Talking alike cements relationships

Similar speaking styles augur romantic success, studies find

By Bruce Bower

A subtle, surprisingly mundane banter lies at the heart of romance. Love’s flames get fanned when two people similarly employ words such as I, it, but and under in conversation, a new study suggests.

Conversation partners’ related use of function words — such as pronouns, articles, conjunctions and prepositions — augurs well for mutual romantic interest and stable relationships, says a team led by James Pennebaker and Molly Ireland of the University of Texas at Austin.

Unconscious coordination of this sort, called “language-style matching” by the researchers, signifies not how much two people like each other but how much attention each pays to what the other says, Pennebaker, Ireland and colleagues propose in an upcoming Psychological Science.

Function words tap into verbal coordination between people because these words are independent of conversation topic and require shared knowledge to be used effectively. If one friend works in an office and another in a quarry, for example, the friends will use different nouns and verbs to talk about their work but similar function words if the two feel connected and understand each other.

The researchers analyzed 40 conversations between speed daters, a recent focus of relationship researchers (SN: 2/14/09, p. 22). Opposite-sex pairs who used similar types and frequencies of function words were more than three times as likely to express mutual interest in dating as pairs whose speaking styles differed.

A second experiment of 86 young-adult couples in committed relationships found that those using similar writing styles during 10 days of instant-messaging chats were particularly likely to stay together over the next three months.

Pennebaker suspects that language-style matching waxes and wanes with relationships. In the September Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, he and Ireland analyze function words in letters between psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, poems and plays of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning and poems of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

Language-style matching diminished as each relationship soured. Notable declines occurred when Jung left Freud’s psychoanalytic group, when Elizabeth Barrett welcomed death’s approach while her husband dreaded it, and when Plath and Hughes’ marriage fell apart.

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Archaeologists had unearthed 20 complete Strombus galeatus marine shell trumpets in 2001 at Chavín de Huántar, an ancient ceremonial center in the Andes. Polished and etched with symbols, the shells had well-formed mouthpieces and distinct V-shaped cuts (top). The cuts may have been used as a rest for the player’s thumb, says study coauthor Perry Cook, a computer scientist at Princeton University and an avid shell musician. — Marissa Cevallos

Theory trampled

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