

The Language of Young Love: The Ways Couples Talk Can Predict Relationship Success

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We know that people tend to be attracted to, date, and marry other people who resemble themselves in terms of personality, values, and physical appearance. However, these features only skim the surface of what makes a relationship work. The ways that people talk are also important. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that people who speak in similar styles are more compatible.

The study focused on words called “function words.” These aren’t nouns and verbs; they’re the words that show how those words relate. They’re hard to explicitly define, but we use them all the time—words like *the*, *a*, *be*, *anything*, *that*, *will*, *him*, and *and*. How we use these words constitutes our writing and speaking style, says study coauthor James Pennebaker of the University of Texas at Austin.

“Function words are highly social and they require social skills to use,” he says. “For example, if I’m talking about the article that’s coming out, and in a few minutes I make some reference to ‘the article,’ you and I both know what the article means.” But someone who wasn’t part of that conversation wouldn’t understand.

Pennebaker, Molly Ireland, and their colleagues examined whether the speaking and writing styles couples adopt during conversation with each other predict future dating behavior and the long-term strength of relationships. They conducted two experiments in which a computer program compared partners’ language styles.

In the first study, pairs of college students had four-minute speed dates while their conversations were recorded. Almost every pair covered the same topics: What’s your major? Where are you from? How do you like college? Every conversation sounded more or less the same to the naked ear, but text analysis revealed stark differences in language synchrony. The pairs whose language style matching scores were above average were almost four times as likely to want future contact as pairs whose speaking styles were out of sync.

A second study revealed the same pattern in everyday online chats between dating couples over the course of 10 days. Almost 80 percent of the couples whose writing style matched were still dating three months later, compared with approximately 54 percent of the couples who didn’t match as well.

What people are saying to each other is important, but how they are saying it may be even more telling. People aren’t consciously synchronizing their speech, Pennebaker says. “What’s wonderful about this is we don’t really make that decision; it just comes out of our mouths.”

INTERACTIVE APPLICATION: Are you wondering whether you and your partner have matching language styles? Visit James Pennebaker’s “In Synch: Language Style Matching” application online to

find out! <http://www.utpsyc.org/synch/>