Fall October 22, 2012

Verbal Communication about Sex in Marriage: Patterns of Language Use and Its Connection with Relational Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined the vocabulary husbands and wives use for talking to each other about sex, and connections between language use and relational qualities. Married people ($n = 293$) responded to a questionnaire about their use of common sex-related terms and about several characteristics of their marriage: sexual communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, relational closeness. Cluster analysis based on reported use revealed that sexual terms fall into clusters characterized as clinical terms, slang, or standard English. Results showed an association between use of sexual terms, particularly slang terms, and both satisfaction and closeness. This connection was stronger for women than for men. The findings offer insight into sexual talk and marital relationships.

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Connection with Relational Outcomes

Sex is an important aspect of a satisfying marriage. Given the intrinsic motivation people have to engage in sex and the pleasure it provides, it seems natural to think that married people would be accomplished lovers. However, estimates suggest that 15-20% of married Americans have sex with their spouse less than once a month (Deveny, 2003). The paucity of sexual activity in these relationships could be problematic because sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction are positively associated (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

Achieving desired sexual outcomes requires effective coordination between partners in the activity itself, as well as in the communicative aspects that are associated with it, such as planning sexual episodes, enticing one another, or constructing shared meaning about a couple's sex life. Communication is one factor associated with sexual and relational (dis)satisfaction (Byers, 2005; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005), and experts believe that married individuals are often less than fully effective in their communication about sex. Poor communication is not the cause of every relational issue, and effective communication is not a panacea for every problem (Postman, 1976), but any interaction requiring skillful coordination of activity can only reach its full potential when people communicate effectively. To that end, this study utilizes the goals-plans-action theory of message production (Dillard, 2008) by regarding sexual and relational outcomes in marriage as goals and sexual verbal language as plans and actions needed to facilitate these relational goals.

Communicating to achieve sexual goals in marriage requires both verbal and nonverbal messages. Much sexual communication is conveyed nonverbally (Cupach & Metts, 1991), but verbal messages are important, as well. As with nonverbal messages, verbal messages impact

what happens during a sexual episode (La France, 2010b), function as part of the sexual act, and co-construct shared meaning in a relationship (Harvey & Weber, 2002). These functions, among others, rely on verbal communication and the specific language that people use. However, the nature of sexual language used by married people has received little research attention, especially when compared to nonverbal communication, and the question of whether sexual language is connected with relational outcomes has received almost no attention. Thus, this paper explores patterns in sexual language used by married people and seeks to discern whether language use is associated with certain relational qualities.

Sexual Language as Action

Language is important not only as a vehicle for clearly expressing ideas, but also because the language used to describe an activity helps shape the meaning people associate with that event. It both describes events as people perceive them and also helps create the nature of the event (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Feminist Catherine MacKinnon (1982) quipped, "Man fucks woman. Subject, verb, object" (p. 541). While MacKinnon's point was about the objectification of women through language, her remark also shows how issues such as agency, passivity, or relational impact are generated through language. "He fucked her" and "he made love to her" may describe the same behaviors, yet the language people use to talk about the event impacts perception of the event and the relationship overall.

Half a century ago, Bailey (1962) suggested that the English language has three distinct sexual vocabularies—spoken vernacular, medical-professional, and agreed-upon words and phrases. Simkins and Rinck (1982) reported a similar trichotomy in their study of male and female sexual vocabulary. They classified terms as colloquial, formal clinical, or euphemisms. While the labels used by each of these writers differ, the meanings of the categories overlap.

First, spoken vernacular/colloquial terms, such as slang, are informal as they fall outside of standard language and considered inappropriate for formal writing or speech, among other factors (Richter, 1987). The key element in Bailey's and Simkins and Rinck's descriptions of these terms is their crudeness. Terms such as *fuck*, *cock*, or *cunt* are often reasonably descriptive, but may be seen as vulgar or offensive to many people. Second, clinical/medical terms are those words that a medical textbook or health document would use as definitive labels for sexual activities or body parts. These terms are scientifically accurate, but "marked by an absence of emotional connotation and by a degree of impersonality" (Sanders & Robinson, 1979, p. 25). Third, euphemisms/agreed upon words or phrases are inoffensive terms that are substituted for offensive ones. In the sexual lexicon, phrases such as *make love*, *roll in the hay*, or *get it on* are descriptions seen by many people as less offensive than their cruder, slang counterparts.

The assumption that sexual vocabulary fits into this trichotomy is not adequately tested, and it is unproven in today's vernacular. Bailey (1962) had no empirical evidence to support his assertion. Simkins and Rinck (1982) coded their data into a priori categories, so their data lack evidence of representational validity. Both studies are at least three decades old, and language evolves over time. Therefore, the first research question is intended to update the examination of sexual vocabulary within the context of marital maintenance by asking:

RQ$_1$:   Does sexual language use of married people reflect different vocabularies when talking about sex?

Some research has suggested that sexual partners avoid using clinical terms in their conversations about sex (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). The first hypothesis tests this assertion.

H$_1$:   Married people use clinical terms less frequently than non-clinical terms when they talk about sex.

Sex Differences in Language Use

It stands to reason that women and men might use different language if they perceive sex differently. Many scholars (e.g., Sprecher & McKinney, 1993) assert that women see sex as more relational than men, whereas men think about sex as a physical act more than women. If that is the case, women would be expected to talk about sex in emotional or relational terms (e.g., *we made love*) and men in action terms (e.g., *we screwed each other*). Indeed, some research has shown that women use the term *make love* more than men (Sanders, 1978), and men use the term *fuck* more than women (Simkins & Rinck, 1982). Further, research on obscene or sexual language has found sex differences in many aspects of language use (Jay, 1980; Sanders, 1978). For instance, researchers have often found that men use a greater amount of obscene words than women (Foote & Woodward, 1973) and utilize more words to represent their genitalia than women (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Sanders & Robinson, 1979). Sanders and Robinson (1979) also reported that women use more euphemistic and formal (clinical) language, whereas men use more derogatory slang terms and sometimes more power/action language. To continue this line of inquiry, the second research question asks:

RQ2: Are there sex differences in the frequency of use of sexual terms used by married people?

Communication Satisfaction, Relational Satisfaction, and Closeness as Relational Goals

Sexual communication serves several functions in relationships. One of these functions includes the achievement of personal and relational goals. Goals-plans-action theory, rooted in the tradition of influence and persuasion, helps explain the communicative actions and cognitive plans that lead to sexual and relational goal attainment. Reasons for influence (Dillard, Anderson, & Knobloch, 2002) applied to a sexual relationship include engaging in sexual

activity, changing the relationship, obtaining permission to perform a sexual act, fulfilling a commitment, or changing the orientation or perspective on sexual attitudes or beliefs. The sexual language used to perform these influence strategies could have important and meaningful consequences. People need language that is appropriately clear or strategically ambiguous, accurate, and comfortable for use in conversations lovers use to talk about sex. The English language has thousands of sex-related words (Richter, 1987), so there is no shortage of words. The challenge is to understand the words used and their ability to achieve relational goals, such as communication satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and relationship closeness. The following hypothesis and research question contribute to this understanding:

H_2: Married people with greater sexual language use will report higher sexual communication satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and relational closeness.

RQ_3: Are connections, if any, between use of sexual terms and sexual communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and relational closeness the same for women and for men?

Apprehension and Sexual Communication

In the exploratory stages of the study of language and sexuality, baseline data of association between language use and broader relational qualities need to be established before testing for causal linkages. It seems likely that there are multiple ways in which language and satisfaction can be associated, so there is no need at an early stage of research to discount any explanation of causality. But, it is worth seeking further clarification of variables that might impact any connection between language use and overarching relational qualities. In the case of inhibition functioning as a variable that might influence both language and satisfaction, communication apprehension is a possible indicator. People who have high communication

apprehension engage in less self-disclosure (Wheeless, Nesser, & McCroskey, 1986), and it is reasonable to assume they would communicate about sex less than those with lower apprehension.

Sexual communication apprehension seems likely to account for some of the connection between language use and satisfaction. But, if connections between language and satisfaction remain significant when removing variance caused by communication apprehension, then it seems more plausible that language use could have some impact on satisfaction. The third hypothesis tests this assumption:

H$_3$:   Even when accounting for sexual communication apprehension, language use is associated with satisfaction and closeness.

Method

Participants

The nonprobability sample included 293 individuals from heterosexual marriages. They ranged in age from 20 to 73 with a mean age of 40 (median = 43; SD = 11.7 years). Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were female, and 42% were male. They indicated their race as Caucasian (91%), African American (5%), Asian (2%), or other (e.g., Hispanic, Indian; 2%). Participants reported duration of marriage ranging from 2 months to 54 years with a mean of 13 years (median = 11 years, SD = 11.2). This sample provided excellent diversity in age and length of marriage and a good balance of women and men, although people of color are under-represented compared to the country's overall population.

Criteria for participation included (a) being in a heterosexual marriage, to eliminate any variance that gay or lesbian relationships might introduce, and (b) only one person per marriage, to protect independence of data. Frequency of sexual activity was not a criterion because

couples who have infrequent sex might still *talk* about sex, and the focus of the study was people's communication experience, regardless of frequency of sexual encounters. Just seven percent of the sample reported having sex less than once per month.

Procedure

Students in introductory communication classes at a large, Midwestern university could earn extra credit for recruiting up to three individuals who met the eligibility criteria described above. Inviting university students to assist with recruitment efforts has been utilized in other sex research (e.g., La France, 2010a) and it offers a way to move findings into established, long term committed relationships when external funding sources are limited. Students who were willing to recruit were given a recruitment script outlining the criteria, purpose, risks, and benefits of the study along with three surveys. Students were instructed to tell the recruits the nature of the study (filling out a survey about sexual communication with their spouse) so that the participants would not be surprised by the content of the questionnaire. If the individual was willing to participate, the student then gave the respondent the questionnaire and a postage paid return envelope. Respondents mailed their questionnaires directly back to the researchers.

Respondents received two sheets of information along with the survey. One sheet was the consent information sheet, which the participant was instructed to keep. The other sheet asked for the name of the student to receive extra credit, a first name of the respondent, and a daytime phone number. As described in the consent form, these information sheets were separated from the surveys and were destroyed once verification and assignment of extra credit was completed. This procedure protected participants' anonymity. Participants were also told on the consent form that a random sample of respondents would be called to verify participation.

Ten percent of the respondents were contacted by telephone and all confirmed that they were indeed the person who filled out the survey.

Instrument Construction

Sexual vocabulary. The purpose of this project was to look for patterns among terms that are potentially part of adults' vocabulary and frequently used in current media outlets (whether that is in entertainment, news, or medical information). This study did not attempt a comprehensive survey of every word possible because there are thousands of sex-related words and a survey of language use could be almost endless. Thus, to generate a list where respondents could indicate their word usage, each researcher independently listed common terms or phrases for sexual activities and for male and female anatomy. Then, words were selected where there was agreement that terms were commonly-used in the media or in everyday conversation. The resulting list of 44 words was presented to participants in alphabetical order. Participants were instructed to reflect on interactions with their spouse and asked to rate the frequency of use of each of the sexual terms or phrases on a 4-point scale, using anchors of never (0), rarely (1), sometimes (2), and often (3).

Sexual communication satisfaction. Hecht's (1978) communication satisfaction measure was chosen because of its documented reliability and validity. Participants were instructed to "recall the last time you and your spouse had a conversation about sex" so that they focused their responses to satisfaction with sexual communication within the marital relationship. Sample items from this scale include "We each got to say what we wanted," "I would like to have another conversation like this one," and "Nothing was accomplished" (reverse coded). Reliability for this scale was .92 (19-items rated on 7-point scale) in our data set ($M =$

96.38, *SD* = 19.43). For this and all measures in this study, a higher score indicated greater satisfaction or closeness.

Relational satisfaction. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) relational satisfaction measure was chosen from among the many available satisfaction measures because its items fit with the nature of this study and the extensive validation done in its development. Typical items were "Our relationship is much better than others' relationships" and "Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs." Reliability for this scale was .95 (5-items rated on 7-point scale) in this data set (*M* = 27.82, *SD* = 6.75).

Relational closeness. To measure closeness or intimacy, Hess, Fannin, and Pollom's (2007) Closeness Strategies Index was selected. This measure uses specific behaviors rather than relying on a holistic judgment, and it has been substantially validated. Sample items included "I paid careful attention when my spouse was talking to me," and "I treated my spouse as someone who was worthy of respect and dignity." Reliability for this scale was .86 (8-items rated on 7-point scale) in our data set (*M* = 41.23, *SD* = 7.99).

Sexual communication apprehension. Sexual communication apprehension was measured with the dyadic subscale of McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension. The items were modified to make them specific to sexual conversations with a spouse (e.g., "While participating in a conversation with my spouse about sex, I feel very nervous"). Reliability for this scale was .89 (6-items rated on 5-point scale) in our data set (*M* = 13.34, *SD* = 5.33).

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question asked whether patterns of language use reflect different vocabularies in their sexual communication. To answer this question, the sexual terms were subjected to a hierarchical, agglomerative cluster analysis (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984) because it looks for patterns in data and can thus reveal items that group together in the data. Researchers look for commonalities within the grouped items that may reveal patterns in the data, and then label clusters in a manner that seems to describe that set of items taken as a whole. Ward's algorithm for clustering was followed because it performs best in monte carlo tests (Milligan & Cooper, 1987; Morey, Blashfield, & Skinner, 1983).

The results showed two distinct clusters, with the second cluster having 4 sub-clusters (see Figure 1). There were differences in average use reported across each cluster and sub-cluster with terms in clusters 1-5 having mean reported use of .44, .92, 1.08, 1.55, and 2.10. Labels were assigned to each cluster to convey a description of each set of sexual terms. These labels are not intended to suggest underlying causal factors. Rather, they suggest an interpretation of a common theme that links the terms.

The first major cluster consisted solely of the infrequently used clinical terms (and *shag*) and was therefore labeled *clinical terms*. The other major cluster was comprised of 4 sub-clusters. Two of these (clusters 2 and 4) were comprised exclusively of non-standard English, such as slang. Cluster 2 included terms for genitalia and oral sex: *boner*, *cock*, *give head*, *go down*, *clit*, and *eat out* and were consequently labeled *slang, oral sex related*. Two slang terms for oral sex (*oral sex*, *blow job*) appeared in other clusters and because the genitalia terms in Cluster 2 could be used in contexts aside from oral sex, it was clear that this cluster wasn't the exclusive domain of oral sex terminology. But, the presence of these terms together suggests that talk about oral sex may be relevant to why these terms clustered with each other. Cluster 4,

in contrast, included a wide range of slang for almost any sexual act. Although this cluster included one euphemism (*do it*), taken together, these were terms that Americans would find crudest among those listed (e.g., *pussy*, *screw*, and *fuck*). Thus, we labeled this set of terms as *cruder slang*.

Clusters 3 and 5 were comprised of more ordinary language. Some euphemisms and slang were mixed into these clusters (e.g., *boobs*, *make love*), but the majority of the terms were standard English that is widely used in everyday conversation and the media (e.g., *breasts, penis, vagina, oral sex*). Although the distinction between these two clusters was subtle, cluster 3 had a stronger erotic or arousal focus than cluster 5 and was consequently labeled *standard erotic*. Cluster 5, labeled *standard everyday*, included *make love* and *have sex*, but these terms describe sexual activity without talking about its physical stimulation. The other terms in cluster 5 were simply body parts, and aside from one term for genitalia (*penis*), the other three terms related to breasts (*breasts, boobs, nipples).* Cluster 3, however, was comprised mostly of terms describing sexual activities and orgasm, such as *masturbate*, *oral sex*, *climax*, and *ejaculate*. These terms paint a more vivid picture of the erotic stimulation aspect of sex.

The presence of these clusters suggests that people use different vocabularies in their sexual communication. These vocabularies show similarities and differences with the clinical-slang-euphemism trichotomy suggested in the literature. Consistent with that classification scheme, the clinical terms clearly separated themselves from the others. However, the euphemisms and slang terms did not emerge as two, separate clusters.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis posited that married people use clinical terms less often than non-clinical terms when they talk about sex. This hypothesis was supported. As shown on Table 1,

the terms that are clinically precise but lacking relational or emotional connotation were largely

not used by participants. Mean use of clinical terms was significantly lower than the mean use of

all other terms combined: .46, 1.43, $t(286) = 32.66$, $p < .001$ (power = .99). Aside from *shag*[1],

all 10 of the least-used terms in the list were clinical in nature: *anus*, *scrotum*, *foreskin*, *labia*,

anal penetration, *fellatio*, *cunnilingus*, *copulate*, and *hymen*.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked whether there were sex differences in reported use of

sexual terms. This question was answered by comparing means for men and women. Men

reported an overall greater use of sex-related terms with a mean score of 1.25 for men (scale

range 0-3) and 1.10 for women, $t(283) = 2.60$, p = .01 (power = .50). However, it would be

misleading to suggest that these results show men using sexual language more than women. This

difference was small in magnitude and largely due to a limited number of terms for which men

reported greater use. When comparing each of the 44 terms, the risk of Type I error requires a

more conservative level of significance. A Bonferroni adjustment sets the level required for a

claim of significance to .001, and only 4 terms (*tits*, *pussy*, *cock*, and *clit*) met that criterion with

men using each of those terms more than women. Even the most liberal standard of difference

(testing all terms without any adjustment) shows that only a quarter of the words account for

men's slightly higher level of reported word use. For the majority of terms, there is no

difference in reported use.

To further examine this small difference in overall language use, scores across clusters

were compared. All clusters had good reliability with alpha coefficients of: .85 (cluster 1), .85

(cluster 2), .83 (cluster 3), .91 (cluster 4) and .81 (cluster 5). For the two slang clusters (2 and 4),

men's scores were significantly higher than women's: means = 1.13, .80, $t(285) = 3.60$, $p < .001$

(cluster 2, oral sex slang) and 1.71, 1.45, $t(285) = 2.89$, $p = .004$ (cluster 4, cruder slang). The other three clusters had mean scores that were not significantly different. Mean scores for these clusters (men, women) were: .48, .41 (cluster 1, clinical), 1.31, 1.21 (cluster 3, erotic), 2.13, 2.07 (cluster 5, everyday).

Overall, these results suggest that husbands report using sex-related language slightly more than wives, but most of this difference is accounted for by a slightly greater willingness of husbands to use cruder slang than wives. For the majority of the words surveyed, there was no significant difference between the sexes in frequency of use.

Hypothesis 2 and Research Question 3

Hypothesis 2 posited that greater use of sexual terms is associated with higher satisfaction and closer relationships. Correlations between frequency of word use and the dependent variables indicated support for this hypothesis: $r = .18$, $p = .001$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r = .14$, $p = .008$ (relational satisfaction), $r = .24$, $p < .001$ (relational closeness).

However, it is illuminating to consider these results in conjunction with the results of RQ_2, which asked whether there were sex differences in this connection. Indeed, when looked at by sex, the data showed that these associations were largely accounted for by women. For men, all associations between sexual vocabulary and the dependent variables were non-significant, although closeness approached significance: $r = .09$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r = .09$ (relational satisfaction), $r = .15$, $p = .052$ (closeness). For women, the associations were much stronger: $r = .24$, $p = .002$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r = .22$, $p = .003$ (relational satisfaction), $r = .36$, $p < .001$ (closeness).

To further explore the nature of the connection of sexual language with satisfaction and closeness, we looked at the correlations by cluster (type of word, see Table 2). For men, increased use of everyday and erotic language (clusters 3 and 5) was significantly associated with greater closeness (for both clusters, $r = .23, .30$) and greater relational satisfaction (for cluster 5, $r = .23$). For women, however, correlations were significant in almost all of the clusters. Greater use of sexual language was associated with increased communication satisfaction on all but cluster 1 (rs ranged from .17 to .33), increased relational satisfaction for three of the clusters (2, 4, and 5, rs ranged from .20 to .26), and increased closeness on all clusters (rs ranged from .18 to .35).

To see if these correlations were significantly different between the sexes, the difference between independent correlations was tested. Despite the difference in size of correlation, none of the correlations for overall language use were significantly different at the .05 level, although the scores for closeness approached significance at $p = .06$. However, when looking at language clusters, the correlations of cluster 4 and closeness differed significantly for men and women at the $p = .01$ level.

Hypothesis 3

The final hypothesis posited that when sexual communication apprehension is taken into account, the relationship between language use and relational outcomes is attenuated but still significant. To test this, a partial correlation between language use and the outcome variables was conducted, controlling for sexual communication apprehension.

The results were consistent with the anticipated pattern. Partial correlations showed that reduced sexual communication apprehension was responsible for some of the connection between greater use of language and better outcomes. However, even removing that variance,

there were still significant associations between language and the other variables. Because of previous results, men and women were separated for further analysis. Partial correlations between frequency of word use and the dependent variables indicated support for this hypothesis: $r_p = .11$, $p = .04$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r_p = .09$, $p = .07$ (relational satisfaction), $r_p = .17$, $p < .003$ (relational closeness). However, as before, these differences were largely accounted for by women. For men, all partial correlations were nonsignificant : $r_p = .04$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r_p = .05$ (relational satisfaction), $r_p = .09$ (closeness). For women, though, the associations were much stronger: $r_p = .13$, $p = .05$ (sexual communication satisfaction), $r_p = .15$, $p = .03$ (relational satisfaction), $r_p = .28$, $p < .001$ (closeness).

These patterns of association were also examined by cluster (see Table 3). Because of the exploratory nature of this study, correlations with probability less than .10 were marked. For men, only the everyday and erotic clusters showed significant associations with closeness, and everyday language was significantly associated with relational satisfaction, as well. For women, however, all clusters correlated significantly with closeness, and three clusters (the everyday terms and the two slang clusters) were also associated with relational satisfaction. Both everyday terms and crudest slang clusters were significantly associated with sexual communication satisfaction. These results largely support Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

This project examined the language married people use when talking to their spouse about sex, and also investigated whether sexual language is related to relational goals of communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction and closeness. This study shed light on patterns of language use and found an association between sexual language use and communication and relational satisfaction as well as closeness. Considering the sparse attention

in the literature to married persons' talk about sex, the results suggest that sexual vocabulary use is more important to marital relationships than scholars have observed.

Nature of Sexual Language

Amount of sexual language used. The results of this study revealed a relatively low frequency of use for most sexual terms. The overall mean frequency of use was 1.16 across all words; that mean increases to 1.46 when the clinical terms were excluded. The latter figure, which falls near the midpoint of the 0-3 range of possible scores, is a more realistic approximation of language use because it is not affected by words rarely used. This mean fell between the anchors of (1) "rarely used" and (2) "sometimes used," indicating that most married individuals use this set of sexual terms only moderately. It could suggest that individuals simply use a very limited set of terms for their sexual talk, but with only 5 of the 44 words having an overall average frequency of use above 2, the numbers indicate that many married people use most of these terms infrequently. That finding may suggest that married people rely more heavily on nonverbal codes to convey sexual meaning, which supports claims that the traditional sex script is largely nonverbal (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). However, evidence shows that better verbal communication about sex is associated with greater sexual and marital satisfaction (e.g., Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). If married people are highly restricted in how they talk about sex, then they may be sacrificing an important tool in improving the quality of their marriage.

Sex differences and similarities in language use. Our data matched previous findings in showing that men reported using sexual language more frequently than women. However, this is a case where simply reporting one overarching statistic can be misleading. The difference in overall language use was small in magnitude, with a difference of only .15 on a 4-point scale.

Further, that difference was accounted for by a small number of terms. What was more interesting was that there were no differences in reported use of *fuck* and *make love*, two terms that previous studies had suggested would be used more by men for the former (Simkins & Rinck, 1982), and women for the latter (Sanders, 1978). When examined carefully, our data show that, although husbands use a few terms more than wives, both sexes report similar use of sexual language.

Connection between Sexual Talk and Relational Qualities

The results from this study showed that use of more terms about sex was associated with higher satisfaction with sexual communication, and also greater overall relational quality. Specifically, men's use of everyday sexual terms is associated with their relational satisfaction and closeness while their use of erotic terms is related to closeness. For women, use of everyday and slang terms is associated with communication satisfaction and relational satisfaction, and use of all terms is related to closeness. The correlational data from this study limit the discussion because causality cannot be determined. However, the patterns of connection found in this study warrant further attention to how married people talk about sex.

Qualitative data from one case study offers an explanation for one causal factor that may explain part of this pattern of association. In the early 1990s, a sexual harassment policy implemented at Antioch College required couples to ask consent for any sexual act he or she wished to do. After implementation, researchers found that women at Antioch reported "having better—more exciting, more varied, and more pleasurable—sex" (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 37). Female students told researchers that the new policy had forced them to "develop a language for representing their desires, both to themselves and to their sexual partners" (p. 37). These women found that talking explicitly with their partners about what specific sex acts they

wanted and expanding their vocabulary on this topic had enhanced their experience and resulted in more satisfying sexual interactions.

Whether the same factors that impacted these college students have a similar impact in ongoing marital relationships is not known. However, the present study offers strong evidence that researchers need to examine married people's sexual language use, and to do so in ways that will allow them to discern cause and effect relationships.

Goals and Quality of Messages

The goals-plans-action theory shows how people use communication to achieve goals. People must tailor messages to achieve those goals, and this process dictates what language use will be most effective. This theory suggests that messages are most effective when appropriately tailored to the speaker's goal. In some contexts, marital partners may find clear and explicit language best communicates their desires. But in other cases, people may wish to offer more ambiguous messages to test partner responses and save face if the partner does not respond positively. In some situations, "talking dirty" may enhance the pleasure of a sexual encounter, and in other cases partners may find more satisfaction in language expressing passion or intimate connection. Using a greater variety of sexual terms may offer a person a better ability to tailor messages for a variety of goals, which could be related to an association between sexual language use and satisfaction. Research that looked at sexual language in specific, sex-related messages spoken to meet people's sexual and relational goals would be a productive follow-up in further exploring the correlational data from this study.

Limitations

Two limitations in the data for this study qualify our interpretation of the results. One of these has to do with the sample used and the other with the nature of the data collected.

Convenience sample. The sample for this study was a convenience sample, so the data lack the robustness that a random sample would provide. The demographics suggest a nice mix of age and length of marriage, which are likely to be important variables influencing married people's sexual talk. But, since these participants were recruited by college students in the Midwest, they are likely middle class Midwesterners, and that means there is likely less diversity in income, race, and profession that were not evaluated here. Further research using random samples would provide helpful data to assess the impact of additional demographic variables.

Individual data. In relationship research, it is common to restrict the unit of analysis to one person in the relationship so that the data remain independent from each other. However, it would be worthwhile for future studies to draw data from married couples. With couple data, it would be possible to determine the degree of similarity in language use or whether similarities in language use within the couple were associated with relational outcomes. Having found evidence that language seems to be connected in some way with other relational qualities, the examination of couple data seems like an appropriate next step.

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Note

[1]The term "shag" was included in the list because of its heavy media exposure from the hit film *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. However, the results of this study suggest that despite its heavy airplay in the U.S. prior to our data collection, this term still remains primarily British slang in practice. We believe its placement in this list (and in the cluster analysis) is an anomaly. For that reason, we removed it from further analyses using this cluster.

Table 1

Mean frequency of term use

Rank	Term	All respondents	Men	Women	*t*-value
1	Have sex	2.41	2.46	2.37	
2	Make love	2.20	2.20	2.19	
3	Boobs	2.13	2.17	2.12	
4	Breasts	2.12	2.10	2.13	
5	Ass	2.02	2.13	1.95	
6	Nipples	1.90	2.00	1.83	
7	Penis	1.82	1.86	1.80	
8	Balls	1.71	1.84	1.61	$t(285) = 2.16, p = .03$
9	Do it	1.71	1.73	1.68	
10	Fuck	1.70	1.79	1.63	
11	Dick	1.60	1.72	1.51	
12	Hard on	1.50	1.62	1.41	
13	Tits	1.47	1.95	1.11	$t(289) = 6.87, p < .001$
14	Blow job	1.46	1.54	1.40	
15	Cum	1.46	1.65	1.34	$t(288) = 2.43, p = .02$
16	Oral sex	1.43	1.47	1.39	
17	Vagina	1.41	1.50	1.35	
18	Erection	1.38	1.47	1.32	
19	Masturbate	1.29	1.39	1.20	
20	Lips	1.29	1.38	1.20	
21	Screw	1.28	1.28	1.28	
22	Sexual intercourse	1.28	1.33	1.24	
23	Pussy	1.19	1.54	0.92	$t(287) = 4.74, p < .001$
24	Give head	1.09	1.31	0.92	$t(287) = 3.08, p = .002$
25	Climax	1.03	0.98	1.07	
26	Go down	1.00	1.14	0.92	
27	Cock	0.98	1.24	0.78	$t(288) = 3.83, p < .001$
28	Testicles	0.97	1.07	0.89	
29	Boner	0.92	1.07	0.80	$t(285) = 2.29, p = .02$
30	Ejaculate	0.90	0.98	0.84	
31	Clit	0.85	1.05	0.70	$t(287) = 3.12, p < .001$
32	Semen	0.85	0.85	0.84	
33	Eat out	0.75	0.91	0.63	$t(287) = 2.34, p = .02$
34	Anal sex	0.65	0.64	0.65	
35	Anus	0.57	0.64	0.50	

(table continues)

Rank	Term	All respondents	Men	Women	t-value
36	Scrotum	0.53	0.63	0.47	
37	Foreskin	0.41	0.40	0.41	
38	Labia	0.29	0.26	0.31	
39	Anal penetration	0.27	0.32	0.22	
40	Fellatio	0.26	0.33	0.21	
41	Cunnilingus	0.25	0.33	0.19	t (288) = 2.14, p = .03
42	Shag	0.24	0.34	0.17	t (289) = 2.57, p = .01
43	Copulate	0.23	0.22	0.23	
44	Hymen	0.22	0.20	0.23	

Note: 0 (never), 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often). Although the Bonferroni adjustment requires $p = .001$ for significance, we have included *t*-tests for any terms with significant differences at or below .05.

Table 2

Correlations of sexual term use (by term type) with satisfaction and closeness

	Comm. satis.	Relat. satis.	Closeness
Men			
Cluster 1 (clinical)	.04	-.02	.14
Cluster 2 (oral sex slang)	.07	.05	.07
Cluster 3 (erotic)	.07	.10	.23 *
Cluster 4 (crudest slang)	.04	.05	-.03
Cluster 5 (everyday)	.18	.23 *	.30 **
Women			
Cluster 1 (clinical)	.07	.01	.17 *
Cluster 2 (oral sex slang)	.25 **	.26 **	.35 **
Cluster 3 (erotic)	.18 *	.12	.27 **
Cluster 4 (crudest slang)	.17 *	.20 **	.28 **
Cluster 5 (everyday)	.33 **	.24 **	.32 **

*p < .05 **p < .01

Table 3

Partial correlations of sexual term use (by term type) with satisfaction and closeness, removing variance accounted for by sexual communication apprehension

	Comm. satis.	Relat. satis.	Closeness
Men			
Cluster 1 (clinical)	.02	-.05	.11
Cluster 2 (oral sex slang)	.04	.02	.01
Cluster 3 (erotic)	.07	.09	.23 **
Cluster 4 (crudest slang)	-.01	.01	-.08
Cluster 5 (everyday)	.09	.16 *	.23 **
Women			
Cluster 1 (clinical)	.01	.00	.15 *
Cluster 2 (oral sex slang)	.09 †	.16 *	.28 **
Cluster 3 (erotic)	.07	.09	.22 **
Cluster 4 (crudest slang)	.14 *	.16 *	.24 **
Cluster 5 (everyday)	.22 **	.17 *	.22 **

*p < .05 **p < .01
†p < .10

Figure 1

Cluster analysis of sexual term choice