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Language Style Matching Predicts Relationship Initiation and Stability

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Abstract

Previous relationship research has largely ignored the importance of similarity in how people talk with one another. Using natural language samples, we investigated whether similarity in dyads' use of function words, called language style matching (LSM), predicts outcomes for romantic relationships. In Study 1, greater LSM in transcripts of 40 speed dates predicted increased likelihood of mutual romantic interest (odds ratio = 3.05). Overall, 33.3% of pairs with LSM above the median mutually desired future contact, compared with 9.1% of pairs with LSM at or below the median. In Study 2, LSM in 86 couples' instant messages positively predicted relationship stability at a 3-month follow-up (odds ratio = 1.95). Specifically, 76.7% of couples with LSM greater than the median were still dating at the follow-up, compared with 53.5% of couples with LSM at or below the median. LSM appears to reflect implicit interpersonal processes central to romantic relationships.

Keywords

romantic relationships, relationship stability, dyads, language, LIWC

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Interpersonal similarity plays an important role in the development of romantic relationships. Similarity in values, interests, and personality traits is known to predict mate selection and, to a lesser degree, the long-term success of romantic relationships (e.g., McCrae et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2004). Other work suggests that people who exhibit more similar nonverbal cues when talking with each other are more likely to be attracted to each other (Karremans & Verwijmeren, 2008). More broadly, when two people meet and automatically coordinate hand gestures, eye gaze, and posture, they are more likely to like and understand each other (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009; Shockley, Richardson, & Dale, 2009).

Often overlooked in the behavioral and social sciences are the facts that couples actually talk with one another and that their conversations often serve as the basis of their attraction. Remarkably little work has been done on synchrony in natural language use between two people who may become or are currently romantically involved. One recently developed tool that stands to shed new light on synchrony in real-life relationships is an unobtrusive measure of nonconscious verbal coordination called language style matching, or LSM (Gonzales, Hancock, & Pennebaker, 2010). LSM is a dyad-level measure of the degree to which two people in a conversation subtly match each other's speaking or writing style. Although people naturally match their language styles to

some degree in most everyday conversations, such matching is undetectable by both speakers and trained observers. (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002). Furthermore, like eye gaze coordination, LSM is thought to map directly onto the interpersonal coordination of psychological states (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010; Richardson, Dale, & Kirkham, 2007). The purpose of the studies reported here was to investigate whether LSM between potential and current romantic partners during naturally occurring conversations predicts initial romantic interest and long-term relationship stability.

The focus of LSM is a person's use of function words in speaking or writing. Function words, such as pronouns and articles, are generally short, are frequently used, and have little meaning outside the context of a sentence (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). As a result of these features, function words are processed rapidly and largely nonconsciously when people produce or comprehend language (Segalowitz & Lane, 2004; Van Petten & Kutas, 1991) and require shared social

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knowledge, or common ground, to be used effectively (Meyer & Bock, 1999). For example, the function words (underlined) in the sentence *He placed it on the table* make little sense without prior knowledge of the man, the object, and the table in question. Perhaps because of their key role in social cognition, function words are robust markers of a variety of individual differences and social behaviors, ranging from leadership style to honesty (Hancock, Curry, Goorha, & Woodworth, 2008; Slatcher, Chung, Pennebaker, & Stone, 2007; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Therefore, LSM theoretically reflects interpersonal alignment across the array of psychological states that function words represent.

By focusing on function words rather than content words, such as nouns and verbs, LSM allows researchers to assess psychological matching irrespective of context. Whereas function words are independent of conversational topics, content words are often constrained by them. For example, although two friends who work in an office building and a rock quarry, respectively, would likely use very different content words during a conversation about their days at work, research suggests that their function words would be similar to the extent that the friends like and understand each other (Gonzales et al., 2010; Pickering & Garrod, 2004).

Among function words, personal pronouns appear to be particularly relevant to relationships. Married couples who use *we* more often and *you* less often have lower divorce rates and report greater marital satisfaction (Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009; Simmons, Gordon, & Chambless, 2005). In dating couples, in contrast, women's use of first-person singular pronouns (e.g., *I*, *my*) during instant-message (IM) conversations positively predicts relationship stability (Slatcher, Vazire, & Pennebaker, 2008). However, in these previous studies, each individual's language use was the focus of analysis. In contrast, naturally occurring verbal matching requires some degree of complicity from both sides of a conversation, much as coordination of eye gaze and postural sway does (Shockley et al., 2009). As a measure of function-word matching at the dyad level, LSM hypothetically reflects not only each partner's attempts to engage the other, but also the degree to which these attempts are reciprocated. Thus, LSM may uniquely predict relationship outcomes that entail reciprocity, such as going on a date or staying in a relationship, independently of measures that focus on individuals in isolation. Indeed, in previous studies, LSM has positively predicted such necessarily mutual outcomes as group cohesiveness and peaceful resolution of hostage negotiations (Gonzales et al., 2010; Taylor & Thomas, 2008).

In two studies, we investigated whether nonconscious verbal coordination during naturally occurring conversations, as measured by LSM, is linked to outcomes of romantic relationships. Specifically, we tested the predictions that LSM is positively associated with mutual romantic interest in a speed-dating paradigm (Study 1) and with relationship stability in dating couples (Study 2).

Study 1

Method

Participants. The analyses reported here included 40 men and 40 women (mean age = 19.6 years, $SD = 1.2$) who volunteered to take part in a speed-dating study (see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007).

Procedure and materials. In total, 187 heterosexual participants took part in speed-dating events on the Northwestern University campus. Participants went on 4-min speed dates with up to 12 opposite-sex individuals, and each date was audio- and video-recorded. Forty speed dates were selected for transcription (see Eastwick, Saigal, & Finkel, in press) using the following criteria: The dates covered a wide range of interaction quality, no participant was included in more than one of the selected dates, and no participants were previously acquainted with their dates. Participants also completed a measure of perceived similarity following each date. This measure included two items: "My interaction partner and I seemed to have a lot in common" and "My interaction partner and I seemed to have similar personalities." The response scale for these items ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*), $\alpha = .92$. We included perceived similarity as a covariate in our analyses to test the unique effects of LSM above and beyond the predictive power of a traditionally strong self-report predictor of romantic interest.

Within 24 hr of the speed-dating event, participants reported on a Web site whether they would ("yes") or would not ("no") be interested in seeing each of their speed-dating partners again. If both participants in a date wanted to get together again, they were considered a "match" and were given the ability to contact each other. Participants whose interest was unreciprocated were unable to contact their dates in the future.

Language analysis. Participants used approximately 429 words on average during a speed date ($SD = 102$, minimum = 218, maximum = 688). To calculate LSM for each pair, we first segmented transcripts by speaker, producing two aggregate text files for each date. Texts were then analyzed with a computerized text analysis program, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007). LIWC calculates the percentage of total words in a text that fall into nine basic-level function-word categories (Table 1). Separate LSM scores were initially calculated for each category using the following formula (prepositions are used in this example):

$$LSM_{preps} = 1 - [(|preps_1 - preps_2|) / (preps_1 + preps_2 + 0.0001)]$$

In this formula, $preps_1$ is the percentage of prepositions used by the first person, and $preps_2$ is the percentage used by the second. In the denominator, 0.0001 is added to prevent empty sets. The nine category-level LSM scores were averaged to

Table 1. Word Categories Used for Calculating Language Style Matching

Category	Examples
Personal pronouns	<i>I, his, their</i>
Impersonal pronouns	<i>it, that, anything</i>
Articles	<i>a, an, the</i>
Conjunctions	<i>and, but, because</i>
Prepositions	<i>in, under, about</i>
Auxiliary verbs	<i>shall, be, was</i>
High-frequency adverbs	<i>very, rather, just</i>
Negations	<i>no, not, never</i>
Quantifiers	<i>much, few, lots</i>

Note: These Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) categories are from LIWC2007 (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007).

yield a composite LSM score bounded by 0 and 1; higher numbers represent greater stylistic similarity between two speakers. One LSM score was calculated for each speed date (see Table 2 for excerpts from speed dates with high and low LSM scores).

Results and discussion

Relationship initiation, operationalized as whether speed-dating partners subsequently matched with each other, was regressed on LSM z scores in a logistic regression (Table 3). As hypothesized, LSM significantly predicted relationship initiation, odds ratio (OR) = 3.05, $p = .039$. For every standard-deviation increase in LSM, speed daters' likelihood of romantically matching more than tripled. Among speed-dating dyads that were above the median on LSM scores, 33.3% were mutually interested in contacting each other; for dyads at or below the median, the corresponding figure was 9.1%. In addition, when the average of the two speed daters' perceived similarity was included in the regression, LSM remained a strong predictor of relationship initiation, OR = 3.49, $p = .051$. Perceived similarity and LSM were uncorrelated, $r(38) = .06$, $p = .725$.

Theoretically, both LSM and verbosity may reflect individuals' interest in and desire to understand their partner. To test whether verbosity accounted for the effect of LSM, we regressed romantic matching on dyads' mean word count and LSM z scores in a logistic regression. LSM remained a strong predictor of matching when word count was included in the model, OR = 5.70, $p < .001$.

In summary, speed daters were more than 3 times as likely to match with their date for every standard-deviation increase in LSM. Critically, this association remained robust when controlling for speed daters' perceived similarity with their dates, which indicates that similarity in language style uniquely predicts relationship initiation beyond self-reported similarity.

Study 2

Study 1 found that LSM during first dates predicted mutual romantic interest. Study 2 investigated whether this pattern of results extends to longer-term relationships. We hypothesized that naturally occurring LSM between current relationship partners would predict relationship stability at a 3-month follow-up.

Method

Participants. Eighty-six couples (mean age = 19.0 years, $SD = 1.4$) participated in a study originally designed to test the

Table 2. Examples of Conversations With High and Low Language Style Matching (LSM)

Excerpt 1 (LSM = .77)

W: Let's get the basics over with. What are you studying?

M: Uh, I'm studying econ and poli sci. How about you?

W: I'm journalism and English literature.

M: OK, cool.

W: Yeah.

M: Alright, um, where are you from?

W: I'm from Iowa, a town of 700. . . .

M: I'm from New Jersey. Uh—

W: Probably not 700. . . .

M: All right, well, I mean, actually, believe it or not, where I'm from in New Jersey has a lot in common with like Iowa and stuff. . . . Uh, how are you enjoying Northwestern?

W: Um, I like it a lot. Um, obviously it was a big transition coming from small-town Iowa, but, um, I love the city and have had a really good time.

Excerpt 2 (LSM = .54)

W: Where are you from?

M: Connecticut. . . . How about you?

W: Um, I'm from Austin, Texas.

M: Texas? Nice, OK.

W: When you say football, I understand football.

M: Oh, OK.

W: That's kind of like one of those things.

M: That's—you a UT fan or a—

W: Um, fan would be the wrong word.

M: An understatement? Or an o—

W: No, the wrong word.

M: OK.

W: I've had enough football to last me a lifetime.

M: Ah, OK. . . . Well, um, so what are you studying here?

W: Oh, I—I study opera and mechanical engineering. . . .

M: That's interesting. Are you in the music school?

W: I am.

Note: These two excerpts are from Study 1. "M" refers to the man in each pair, and "W" to the woman. The higher-LSM pair (Excerpt 1) mutually desired future contact; the lower-LSM pair (Excerpt 2) did not. The higher-LSM pair matched each other's use of personal pronouns (10.53% vs. 12.96%), auxiliary verbs (10.53% vs. 11.11%), and negations (1.75% vs. 1.85%). The lower-LSM pair differed in the same categories (15.09% vs. 10.0%, 15.09% vs. 7.50%, and 1.89% vs. 0.0%, respectively).

Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Relationship Outcomes in Studies 1 and 2

Model and predictor	β	SE (β)	Wald statistic	p	Odds ratio
Study 1					
Model 1					
LSM	1.11	0.54	4.25	.039	3.05
Model 2					
Similarity	1.64	0.63	6.83	.009	5.16
Model 3					
LSM	1.25	0.64	3.80	.051	3.49
Similarity	1.77	0.68	6.75	.009	5.87
Study 2					
Model 1					
LSM	0.67	0.27	6.30	.012	1.95
Condition	-0.99	0.50	3.95	.047	0.37
Model 2					
Satisfaction	0.88	0.27	10.48	.001	2.40
Condition	-1.04	0.51	4.11	.043	0.35
Model 3					
LSM	0.68	0.29	5.37	.021	1.96
Satisfaction	0.88	0.28	9.56	.002	2.40
Condition	-0.85	0.54	2.50	.114	0.43

Note: Outcomes are matching (i.e., reciprocal romantic interest) following a speed-dating event (Study 1) and relationship stability (Study 2). Similarity is a pair's average score on a two-item measure of self-reported similarity with the speed-dating partner (see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). Satisfaction is a couple's average score on the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988). The conditions in Study 2 were a control condition and an expressive-writing condition (see Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). LSM = language style matching.

effects of expressive writing on relationship stability (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). Couples who were in a committed heterosexual romantic relationship and engaged in IM conversation with each other daily were recruited for that study. On average, the couples had been dating approximately 1.31 years ($SD = 1.06$).

Procedure. Couples provided their IM chats that took place during the 10 days of the study. Each couple member completed the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) on the first day. The RAS is a face-valid measure of relationship satisfaction consisting of seven items, such as "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Responses are provided on 7-point Likert-type scales. Three months later, relationship stability was assessed by asking couples whether they were still dating.

Language analysis. The 10 days of IM conversations were grouped into three periods (before, during, and after a 3-day expressive-writing manipulation). Conversations were then aggregated by participant and analyzed with LIWC. On average, participants wrote approximately 1,000 words to their partners during each time period ($SD = 1,136$, minimum = 52, maximum = 7,782). LSM for each period was calculated as in

Study 1, and these values were averaged to yield one mean LSM score per couple.

Results and discussion

All analyses controlled for the effect of experimental writing condition, although hypothesis tests yielded identical conclusions when this control was excluded. Relationship stability, operationalized as whether couples were still dating at the 3-month follow-up, was regressed on mean LSM z scores (Table 3). LSM significantly predicted relationship stability, $OR = 1.95$, $p = .012$. For every standard-deviation increase in LSM, couples were approximately twice as likely to be together 3 months later. Among couples with mean LSM scores above the median, 76.7% were dating at follow-up; for couples whose mean LSM scores were at or below the median, the corresponding figure was 53.5%. As in Study 1, LSM remained a strong predictor of the relationship outcome (in this case, relationship stability) when the analysis controlled for couples' mean word count, $OR = 1.98$, $p = .033$.¹

In addition, results were consistent with those of the Study 1 covariance analysis in that LSM continued to predict the relationship outcome when couples' mean relationship satisfaction was included in the model, $OR = 1.96$, $p = .021$. Relationship

satisfaction was unrelated to LSM, $r(84) = .11$, $p = .323$. The results indicate that LSM uniquely predicts relationship stability beyond partners' self-reported perceptions of relationship quality.

General Discussion

In two studies, an unobtrusive measure of nonconscious verbal matching uniquely predicted mutual romantic interest and relationship stability independently of traditionally strong self-report predictors (perceived similarity and relationship satisfaction). Notably, the relationship outcomes in both studies were consequential: Both romantic matching and relationship stability determined the existence or nonexistence of a romantic relationship.

Although there is currently no consensus on the specific mechanisms underlying nonconscious behavioral coordination, it is generally accepted that coordinated eye gaze, language use, and posture function to facilitate communication and mutual understanding (Pickering & Garrod, 2004; Shockley et al., 2009). Building on this theory, we speculate that people seek to understand and thus coordinate with a conversation partner to the degree that they find their partner engaging. Further, our results suggest that engagement in a conversation, which LSM theoretically reflects, is largely independent of the degree to which individuals feel similar to or are satisfied with their conversation partner.

As is the case for most research on verbal coordination, our data are correlational. Although Pickering and Garrod (2004) contend that language alignment causes mutual understanding, other researchers contend that individuals' goals to be liked and understood cause behavioral coordination (Brennan & Hanna, 2009; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). It is likely that LSM and its underlying psychological processes are bidirectionally linked. Specifically, we suspect that style matching and relationship engagement reciprocally increase one another and jointly facilitate positive relationship outcomes (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002).

LSM predicts critical real-world behaviors in contexts ranging from academics to romantic relationships (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). Measures of nonconscious verbal matching, such as LSM, have the potential to illuminate previously hidden processes that determine the existence or nonexistence of social relationships. Extending previous findings that non-verbal coordination facilitates smooth interpersonal interaction, our results suggest that verbal coordination during everyday conversations is integral to the initiation and maintenance of romantic relationships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

James W. Pennebaker is the codeveloper and owner of the text-analysis program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), which is a commercial product from LIWC.net. All profits that he receives are donated to the University of Texas at Austin. All other authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Note

1. Several logistic regressions tested whether the effects of LSM were driven primarily by matching in a subset of word categories (e.g., personal pronouns, negations). No one category or subset of categories reliably predicted relationship outcomes in Studies 1 and 2.

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