—even frequent IM users—likely exchange with each other. It is unknown to what extent couples' IM conversations mirror their face-to-face interactions. While some have suggested that online communication may be more disclosing and emotionally expressive than spoken communication, no studies have directly compared the association between online communication and face-to-face communication in naturalistic settings. It may be that certain words that couples use are more salient in IM communication than in spoken communication, and vice versa. Other new technologies such as the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR)—a micro recorder that samples people's acoustic social environments—offer relationship researchers exciting new possibilities to study couple's word use as it naturally unfolds each day. Initial evidence suggests that the words people use in their relationships have very different meanings depending upon the context, for example during conflictual vs. supportive interactions. It seems essential that word use be examined across a variety of settings and situations before we can fully understand how and under what conditions word use is linked to relationship functioning.

### **Clinical Implications of Language Use in Relationships**

There may be important clinical implications for the types of words that people use in their relationships. For example, in behavioral couples therapy, couples often are encouraged to use more *I* statements when discussing problems in their relationship. Investigations of the role of word use in relationships present the possibility that encouraging couples' use of other types of words during therapy—such as positive emotion words—may be beneficial as well. Although therapists may not be able to readily change how happy people are in their relationships, they may be able to effect subtle changes in the words that couples use. This is in line with current

cognitive and behavioral approaches to therapy that are geared to toward enhancing relationship functioning through the modification of couples' behaviors. Promising findings from experimental laboratory studies of unacquainted individuals show that manipulating word use can indeed lead to changes in perceptions of closeness. Additional experimental research and studies that assess changes in relationship quality and word use over time are still needed to elucidate the causal direction of these associations and, in turn, their clinical relevance. Such research would help clarify whether a couple's word use merely reflects their underlying thoughts and feelings about their relationship or actively shapes the future course of that relationship.

**See also** Communication Processes, Verbal; Communication Skills; Communication, Instant Messaging and other New Media; Computer-Mediated Communication; Maintenance Behaviors in Relationships; Interaction Analysis.

### **Further Readings**

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