

The Patterning and Matching of Indexicalities within Supportive Conversations

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Social support is an important context for studying language variation and style. Drawing on the work of Eckert (2000), Bucholtz (2009), and Kiesling (2009) on style and indexicality this paper argues that how supportive listeners use certain contextually important words through a conversation depends upon how those words are first presented by a stressed other. The matching of language variables has been shown to increase supportive outcomes (Cannava and Bodie, 2014), and it appears that listener matching of discloser is particularly important. Indeed, how a discloser first tells a problematic event should influence how a listener responds. In particular, we propose that variability in listener language is dependent on the style of a discloser.

238 dyads engaged in a 5 minute conversation in which one person told about a problematic event while the other listened to that disclosure. Listeners were told they could respond both verbally and nonverbally, as they “normally would in a conversation of this nature.” Transcripts of these conversations were analyzed using a computerized textual analysis program on the four theoretically relevant word types: positive emotion words, negative emotion words, cognitive mechanism words, and I Pronouns. The stylistic variation patterns of a listener were analyzed over four segments and were dependent on the discloser’s high or low frequency of the variable of interest presented during the first segment of a conversation.

The only significant trends in the data were the cubic and quadratic patterns of I Pronouns of listeners interacting with discloser using high amounts of I pronouns; listeners tended to steadily increase their use of I Pronouns throughout the conversation, peaking in the fourth segment and drastically dropping the frequency during the final segment. Results showed that a listener’s topography of positive emotion words did not vary as a function of a discloser’s use of positive emotion words. There were, however, significant differences between listeners while using cognitive mechanism words and negative emotion words. These differences were in degree and not in kind; the pattern of these words stayed the same, whereas the frequency changed. Specifically, listeners produced more negative emotion words when paired with a discloser who had high amounts of negative emotion words.

These results suggest that the style of a listener is somewhat dependent upon a discloser’s initial language choices, particularly negative emotion words, cognitive mechanism words, and I pronouns. The types and frequencies of indexicalities a listener selects to produce tends to be influenced by how a discloser is first presenting those words. If a discloser uses more of one type of word then a listener will also use more of that word. Although the patterns in which listeners are using cognitive mechanism words, positive emotion words, and negative emotion words are the same regardless of frequency, where the most significant change occurs is during the use of I Pronouns.