

EXPLAINING PARTNER BEHAVIOR: DO PARTNERS SHOW LINGUISTIC BIASES  
DEPENDING ON THEIR LEVEL OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION?

BY

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### **Abstract**

The present study examined language used by partners in and out of romantic relationships when describing both negative and positive partner behavior to observe a potential bias that is often observed in other social groups. The researchers hypothesized that individuals currently in romantic relationships would use language with lower levels of abstraction to describe bad partners behavior but would use language with higher levels of abstraction to describe good partner behavior, thus displaying an overall pro-relationship language bias. The present study also examined relationship satisfaction, self-esteem and the levels of relationship interconnectivity to examine their role in the language bias. The researchers further predicted that the strength of this bias would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, given the link between other relationship biases and satisfaction. Participants viewed drawings that were meant to emulate typical positive and negative partner behavior and were given the option to describe the behavior in abstract or concrete ways. Participants also completed self-measures on relationships satisfaction, self-esteem and relationship interconnectivity. Inconsistent with the researcher's hypothesis, higher levels of relationship satisfaction were not associated with higher language bias however, higher levels of relationship interconnectivity were associated with higher language bias in describing negative partner behavior.

*Keywords:* Relationships, Self-esteem, Abstraction, Language Bias

### **Explaining Partner Behavior: Do Partners Show Linguistic Biases Depending on Their Level of Relationship Satisfaction?**

Romantic relationships can be either rewarding or disappointing. They even shape the way in which an individual perceives their surroundings. Whether it involves partner behavior, perception and even memory (Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996; Luchies, Rusbult, Eastwick, Wieselquist, Kumashiro, Coolsen & Finkel, 2013, Eastwick, Finkel & Eagly, 2011); compared to single individuals, partners in romantic relationships tend to develop a different perception of the world around them.

Considerable research has demonstrated that individuals in romantic relationships often view their partners in biased and overly positive ways (Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996). One study examining married and dating participants' views found evidence for these "positive illusions" in many forms (Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996). For example, participants generally rated their partners more favorably (i.e., having more positive traits) than a "typical partner." To examine whether these perceptions were accurate or reflective of biases, the researchers also had the partners themselves provide self-descriptions. Lastly, to measure the effect of these "positive illusions," the researchers also measured partner satisfaction. Although the partner's own self-descriptions correlated with the participants' descriptions of them (which indicates that the participants' perceptions were rooted in reality), the participants' descriptions of their partner also correlated with their descriptions of an ideal partner. In essence, participants ultimately viewed their partner in a more idealized way than the partner themselves indicated that they were actually like. In addition, this positive bias was correlated with greater relationship satisfaction. In all instances, the results indicated that individuals perceived their partners as having many

positive traits. Their views were colored by their own idealized perceptions of what a partner should be like and this contributed to their satisfaction in their relationships.

In addition to viewing partners as having many positive traits, individuals in romantic relationships can also be biased in their perceptions of their partner's behaviors. Another study examining memory in romantic relationships found that people were biased in their recall of partner's transgressions (Lunchies et al., 2013). For example, participants were instructed to keep notes of every partner transgression and the intensity of each transgression daily (e.g., he ignored me versus he is cheating on me). Every two weeks they would fill out a questionnaire where they would describe the transgression and whether they remembered the transgressions of the previous questionnaires prior to that one. This transpired for a total of six months. Participants also completed a measure of trust towards their partner. It was observed that participants with higher levels of trust recalled fewer transgressions than they had initially reported compared to participants with lower levels of trust (Lunchies et al., 2013). In general, participants were less likely to remember their partners' wrongdoings if they had greater levels of trust, which demonstrates how trust can increase positive biases in memories and perceptions of one's partner.

In another line of research, individuals have also examined biases in intergroup contexts, especially as they relate to language use. The intergroup linguistic bias refers to the favoring of one's own group over an out-group in the form of behavior descriptions (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri & Semin, 1989). When behaviors are described, these descriptions can have different levels of abstraction that range from descriptive action verbs (lowest level of abstraction) to adjectives (highest level of abstraction). More concrete (non-abstract) language treats the behavior as a one-time occurrence, while more abstract language use implies the behavior is indicative of broad,

permanent character traits on the part of the actor. Researchers hypothesized that members of the same team would show an in-group bias by using words with the least levels of abstraction to describe their own teams' negative behavior and the most levels of abstraction when describing negative behavior from an out-group member. What they found was that indeed, positive behaviors from a team member were described at higher levels of abstraction than out-group behaviors. The members of an in-group used words with higher levels of abstraction to describe positive behavior when it came from their group but not if it was a behavior performed by a member of the out-group. The researchers also found that for negative in-group behavior, the opposite was observed (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri & Semin, 1989). Members of the same team were more critical and used words with higher levels of abstraction to describe negative out-group behavior than they were of their own group's negative behavior.

A similar study that observed the linguistic bias implemented elements such as threats; a manipulation to enhance the language bias due to the need to protect the in-group in the face of identity discrimination. The researchers also incorporated a measure of self-esteem: both of the collective self and of the individual self (Maas, Ceccarelli & Rudin, 1996). It was hypothesized that the linguistic bias would be stronger after receiving a threatening message than a friendly message. The researchers also hypothesized that since in-group identity is dependent on self-esteem, then in-group members would report higher self-esteem after responding in a biased way to an out-group threat. Using similar measures as those from the previous study, researchers were able to observe that the threat manipulation did enhance the use of abstract language for in-group members' positive behaviors. The focus of the current study was to observe this bias in individuals toward their romantic partners.

### **Present Study**

The current study examined whether romantic partners display a positive language bias when describing partner behaviors. However, participants currently not in romantic relationships were recruited as well to serve as a control group. Participants answered several prompts that measured their language use whilst describing partner behaviors. They were also asked to answer prompts that measured self-esteem, partner satisfaction and closeness. The researchers hypothesized that individuals currently in romantic relationships would use language with lower levels of abstraction to describe bad partner behavior but would use language with higher levels of abstraction to describe good partner behavior, thus displaying an overall pro-relationship language bias. We further predicted that the strength of this bias would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, given the link between other relationship biases and satisfaction.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited using the Mechanical Turk website. A total of 202 participants completed the study for \$2. 148 of them were in romantic relationships and the remaining 54 were not. Most were Caucasian (80%) and male (58%).

### **Materials**

*Language Bias Measure:* The Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) was used to measure abstraction in language use. Participants were shown 8 drawings (4 positive drawings, 4 negative drawings) of individuals performing either positive or negative partner behaviors. Participants then picked the description that best fit the drawings in their opinion. There were four response choices that varied in levels of abstraction. The four positive behaviors displayed were hugging, gifting, comforting and dancing. The four negative behaviors displayed were yelling, ignoring, rolling eyes, and unhelpfulness. At the lowest level of abstraction were

descriptive action verbs that simply described momentary behavior such as “dance” “ignore,” or “hug.” The next level of abstraction included interpretive action verbs that applied some interpretation to the behavior, such as “disagree,” “hurts,” or “attack.” The next level includes state verbs that described the current state of the person, such as “likes,” “cares,” or “disrespects” and finally, the most abstract level of description included adjectives that described the individual, with language such as “rude,” “loving,” or “lazy.” Scores for the positive and negative behaviors were averaged separately such that higher numbers indicated greater abstract language use in describing the behavior.

### **Procedure**

Participants were invited to take an online survey through the Mechanical Turk website. After consenting, participants were asked if they were in a romantic relationship, their gender and race. Afterwards, participants completed the Language Bias Measure and were asked to imagine their partner engaging in the behaviors if they were currently in a relationship or were instead to imagine a hypothetical partner of theirs if they were not currently in a relationship.

After completing the Language Bias Measure, participants completed Rosenberg’s (1965), Self-Esteem Scale, which included ten items measured on four-point Likert-type scales from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Participants who were in romantic relationships also completed a three-item, relationship satisfaction assessment measured on a 9-point Likert scale that ranged from 1(not at all) to 9 (Completely true). Items included the following statements: “I am extremely happy with my relationship,” “I have a very strong relationship with my partner,” and “I do not feel that my relationship is successful” (Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996) which were averaged together into an index of relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Then participants completed two relationship measures included for another study. Then participants

completed the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale, a single-item pictorial measure of an individuals' perceived closeness with their partner (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992).

### Results

To examine the predictors of language bias for positive and negative behaviors, two multiple regressions were run examining the role of gender, relationship satisfaction, IOS closeness scores, and self-esteem. For positive behaviors, none of the predictors were significantly associated with the language bias score, although gender ( $B = .17, p = .064$ ) and relationship satisfaction ( $B = .06, p = .096$ ) were marginally related (See Table 1). However, for negative behaviors, the IOS closeness measure emerged as a significant positive predictor of language bias, ( $B = -.15, p < .001$ ; see Table 2). Finally, a multiple regression predicting relationship satisfaction from gender, self-esteem, the IOS closeness rating, and language bias for positive and negative behaviors only found significant associations for the IOS closeness scores, gender, and self-esteem (See Table 3). Language bias scores did not predict relationship satisfaction in the regression or show first-order correlations with relationship satisfaction (See Table 4).

To observe whether participants used language in a biased way when in a relationship versus imagining a hypothetical relationship partner, two t-tests were conducted comparing language bias for the positive and negative behaviors for single and non-single participants. Language bias was not significantly different for positive behaviors,  $t(199) = .329, p = .743$ , or negative behaviors,  $t(199) = -.30, p = .762$  between participants currently in relationships versus not.

### Discussion



The main purpose of the study was to try to observe a bias in the language choice used to describe partner behavior. It was hypothesized that individuals currently in romantic relationships would use language with lower levels of abstraction to describe bad partner behavior but would use language with higher levels of abstraction to describe good partner behavior, thus displaying an overall pro-relationship language bias. We further predicted that the strength of this bias would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, given the link between other relationship biases and satisfaction. Although we expected a pro-relationship bias in both descriptions of positive and negative behaviors, a bias only emerged for the negative behavior descriptions. Thus, for negative partner behavior, participants in and out of romantic relationships used more concrete, temporary language to account for a partner's bad behavior. One possible reason for this could be the influence of the positive illusion effect, previously mentioned in research by Murray, Holmes & Griffin (1996). Participants demonstrate the language bias when describing negative partner behavior due to their overly positive illusions of their partner.

Finally, although past research indicated that greater positive illusions are linked to greater relationship satisfaction, this association did not emerge in the present results. However, there was a positive correlation between the interpersonal interconnectedness between romantic partners and the strength of the language bias. This lends support to the idea that the positive illusion may indeed relate to how individuals construe and describe negative partner behaviors. This could have been because ultimately, the closer the individuals considered themselves to their partner, the more they would develop these positive illusion effects and ultimately the more they would have a language bias when describing their partner.

### **Limitations**

Although the present study yielded interesting results, this study could have better represented the general population, as most participants were white males given that some relationship processes in heterosexual relationships differ by gender, it is important for future research to examine both and account for any possible gender differences.

Another obstacle that this study faced pertained to the Language Bias measure. This measure was taken from previous studies and was adapted to accommodate partners in relationships instead of members of sports teams. The researchers tried to emulate as much of the measure as possible while also trying to be as open to all types of relationships as possible. This meant that the characters were drawn to resemble people in romantic relationships of all genders and sexualities. While open to diverse relationships, the ambiguity of the stimuli may have made it more difficult to imagine themselves and their partners in those situations, thus weakening any results. Future research may benefit from gender-matched images.

To the current knowledge of the researchers, this was one of the first studies of its kind. Future research should consider using relationship threat manipulations to try to determine if the language bias increases, as it did in research on inter-group threat (Maas, Ceccarelli & Rudin, 1996). Future research should also include a measure of trust given its role in other relationship processes (Lunchies et al., 2013). Romantic relationships can be very rewarding and positive illusions are one psychological mechanism that serves to reinforce our social bonds. Thus, understanding how these illusions affect partners' interpretations of and communication about relationship-relevant behavior is an important next step in examining relationship processes.

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Table 1

**Regression results for positive partner behavior**

	<b>Unstandardized</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Standardized</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
(Intercept)	1.625	0.322		5.053	< .001
gender	0.187	0.100	0.155	1.864	0.064
RelSat	0.057	0.034	0.168	1.674	0.096
Rel_IOS	0.014	0.042	0.032	0.333	0.740
SelfEsteem	-0.117	0.080	-0.129	-1.465	0.145

Table 2

**Regression results for negative partner behavior**

	<b>Unstandardized</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Standardized</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
(Intercept)	2.203	0.349		6.317	< .001
gender	0.134	0.109	0.100	1.230	0.221
RelSat	0.020	0.037	0.053	0.541	0.589
Rel_IOS	-0.152	0.045	-0.314	-3.345	0.001
SelfEsteem	-0.016	0.087	-0.016	-0.184	0.855

Table 3

**Regression results predicting relationship satisfaction**

	<b>Unstandardized</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Standardized</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
(Intercept)	2.610	0.887		2.942	0.004
Rel_IOS	0.556	0.096	0.436	5.790	< .001
gender	-0.545	0.245	-0.154	-2.229	0.027
SelfEsteem	0.656	0.189	0.246	3.467	< .001
PosConstrual	0.340	0.216	0.116	1.576	0.117
NegConstrual	-6.879e -4	0.201	-2.609e -4	-0.003	0.997

Table 4

**First-order Correlations**

	<b>SelfEsteem</b>	<b>RelSat</b>	<b>PosConstrual</b>	<b>NegConstrual</b>	<b>Rel_IOS</b>
SelfEsteem	—				
RelSat	0.353 ***	—			
PosConstrual	-0.025	0.116	—		
NegConstrual	-0.078	-0.127	0.343 ***	—	
Rel_IOS	0.255 **	0.509 ***	0.084	-0.291 ***	—

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$