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Language in Close Relationships

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Introduction

Man is by nature a social animal
(Aristotles, Politics, 1253al; cf. NE 1097b9-11, 1169b1 8).

The ability to develop and maintain close relationships is at the core of human functioning; most human behavior takes place in social context (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Relationships are characterized by interdependent patterns of thought and action (Berscheid, 1994). In other words, each partner's behavior influences the other partner's subsequent thoughts and behaviors within and across interactions. The idea that nonverbal and verbal communication define interpersonal relationships was established in the early years of communication theory (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). If we think about what constitutes our daily experiences of relationships, it is intuitive that language plays a major role: From a developmental perspective, it all starts with the mental representation of our attachment figure, developed in early childhood as a working model of relationships (Grossmann, 1999). As we gradually move into adulthood, we develop close and romantic relationships, which could not be done without language as a tool to transmit our inner thoughts and feelings to the other person and is constitutive for the establishment of psychological intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988). As a couple, our romantic partner can be an essential source of support—once again, it is difficult to imagine complex support processes without partners talking to each other.

Marital conversations are, however, not always supportive—sometimes partners fight and may hurt each other with words (Sillars, Shellen, McIntosh, & Pomegranate, 1997). Our goal in this chapter is to provide an overview of language research in close and romantic relationships and its conceptual background: the fundamental basis of mental representations of relationships, as well as of conflict and support processes in couples. In this chapter we focus on research that relied on automated, word-count-based approaches such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count

(LIWC; Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). We note that there are more, highly important and influential language-based paradigms providing rich reflections and analyses on relationship processes that are, however, beyond the scope of this chapter (see, e.g., conceptual contributions by Mehrabian, 1975, on "silent messages" of language within language; Bradac, 1983, on language as the base of relationships; or Clancy, 2016, on discourse analytical approaches).

Language and Social Relationships: The Foundations

Verbal Representations of Attachment and Close Relationships

In the early years of a human life, the infant's interactions with the primary caregiver lead to the development of an internal working model of attachment (Bowlby, 1980). Such mental relationship representations are the foundation and underlying scheme of all human relationships over the lifespan and have an impact on well-being and health (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The most common way of assessing attachment is the Adult Attachment Interview on early relationship experiences with the primary caregiver (Main, Hesse, & Goldwyn, 2008).

Traditionally, human coders rated the language used in these accounts of early experiences with the caregiver. Recent studies show that automated analyses of language use in these interviews detect the working models of attachment with high accuracy. Evidence from studies based on LIWC analyses (Borelli et al., 2013; Borelli, Sbarra, & Mehl, 2019; Borelli, Sbarra, Mehl, & David, 2011; Waters, Steele, Roisman, Haydon, & Booth-LaForce, 2016) and discourse analytical linguistic analyses (Fabbro, Crescentini, D'Antoni, & Fabbro, 2019) demonstrated that automated language use analyses allow for an identification and distinction of attachment styles as precise as human codings. Independently of who is coding, language is substrate of these attachment models in our minds. The mental representation of relationships that began to develop in childhood are to a significant extent verbal, and thus can be studied as such through how people use language.

In general, more elaborated and coherent language representations of relationships are linked to not only higher relationship quality but also more successful affect regulation, stable self-concepts, and, consequently, better mental health (Fonagy, Gergely, & Jurist, 2018). As an example, if adults are asked in the Adult Attachment Interview to talk about their relationships with their main caregiver during childhood, individuals differ with regard to the coherence with which they tell their childhood story, and how flexibly they evaluate supportive or more challenging aspects of their relationships. Some do not even manage to tell a coherent story, are emotionally overwhelmed, do not find words, or report in a defensive and distant manner. The latter examples have been associated with less functional attachment styles that are associated with deficits in emotion regulation that in turn lead to mental health problems. In human development, early affect regulation is always social coregulation by the caregiver that lays the foundations for the later self-regulation repertoire of the individual (Calkins & Hill, 2007). Therefore, mental representations of relationships shape not only the way we deal with relationships but also our own emotional responses. The related ability to put these representations of the self, own states, and relational processes into words has been called *mentalizing* and is supposed as a basic skill for the maintenance of individual and relational mental health (Fonagy et al., 2018).

Accordingly, when studies assess mental representations of close relationships, language use has been linked to different kinds of relationships and their quality. Accordingly, language use in narratives about friendship covaried with friendship quality (Tani, Smorti, & Peterson, 2015). Manipulating language use in friendship narratives, and thus their verbal mental representation, by increasing the use of first-person plural pronouns (“we”), changed the perception of closeness of these relationships (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004). In a further line of research, the language-based representation of romantic relationships proved predictive of their quality (Li & Samp, 2019; Robinson, Persich, Sjoblom-Schmidt, & Penzel, 2019) and maintenance (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). To sum up, there are reasons to believe that relationships, as well as the views of ourselves, are mentally represented in words (Fonagy et al., 2018). Therefore, language use may act as a behavioral indicator of these representations and can reveal to us relevant information about relationship quality and individual adjustment. Among the studied linguistic indicators, pronouns have been of particular interest, as their usage reflects the social unit of the mental representation and has proven to be a predictive language feature in different lines of research.

We-Ness versus Separatedness

Within research on romantic relationships, investigating the pronoun *we* as reflecting togetherness in couples has a long-term research tradition (Levenson, 1992). Accordingly, the construct *we-ness* did not originate in quantitative language research, but rather emerged in other theoretical streams such as dialogic dialectics, intersubjectivity, and self-expansion theory (for a review, see Fergus, 2015). Here, interpersonal relatedness in romantic relationships is seen as a result of co-constructing shared meaning in romantic relationships, an intersubjective process leading to the development of shared narratives that couples live and tell. This constitutes the sense of we-ness as a third entity beyond the two individuals, which has communication as substrate and requires self–other knowledge and mutual attunement. Recent conceptual frameworks from the affective sciences focus on the positive resonance that can be induced by shared positive affective moments that accumulate over time (Fredrickson, 2016). Partners’ attunement in these positive experiences can also be thought of as an upward-spiral: Partners' attunement contributes to the formation of we-ness, which in turn facilitates more occurrences of shared positive moments (Fredrickson, 2016). In general, we-ness is a resource in relationships that represents positive relationship quality and leads to improved resilience. Similarly, the self-expansion theory (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2004) states that the interdependency of a relationship is rewarding insofar as it allows one to expand the bounds of oneself through the partner's resources, views, and traits by including the other in the self. We-ness can be contrasted by the notion of *separatedness*. Here, the unit of perception is not the dyad, but the partner and the self as separated units, which in the relationship context has been interpreted as an indicator of less interdependence. In this context, pronoun use of "I" and "you" in relational contexts has been interpreted as substituting the use of "we" and indicating less overlap in the perception of the self and the other (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). For a visualization of the perspectives that have been associated with pronoun use in the relational context see Figure 3.1.

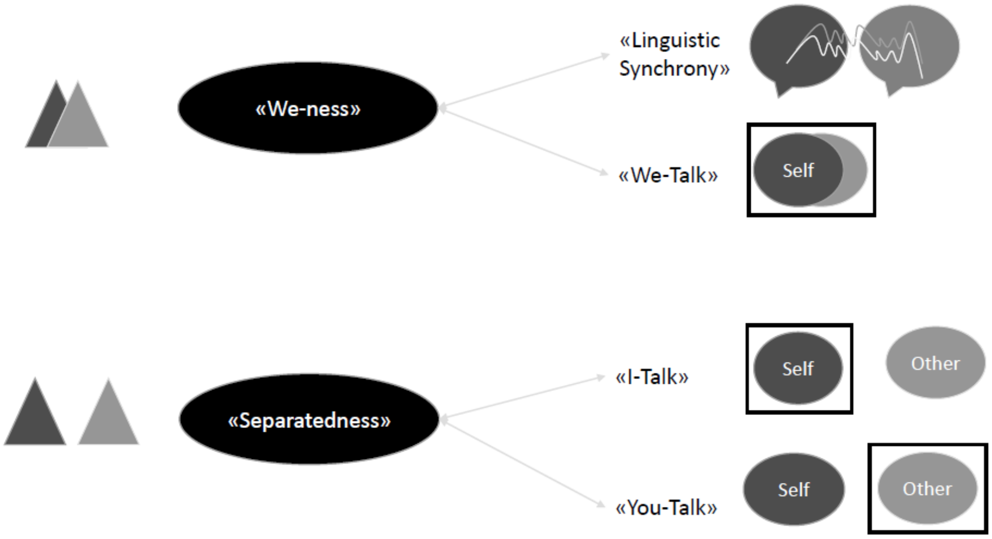

Figure 3.1 Linguistic indicators of different perspectives on dyadic relationships: we-ness versus separatedness.

The interpretation of quantifiable linguistic features is informed by these notions of we-ness–separatedness and interdependence. First, the use of the pronouns “we” and “us” is a plausible behavioral indicator of we-ness by verbally representing a shared, interdependent identity that provides resources for daily adjustment. In contrast, when the linguistic framing is referring to the partner (“you”) and the self (“I”) as separated units, this is interpreted as an opposing perspective to we-ness, often referred to as separatedness.

The second feature is *verbal mimicry* (or synchrony), that is, communication attunement leading to similar linguistic choices of communication partners. Verbal mimicry can start with synchronizing language styles (e.g., Boparai et al., 2018; Borelli et al., 2017; Borelli, Klemfuss, & Hollas, 2019; Bowen, Winczewski, & Collins, 2017; Ireland et al., 2011) or syntax accommodation in a conversation (Boghrati, Hoover, Johnson, Garten, & Dehghani, 2018). It may also build up to the semantic level, for example, by the development of an idiomatic vocabulary and the shared linguistic choices often observed in long-term couples that have a “secret code” to refer to certain content developed within shared experiences (Fergus, 2015).

We-Talk as an Indicator of We-Ness

We-talk has shown the expected associations with relationship and individual functioning. A recent meta-analysis including $N = 30$ studies (Karan, Rosenthal, & Robbins, 2019) provided evidence of small to medium effects between the proportion of first-person plural pronoun use and the studied outcome measures. More specifically, the reported partner effects (i.e., effects of the partners’ we-talk on their romantic counterparts, above and beyond partners’ own we-talk) tend to be larger than actor effects. In line with the concept of self-expansion (Aron et al., 2004), this emphasizes on the truly interdependent nature of relationship processes. Additionally, relationship outcomes tend to yield higher effect sizes than individual outcomes

(Karan et al., 2019). In the following sections, we present an overview of the most important studies about we-talk in couple research.

Language Style Matching

Given that language is a major channel of communication, the idea of language synchronization as a genuinely relational marker of dyadic attunement in relationships seems very intuitive. Indeed, conceptualizations of language synchronization have been informed by the previously introduced notions of interdependence that constitute close relationships. Correspondingly, the development relationships is associated with an array of dynamic synchronization or attunement processes that have been shown not only in language but also other areas such as physiology (Thorson, West, & Mendes, 2018; Timmons, Margolin, & Saxbe, 2015), nonverbal communication (Tschacher, Ramseyer, & Koole, 2018), or momentary negative and positive affect (Butler & Randall, 2012; Fredrickson, 2016).

Coming from a social-psychological perspective, language *style* has been defined by the use of function words (e.g., pronouns, articles) as opposed to content-related words. It is derived by counting the function words that are frequently used, as they serve specific functions in a sentence without conveying content. As an example, pronouns are promising candidates for relational processes, as they convey the perspective on the self and others (see Figure 3.1)—these perspectives can be more or less shared by an interaction partner. *Language style matching* (LSM), then, refers to the covariation of language style in dyadic communication, that is, the degree of similarity between two individuals' function word use (Ireland et al., 2011). Even though it is based on words, due to its nonsemantic focus on words that serve grammatical functions rather than the transmission of content, LSM has some similarities with other automatized approaches detecting the similarity of syntactic patterns, that is, how words are put together for meaningful utterances (Boghrati et al., 2018). Conceptually it has been related to the previously introduced relationship concepts of we-ness and the idea that interdependent patterns of thoughts and actions are constitutive for close relationships (Berscheid, 1994). It is also in line with basic assumptions in theories that focus on the interactive process of communication rather than the relationship, including communication accommodation theory (CAT; Giles, 2016) and interactive alignment accounts (Pickering & Garrod, 2004). Both state that language processing is interacting with the language of the dialogue or communication partner and tends to be aligned in successful communication. In line with this notions, verbal synchrony can be seen as psychological adaptation toward another person that occurs, depending on the social demands of a situation (Meier, Boyd et al., 2021; Müller-Frommeyer, Kauffeld, & Paxton, 2020).

The assumption that higher levels of verbal synchronization represent positive relational processes has been supported in speed-dating dyads, whose members were more likely to start dating when their short encounter had been characterized by higher levels of LSM (Ireland et al., 2011). In a similar vein, historical correspondences tended to match less, stylistically, in phases when the authors allegedly did not get along well (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). While these initial studies introduced LSM as a marker of coordination–engagement in communication, several studies covering different communication contexts and relationship types have been conducted in the meantime,[1] with the current body of evidence inviting further elaboration on LSM and its unique functions across different settings (Bayram & Ta, 2019; Liu, Xie, & Zhang, 2019).

In another line of research, child–mother interactions were investigated in preschoolers (Borelli, Klemfuss et al., 2019) and school-age children (Borelli et al., 2017). Mother–child interactions characterized by higher levels of LSM were linked to more secure attachment in school-age children. In other words, language synchronization in these dyads was associated with a better mother–child relationship quality. Furthermore, for preschool children, child–mother interactions showed higher LSM compared to interactions with strangers, thus suggesting LSM as an indicator of familiarity in interactions of small children.

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[1] A comprehensive overview of LSM studies is provided by Shaw, Taylor, Conchie, and Ellis (2019); available at *https://psyarxiv.com/yz4br*.

Beyond close relationships, verbal synchronization has been studied in many different settings, including translations (Meier, Boyd et al., 2021) and group settings (Gonzales, Hancock, & Pennebaker, 2010). Gonzales et al. conducted the first study to look at how group dynamics are captured by LSM, showing that higher group coherence corresponds to higher levels of LSM. This study opened the door for further investigation of the function of LSM in group interactions, and recent studies suggest that while LSM is positively associated with team well-being, team performance, in contrast, tends to be negatively associated with LSM (Heuer, Müller-Frommeyer, & Kauffeld, 2019). In fact, cumulative evidence suggests that at different stages of group formation, LSM is a marker of communication processes in work groups that, depending on the context, are more or less associated with group performance (for a review, see Van Swol & Kane, 2019).

As another example of studies considering contextual differences, a couple study analyzing transcripts of support and conflict interactions showed that higher LSM is associated with higher levels of critical negative behavior in conflict situations, but with partners' more positive emotion in the social support situation (Bowen et al., 2017). This can be taken to suggest that LSM might not be a marker of rapport per se, but rather of affect amplification in interpersonal situations, which would explain null-findings of LSM and other markers of interactional synchronization in some studies (Babcock, Ta, & Ickes, 2013). This seems particularly the case if global, distant, self-reported parameters are used as outcome: In a multisample study, Bierstetel et al. (2020) showed that LSM across conflict and support couple situations was only minimally or not associated with distal self-report measures of relationship commitment and satisfaction. Just like other forms of dyadic attunement (e.g., physiological synchrony: Coutinho et al., 2019; Saxbe & Repetti, 2010; Timmons, Margolin, & Saxbe, 2015), LSM might signal a reciprocity of relational processes leading to an amplification of positive outcome, for example, attraction in dating couples (Ireland et al., 2011), as well as negative outcome, such as anger in conflict escalation (Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Timmons et al., 2015), and possibly should be seen more as a dynamic indicator driven by the communication situation than one that distinguishes couples across situations. Future research should empirically test whether this is the case and might benefit from conceptual (Reed, Barnard, & Butler, 2015) and methodological (Sels et al., 2020) developments in related fields faced with similar questions.

To summarize, the synchronization, or mimicry, of function word use in social interaction, as measured by LSM, has been proven to be a marker of automatic relational processes that are shaped by interpersonal focus and interactive involvement. Further research is required to better understand situational and relationship-related contextual factors that moderate the functionality of these processes that might be linked with the generic processes linked to establishing and maintaining closeness in social relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, there is much to learn about the underlying mechanisms and contextual moderators of this synchronization. As an example, it is not clear whether the linguistic mimicking actually happens on the level of function words or syntax, which empirically overlap (Boghrati et al., 2018) Moreover, there has been a call for differentiating the methods of measurement of verbal synchronization (Müller-Frommeyer, Frommeyer, & Kauffeld, 2019). Furthermore, it has been suggested that we should go beyond function words and also investigate verbal mimicry relative to shared semantic meaning (Babcock et al., 2013; Ta, Babcock, & Ickes, 2017) and other linguistic choices with different types of interlocutors (Luo, Robbins, Martin, & Demiray, 2019).

Couple Research: Language Use in Romantic Relationships

Empirical couple research has a long tradition in psychology, communication science, and related fields (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). In adulthood, the closest relationship is with the romantic partner, who plays a major role in the social–affective regulation of daily stressors (Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, & Horn, 2013; Horn, Samson, Debrot, & Perrez, 2019; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Affective coregulation might thus be one pathway to explain why being in a romantic relationship is highly predictive of all levels of well-being and even lower mortality risk (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), particularly in the case of high relationship quality (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014; Stanton, Selcuk, Farrell, Slatcher, & Ong, 2019).

Given that language is a main channel where relational behavior is performed, marital conversations have been a subject of couple research from the beginnings of behavioral couple research (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). However, the first studies mainly relied on coding of meaningful concepts (e.g., affect) in verbal and nonverbal behavior that was conducted by trained raters (e.g., the Specific Affect Coding System, which is described below; Coan & Gottman, 2007). Nevertheless, couple language has been studied and conceptualized for quite a while. Even before the rise of large-scale computerized language analysis, pronouns were conceptualized and studied early on as indicators of relationship processes (Acitelli, 1993;

Levenson, 1992). In early reflections of relationship awareness, talking about “us” rather than “you” has also been referred to as implicit relationship talk (Acitelli, 1993). Sillars et al. (1997) provide a good overview of the early conceptual foundations in a study that investigated linguistic and pragmatic features of couples’ conversations as rated by coders. The results support the idea that personal references reflected in pronoun use are a meaningful indicator of romantic relationship functioning; traditional, satisfied, and older couples used more first-person plural pronouns (*we*), indicating increased focus on joint versus individual identity. Additionally, “I” and “you” words were associated with lower relationship satisfaction in this study, which largely shaped the idea that indicators of separatedness between partners represent less desirable relationship processes.

In its beginnings, couple research was mostly conducted by researchers with a background in couple counseling. Couples who seek counseling tend to experience and suffer from many conflicts; therefore, the classic paradigms researching couple communication started with a focus on conflict interactions. Later, positive couple processes (i.e., support and dyadic coping) yielded more and more research attention, showing that these processes may be even more central to romantic relationships than conflicts (Hilpert, Bodenmann, Nussbeck, & Bradbury, 2013; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Moreover, in the context of health psychology, an emerging research line investigated coping with physical and mental diseases from a couple perspective. These interpersonal frameworks introduced the term *we-disease*—partners’ joint perspective on the disease as “our” disease that frames the health problems of one partner as a common problem that is to be mastered jointly (Bodenmann & Randall, 2013; Kayser, Watson, & Andrade, 2007). In the following sections, we review findings that shed light on the role of pronoun use in these essential couple processes in two contexts: conflict interactions, and coping together with stress and health problems.

Couple Conflict Discussions: “We” Need to Talk . . .

Many studies about couples’ conflict interaction were originated by the pioneering research of John M. Gottman’s and his colleagues, who started with systematic observational studies of marriage in the 1970s. Out of these laboratory studies emerged an observational research paradigm, in which couples engage in videotaped conflict tasks; that is, they are asked to discuss a common area of disagreement in their relationship (Gottman, 1994). Typically, couples soon fall into their habitual interaction patterns despite being filmed (Coan & Gottman, 2007).

The most widely used example of a coding scheme for measuring positive and negative interaction behaviors is the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF; Coan & Gottman, 2007), designed to measure emotional expression in interactions focusing on the different channels of facial expression, language, voice, and context. In the recent years, an increasing number of studies has exploited the potential of studying pronoun use as a proxy for these relevant relationship processes and dynamics. We briefly review some of these studies and their main findings here.

Simmons, Gordon, and Chambless (2005) examined how pronoun use relates to relationship satisfaction, as well as the quality and success of couples’ interactions. In their study, couples engaged in a laboratory “problem-solving task,” as Gottman’s conflict paradigm was labeled in later research, and partners’ interaction behaviors were coded for their negativity and positivity, and text analysis methods were used to measure linguistic markers of relational focus (i.e., we-ness vs. separatedness). Conflict situations represent a particularly suitable context to study these relational concepts, as couples differ in their way of dealing with this situation: Some predominantly discuss an issue of disagreement as a team with a shared identity and common goals, while other tend to confront and blame each other, underlining possibly differing interests of two separate individuals. Their sample was rather representative of distressed couples and included couples in which one partner had a diagnosis of obsessive–compulsive disorder with agoraphobia. Among Simmons et al.'s main findings were that the occurrence of more pronounced we-ness (we-pronouns) in language was linked to more positive solutions in the problem-solving task, while partner-focus (you-pronouns) correlated with more negative emotional behavior. This supports the idea that we-ness is adaptive (Karan et al., 2019) and partner-focus (especially during conflict) is maladaptive, Simmons et al. (2005) further reported a marginal positive association between *self-focus* (I-pronouns) and marital satisfaction. The latter finding contradicts findings from other studies that predominantly reported negative links between self-focus during conflict and relationship functioning (Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009; Sillars et al., 1997). Indeed, the role of *I-talk* during relationship conflict has been the subject of some confusion in the field. In general, high rates of I-talk, as an indicator of self-focus, can indicate the speaker's negative emotionality (Tackman et al., 2019), defensiveness (Rentscher, Rohrbaugh, Shoham, & Mehl, 2013) or self-disclosure (e.g., Slatcher, Vazire, & Pennebaker, 2008). In the relationships context, self-disclosure plays a fundamental role in generic couple processes, such as the establishment psychological intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Rankin-Esquer, Burnett, Baucom, & Epstein, 1997). The beneficial effects of self-disclosure, however, may depend on the relationship context, which has been demonstrated by Williams-Baucom, Atkins, Sevier, Eldridge, and Christensen (2010) on the example of I-talk.

More specifically, Williams-Baucom et al. (2010) extended the discussion about separatedness versus we-ness in language by investigating two different samples—chronically distressed couples and nondistressed couples—across two conflict discussion tasks, for which either partner chose one topic of disagreement to discuss. This allowed them to shed light on whether associations between partner's pronoun use and relationship satisfaction depend on the relationship context (satisfied vs. distressed), and on the conversation role (i.e., listener vs. speaker). Indeed, their results indicated that partners showed greater partner-focus (you-pronouns), when their own topic was being discussed, while they showed greater self-focus (I-pronouns), when the spouse's topic was being discussed. Moreover, the discussion of one's own topic linked to the use of more we-pronouns. This was unexpected and emphasizes the importance of considering context when studying couples' language use. Thus, we-talk may not always reflect desirable aspects of we-ness; rather, it may sometimes be a demand in disguise, a "soft" form of demand relying on the Royal-We (Kacewicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2014; Pennebaker, 2011). "*We* should listen more to each other" can be a subtler version of saying "*You* should listen more to me."

Moreover, inn Williams-Baucom et al.'s (2010) study, distressed couples expressed less we-ness and greater separatedness during conflict than did nondistressed couples. Interestingly, self-focus (I-pronouns) was positively associated with relationship satisfaction in the distressed couples, but the opposite was the case for the nondistressed couples, thus replicating earlier findings in distressed (Simmons et al., 2005) and nondistressed couples (Sillars et al., 1997). This may be taken to suggest that self-disclosure, as indicated by more I-statements, may have different functions for different relationship contexts. Moreover, it may be seen as an encouragement for clinical recommendations given to distressed couples in relationship interventions, namely, to use I-statements rather than you-statements during conflict (e.g., Kessler & Bodenmann, 2014). This clinical expertise has been supported by a recent vignette study (Rogers, Howieson, & Neame, 2018). In hypothetical scenarios, participants were provided with different opening statements of a conflict discussion. These statements showed linguistic variations, including different rates of I- and you-focus, and participants rated the likelihood that the counterpart would react with defensiveness to the statement. In this study, statements that combined self-focus with other-focus, and therefore communicated the own as well as the partner's perspective were identified as the best strategy to start a conflict discussion. Future research should specifically test this to ultimately inform the development of possible communication-based couple interventions.

The Seider et al. (2009) study included middle-aged and older couples, which revealed interesting age differences: Older couples expressed more we-ness than did younger couples, but no age differences were apparent for separatedness. As older couples have often spent the majority of their lives together, with their collective experiences resulting in an enhanced shared identity, higher levels of we-ness have also been found in other studies of lifespan samples (Neysari et al., 2016; Sillars et al., 1997). Moreover, the link between separatedness and marital dissatisfaction was most pronounced for older couples (Seider et al., 2009). The latter finding seems especially relevant in light of the increased focus on the romantic relationship partner (Verstaen, Haase, Lwi, & Levenson, 2020) and the narrowing of the social network (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; English & Carstensen, 2014) that is typically associated with older age; the risks associated with a dysfunctional romantic relationship may thus be exacerbated in older adulthood (Charles, 2010).

An extension to the traditional laboratory conflict task was used by Biesen, Schooler, and Smith (2016), who focused on partners' *perceptions* of the interaction quality rather than objectively rated interaction quality. In their study, increased use of me-pronouns was negatively linked to one’s own perceived interaction quality; that is, partners who use more me-pronouns perceived the interaction as more negative. Moreover, increased you-focus was related to more negatively perceived interaction quality by both partners. Once more, this emphasizes the detrimental effects of separatedness, showing that a defensive me-focus might be most harmful for the partner being defensive. Furthermore, the study showed that pronoun use was most strongly connected to perceived interaction quality for partners with lower levels of worry. This adds to the literature in emphasizing that levels of distress meaningfully alter basic relationship processes (e.g., Williams-Baucom et al., 2010), and that individual tendencies such as worrying or depressive biases matter when considering pronoun use as objective markers of relationship quality.

In addition to partners’ we-ness and separatedness, their language may reveal deeper insights their relationship, such as how engaged they are in the conversation, which may in turn have important implications for how they solve the problem together. Graham et al. (2009) tapped into this domain and examined couples’ cognitive engagement in conflict discussions and how this links to inflammatory dysregulation, a highly clinically relevant indicator of immune health. Although conflict discussions have the potential to increase levels of stress, at the same time they represent a great opportunity for partners to successfully regulate emotions and solve problems together in a relationship. In this study, words referring to *cognitive processes,* that is, any words referring to thinking processes and reasoning (e.g., “to realize,” “because,” “hence”; categories represented in the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count [LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015]) were seen as verbal indicators of cognitive engagement and adaptive conflict discussion. As hypothesized by the authors, participants’ higher cognitive engagement in the conflict task (but not in the more neutral discussion tasks) was linked to attenuated inflammatory responses. This suggest that couples who show high cognitive engagement during conflict are likely more actively involved in the discussion, trying to make meaning and truly understand the areas of disagreement in their relationship. This may be beneficial for not only problem resolution but also partners' health and well-being in the long term.

In summary, we may say that those couples who are able to maintain we-ness (as reflected in higher rates of we-talk) even in such distressing situations as a relationship conflict fight "better," and this translates into their higher interaction quality and relationship functioning, as perceived by themselves, their partners, and coders in the lab. The benefits of we-talk are a well-replicated observation (Karan et al., 2019). Conversely, partner focus, as indicated by *you-talk,* has consistently been associated with worse outcomes. This is in line with the assumption that you-talk reflects blaming, at least in conflict situations. In contrast, higher self-focus as reflected in I-talk showed heterogeneous effects. In distressed couples, it was associated with positive outcomes, whereas the reverse relationship was observed in satisfied couples. Possibly, an increased self-focus leads to sharing of personal content in distressed couples, which is more functional than blaming the partner and therefore relates to positive outcomes. In contrast, in satisfied couples, self-focus might indicate defensivesness, or the replacement of we-ness with separatedness, which may perhaps explain the unexpectedly observed negative associations. Further research is needed for a better understanding of pronoun use and its differential effects across communication context, individual biases, and regulatory resources. Furthermore, the situational adaptiveness of the dynamics between self-focus and autonomy as opposed to we-ness and identity co-constructions requires further elaboration. So far, the majority of studies have focused on between-couple differences, making it impossible to really differentiate between contextual aspects.

Couples Coping with Stress and Disease: “We” Are in This Together . . .

Although the way couples deal with conflicts has traditionally received much scientific attention, it is by far not the only context of couples’ interaction. In fact, close relationship partners may be a crucial resource for coping with stress and handling emotions in general (Coan & Sbarra, 2015). Although humans have individual skills to regulate their emotions, in reality, they often rely on external help and social resources. A vast portion of emotion regulation happens during social interaction and is thus interpersonal in nature (Horn, Samson, et al., 2019; Rimé, 2007). *Social sharing,* that is, talking about one`s thoughts and feelings with close others, may help to alleviate feelings of stress, and gain a new, differentiated understanding of the situation (Horn, Boettcher, et al., 2019; Rimé, 2007). In addition, stress that comes from outside the relationship (e.g., workplace stress) may have a profound impact on the relationship, and the essential ability to deal with stress together as a couple has been coined as *dyadic coping* (Bodenmann, 1997) or *communal coping* (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). These concepts share a systemic view on overcoming stressful experiences as opposed to a “lone man against the elements” view. In other words, human beings tend not only to cope with stressful situations on an individual level but also to rely on their close relationships as resources (Rimé, 2007). Dyadic or communal coping opens the door for resilience that stems from we-ness as shared resources beyond the individual, as we outlined earlier in this chapter. More specifically, when one partner has a disease, the co-construction of this situation as a shared yet manageable challenge has been referred to as *we-disease* in the context of physical (Kayser et al., 2007) and mental health (Bodenmann & Randall, 2013). In other words, if one partner suffers from a disease and the other partner feels a strong sense of togetherness, this communal perspective on the disease may foster more adaptive outcomes on the psychological and relationship level through helpful partner support. This perspective provides the conceptual background for a research line on couples coping with physical and mental health problems. Coping with health problems may be framed as one of many examples of chronic stressors. It is special insofar as the roles in the dyad are fixed into patient and supporting partner. In contrast, in other dyadic coping as a response to daily stressors in the couple, the roles of support provider and recipient are more flexible. In the following sections, we review relevant studies from this field, starting with studies that focus on the basic processes of dyadic coping. After that, we present studies that investigate linguistic markers of communal coping specifically within the context of health problems.

Couples Coping Together with General Stress

Stress situations are defined by the challenge of resources available in the individual and the dyad (Bodenmann, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In adulthood, workplace stress is a major source of stress that is external to the couple but has a propensity to spill over into the family domain. Lin, Chen, and Li (2016) interviewed dual-earner couples about their coping with work–family stress to investigate how communal coping links to work and relationship satisfaction. As we outlined earlier in this chapter, we-talk may have two distinct meanings: a warm “we” that reflects sense of togetherness and communal orientation, and a cold “we” that is used to express demands (Kacewicz et al., 2014; Pennebaker, 2011). Based on common stereotypes and gender role differences, where women are expected to be emotionally expressive and men are expected to be powerful and competent (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), Lin et al. (2016) hypothesized that we-talk by men and women may have distinct meanings. Consequently, the link between we-talk and stress should differ depending on gender. While rates of we-talk did not differ between men and women in this study, Lin et al.'s findings support the assumption that the psychological meaning of we-talk depends on speaker's gender role. Wives' we-talk was associated with husband's increased work and relationship satisfaction, whereas husbands' we-talk was associated with wives' d*ecreased* work satisfaction. This suggests that men's we-talk might be more likely to indicate "domineering" or status behavior (Kacewicz et al., 2014) rather than communal coping, although it remains unclear how these findings generalize across different family models (e.g., traditional vs. modern gender roles) and cultural settings. Although further research will be required to back up these findings, this study demonstrated some potential boundaries of we-talk as an indicator of a warm and supportive relational focus, and encourages future research to take context more into account. Especially for language-based research on mixed-gender couples, gender or social roles expectations might be an important contextual aspect that has been overlooked so far.

In a similar study in a dyadic coping context, Lau, Randall, Duran, and Tao (2019) examined how partners' language use linked to stress communication and perceived interaction quality in a laboratory-based discussion of relationship–external stress. This study showed that stress disclosure in dyadic coping goes along with an enhanced focus on the distressed partner. For instance, the support-providing partner used less I-talk and more you-talk, therefore expressing greater partner-focus. Conversely, the disclosing partner expressed greater self-focus (I-pronouns); and lower couple-focus (we-pronouns), and partner-focus (you-pronouns). Both partners thus showed aspects of what has been called separatedness, and this illuminates that the adaptiveness of separatedness may depend on the interaction context. Directing the focus toward the distressed partner may acknowledge the partner in distress and be adaptive when coping together with relationship–external stress.

In general, it can be seen as a progress that this line of research opened the door for the investigation of linguistic markers in shared problem-solving situations that are not characterized by conflict. It seems likely (and very intuitive) that situational aspects play a role in whether couple, self-, or other foci are adaptive perspectives in dyadic interaction. Thus, there is a need for research on the linguistic markers of these foci that takes into account different situational demands and allows a more nuanced view of the adaptiveness of different perspectives on the self, the other, and the dyad, as reflected by pronoun use. In a recent study in our own lab (Meier, Milek et al., 2021), we aimed to contribute to this research gap and systematically investigate couples' pronoun use across varying interaction contexts in the laboratory, namely, conflict versus dyadic coping interactions. The results show both context-dependence and context-invariance of you-talk: A high rate of you-talk overall in the couple (i.e., couple mean), was related to lower situational relationship functioning both in the conflict and in the dyadic coping tasks. However, you-talk asymmetry (i.e., if one partner showed greater you-talk than the other) had opposing associations across interaction contexts. While asymmetric you-talk was linked to *lower* relationship functioning during conflict, it actually was associated with *higher* relationship functioning during dyadic coping (while controlling for you-talk level). This suggests potential unique benefits of an enhanced focus on the distressed partner during dyadic coping.

Couples Coping with Health Problems

Health problems are an example of relationship–external stress that may profoundly impact the relationship and require substantive coping efforts. The situational demands in situations in which one partner suffers from illness are multifaceted: Besides the need for psychological adjustment to the situation, instrumental coping is needed for proper disease management by not only the patient but also the romantic partner. Therefore, several studies haven taken a systemic or interpersonal view to study adjustment to diseases through couples' language in their interaction, which we present below.

In a study of couples coping with heart failure, Rohrbaugh, Mehl, Shoham, Reilly, and Ewy (2008) examined how a communal coping orientation (i.e., seeing the disease as "our" problem rather than "mine" or "yours"), as marked by partners' we-talk links to patients' general health and changes in heart failure symptoms over time. For this purpose, partners were asked to discuss how they cope with the patient's disease in a home interview. We-talk by the spouse, but not by the patient, predicted positive changes in the patient's heart failure symptoms and general health over the subsequent 6 months. Further analyses revealed that the spouse's active version of we-talk ("we" rather than "us"/"our"), as well as his or her higher "we":"I" ratios (the spouse's greater we-talk relative to his or her I-talk) was most predictive of the patient's positive health changes. This suggests that the spouse's adaptive shift away from him- or herself toward a dyad-as-a-unit (or communal coping) perspective during the coping process is most beneficial and may even foster adaptive outcomes on the physical level. Most importantly, the spouse's communal coping, indicated by his or her pronoun use, was a stronger predictor of positive health outcomes than self-reported communal coping in this study. This emphasizes the added benefit of studying dyadic coping processes through language and is in line with recent calls for the use of multimethod approaches (e.g., self-reports, observational coding, language use) to study dyadic coping (Bodenmann, Falconier, & Randall, 2019) .

Several other studies examined cancer diseases and how dyadic coping processes reflected in language helps patients adjusting to these adverse conditions. For example, Badr et al. (2016) investigated couples' coping with head and neck cancer. Their results extended previous findings on the benefits of communal coping (e.g., Rohrbaugh et al., 2008) by showing its positive short-term and long-term effects. Patients’ and partners’ we-talk was positively linked to their reported mood following the discussion. Moreover, partner’s couple-focus (we-talk) during a cancer-related discussion was linked to lower levels of distress at the 4-month follow-up. This suggests that while both partners’ we-talk is important, the support-providing partner’s we-talk, as indicative of communal coping, is especially rewarding in the long term, a finding that has been backed up by other studies (Karan, Wright, & Robbins, 2017; Karan et al., 2019; Robbins, Mehl, Smith, & Weihs, 2012; Rohrbaugh et al., 2008). In addition, partner-focus toward the patient during the discussion (as indicated by partner’s increased you-talk and decreased I-talk) was positively associated with relationship satisfaction. This finding adds to the discussion about the context dependency of you-talk (Karan et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2019; Meier, Milek et al., 2021), and corroborates the idea that you-talk may not be exclusively thought of as an indicator of maladaptive separatedness, but may reflect functional partner-focus when providing support the partner in need.

In addition, Badr et al.’s (2016) study contributed to the understanding of language markers of dyadic coping with a thematic analysis of emotion word and pronoun use. Couples used I-talk and you-talk to convey separatedness (i.e., to talk about individual responsibilities), and they used we-talk to express shared concerns, the need for shared action, and common approaches to solve problems associated with the patient’s cancer—topics that are typical for a communal coping perspective. Perhaps, the silver bullet to successful dyadic coping is to find a good balance between separatedness and we-ness in the couple across different situations of need and resources (Willi, 1985).

Often however, the challenges surrounding severe illness, such as a cancer diagnosis, affect not only the couple but also entire families. Robbins et al. (2012) investigated how families cope with breast cancer, and their specific interest was to examine how emotional expression and relational focus reflect healthy family adjustment. Families in which one member had been diagnosed with breast cancer in the last year engaged in a 15-minute family discussion about their coping with the breast cancer diagnosis and changes they would like to make in their family. Partners' greater we-talk during the discussion related to patients' better adjustment, whereas patients' and partner's you-talk was indicative of poorer adjustment, including higher levels of patients' depression and family conflict. These findings further add evidence to the benefits of communal coping orientations and we-ness in dyadic coping contexts. Their being further in line with earlier findings of the potential detrimental effects of separatedness, however, contradicts other dyadic coping studies that report benefits associated with partner-focus toward a distressed partner (Badr et al., 2016; Karan et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2019; Meier, Milek et al., 2021). Future research on partner-focus and dyadic coping that takes a more fine-grained approach to study contextual aspects, that is, not only interaction context but also the interplay with the relationship context (e.g., relationship distress, relationship duration) and specific type of distress (e.g., severity of the stressor, short-term vs. long-term distress) will be especially valuable to advance the discussion. For example, it may be the case that different dyadic coping dynamics are at play when it comes to severe and chronic distress (e.g., cancer) as opposed to more mundane forms of distress (e.g., workplace stress). It must also be noted that many forms of sustained distress likely go along with relationship conflict to some degree, which may explain heterogeneity in the findings about you-talk in dyadic coping.

Robbins et al. (2012) further elaborated on the literature by studying the use of emotion-related words as operationalized by LIWC categories. Partners' use of positive emotion words was indicative of better family adjustment and cohesion, whereas patients' use of negative emotion words, as well as daughters' and sons' expressions of anger, were linked to poorer family adjustment. For specific types of emotions, differential effects for different family members were observed: Daughters' and sons' expression of anxiety (e.g., the word "scared") was linked to better adjustment, whereas partners' expression of anxiety were linked to the patient's higher depression scores and higher patient depression. These findings encourage the inclusion of linguistic markers of emotional expression when investigating family adjustment to cancer, and the consideration of the specific role of family members.

In summary, these studies uniformly suggest that for couples coping with cancer, communal coping mechanisms with beneficial short- and long-term effects manifest in couples' greater couple-focus during their coping discussions, particularly couple-focus by the spouse (Badr et al., 2016; Robbins et al., 2012; Rohrbaugh et al., 2008). Particularly, the spouse's we-talk seems to be important. While the spouse's partner-focus may be an adaptive component of communal coping as well (Badr et al., 2016), inconsistent findings have been reported (Robbins et al., 2012), and future research is needed to further capture the meaning of partner-focus in dyadic coping. One limitation that the studies by Rohrbaugh et al. (2008), Badr et al. (2016), and Robbins et al. (2012) have in common is that all recorded couples' coping conversations in laboratory situations. Although the claim of such traditional laboratory discussion paradigms is to be as naturalistic as possible, not so much is known yet about their generalizability to real life contexts, and how couples' coping efforts manifest in their everyday life conversations.

Reblin, Sutton, Vadaparampil, Heyman, and Ellington (2019) went one step further and tapped into everyday life conversations of couples coping with advanced cancer. More specifically, they recorded couples' conversations in their naturalistic environment for 1 day.

Interestingly, the results revealed that only a fraction of these couples' everyday-life conversations was about cancer, or their relationship. In the recordings, which on average were almost 10 hours long, only a bit more than 1 minute was spent talking about cancer, and more than half of the couples did not talk about their relationship at all. Rather, the majority of their communication could be best categorized as small talk, or talking about logistical issues (e.g., household chores). Participants self-reported that they were "somewhat aware" of the recording equipment during the study, but that it did not have much of an impact on their behavior. This is strongly in line with Robbins, López, Weihs, and Mehl (2014), who conducted the first naturalistic observation study of dyadic coping using Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR) methodology (Mehl, 2017) and observed that 95% of daily conversations of couples coping with cancer were about non-cancer-related topics. Moreover, the few conversations that were about cancer had more an informational rather than an emotional or supportive character. Studies like these can be seen as feasibility studies observing couples' communication in real life, and while their findings are promising, they raise some important questions about the utility of traditionally used laboratory paradigms, and on how to complement them with more naturalistic observational approaches.

The prospect of studying how couples cope with cancer in their everyday lives has further been demonstrated by Karan et al. (2017). Couples coping with breast cancer were recorded with the EAR over one weekend (recording 50-second sound snippets every 9 minutes during nonsleep times) and provided self-reports about their dyadic adjustment. Analyses of non-cancer-related conversations revealed that partners' positive emotion word use was indicative of better dyadic adjustment, but—unexpectedly—such a connection was not found for patients' positive emotion word use. Together with findings from Badr et al. (2016) and Robbins et al. (2012), this hints toward potential contextual differences in the effects of emotional self-disclosure. In couples' daily lives, attending to the partner's positivity may possibly have more positive outcomes for patients than actively engaging in self-disclosure themselves. This is in line with relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), which postulates that mundane exchanges with the partner in daily life are crucial for adjustment, even more than deep problem solving or support conversations; the latter might not even happen as often in daily life as laboratory studies suggest. This idea has been backed up by other studies examining disclosure in couples coping with disease (Horn, Boettcher, et al., 2019). Further research in the context of typical, real-life conversations are required to better understand the role of emotional disclosure in dyadic coping. Partners' use of negative emotion words, and patients' use of words that specifically refer to anger, were negatively linked to dyadic adjustment in the Karan et al. (2017) study. Together with previous findings from Robbins et al. (2012), this illustrates the particular benefits and risks associated with partner's positivity and anger expression when coping with cancer. Moreover, partner-focus rather than patient-focus (partners' I-talk, and patients' you-talk) was positively linked with dyadic adjustment. This contrasts findings by Badr et al. (2016), who reported beneficial effects for patient-focus, but possibly stems from the fact that two different contexts were examined (real-life noncancer conversations vs. laboratory cancer discussion). The Karan et al. (2017) findings provide initial evidence suggesting that a focus on the supporting partner rather than the patient may be an important compensatory pathway to adaptive dyadic coping with a serious disease. Previous studies demonstrated the importance of balance or equity in romantic relationships (Meier et al., 2020; Willi, 1985), and serious challenges, such as a one partner's cancer diagnosis or life transitions provoking a threat to this balance (Meier et al., 2020; F. Meier, Cairo Notari, Bodenmann, Revenson, & Favez, 2019; Wilson, Barrineau, Butner, & Berg, 2014). An enhanced partner-focus (rather than patient-focus) in couples' everyday language might perhaps reflect attempts to restore an imbalance caused by the patient's disease. Possibly, a flexible situation-adjusted change of self-, other-, and couple-focus is the most functional, balanced way, as it corresponds to the needs of both partners. Most importantly, however, both studies provide meaningful insights into how dyadic adjustment is reflected in mundane interaction situations, even when couples are not talking about cancer.

In a similar study, Robbins, Wright, María López, and Weihs (2019) examined the prospect of interpersonal positive reframing in everyday lives of couples coping with breast cancer. Positive reframing referred to "construing a stressful transaction in positive terms" (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989, p. 269) and was operationalized through the verbal markers of positive and negative emotion words, as well as words referring to cognitive processes (e.g., "think," "realize," "because"). This time, both cancer and non-cancer-related discussions between the partners were considered for analyses. The results generally demonstrated that words indicative of positive reframing link to decreased levels of stress in couples coping with breast cancer. Moreover, the use of words referring to positive emotions and cognitive processes by both partners was linked to each partner's own self-reported positive reframing. In addition, partners' language markers of positive reframing linked to patients' reports of positive reframing, once again emphasizing the truly dyadic nature of coping processes. Altogether, this study extends previous findings on between-partner positive emotion word use and dyadic adjustment to cancer (Karan et al., 2017; Robbins et al., 2012) by suggesting interpersonal positive reframing as a mechanism.

Couples Coping with Smoking and Alcohol Abuse

Beside physical diseases, mental disorders are another area in which dyadic context and support provided by close relationship partners is essential. Taking the example of addiction, the support received from the partner may be a blessing and a curse at the same time. Partners are often willing to help but are overwhelmed with the situation and, needless to say, such situations present huge challenges to close relationships. Many addiction therapy programs and interventions have explicitly been designed to involve close relationship partners; often, these programs aim at promoting adaptive ways of communal coping. Several studies have examined partners' language during therapy sessions as a window to the couple processes that foster therapy success.

For example, Rohrbaugh, Shoham, Skoyen, Jensen, and Mehl (2012) focused on couples who participated in a couple-focused smoking cessation program. More specifically, they investigated how we-talk as an implicit marker of communal coping before and during therapy predicts treatment outcomes. Their sample comprised couples in which one partner smoked despite having symptoms of lung or heart disease. In support of their assumptions, pretreatment we-talk by the patient's spouse predicted the patient's successful smoking cessation in the next 12 months. As has been documented by other studies (Badr et al., 2016; Robbins et al., 2012; Rohrbaugh et al., 2008) this asymmetric finding again highlights the importance of partners' (more so than patients) communal perspective when they cope with physical and mental health problems. In general, this finding sheds light on how couples with high levels of we-ness and communal coping before therapy may be in a privileged position for positive therapy outcomes. Additionally, however, *both* partners' *change* in we-talk over the course of therapy sessions in this smoking cessation study (while controlling for baseline we-talk levels) predicted therapy success. One thing that must be kept in mind when interpreting these results is that a great portion of the sample was dual-smoker couples. A communal perspective or "seeing smoking as our problem" may thus have been facilitated for them, compared to couples with only one smoking partner. Nonetheless, the results add further to the prospect of monitoring couples' we-talk during therapy, highlighting not only the prognostic value of pretreatment we-talk levels but also how change in we-talk over time may reflect adaptive changes and support in the couple. Upon further validation, results like these could inform the development of language-based feedback systems to aid couples through the therapy process in the foreseeable future.

In a similar vein, Hallgren and McCrady (2016) investigated communal coping in a couple-based treatment for alcohol use disorders. Both partners' and patients' greater we-talk during both therapy sessions were linked to patients' improved within-treatment abstinence (more percentages of days abstinent during treatment). In addition, partners' we-talk in both sessions was linked to long-term treatment success, namely, patients' abstinence at the 6-month follow-up. Results on separatedness were less consistent, but in general, separatedness is rather negatively linked to treatment successes. For example, patients' lower levels of you-talk during therapy sessions predicted improved abstinence during the therapy period, likely suggesting improved outcomes the less patients engaged in blaming during therapy. Patients' and partners' I-talk was negatively linked to treatment success, hinting at the ways in which enhanced, self-immersed negative emotionality (Tackman et al., 2019) may be dysfunctional in dyadic coping with addiction. However, *changes* of pronoun use over the course of therapy were not linked to alcohol abstinence in this study, which contrasts findings from Rohrbaugh et al. (2012) and suggests that different dynamics might be at play when jointly coping with smoking versus alcohol abuse. Furthermore, couples' pronoun use during therapy sessions was mostly unrelated to relationship distress in Hallgren and McCrady's (2016) study, thus suggesting that we-talk reflects constructs that go beyond mere general relationship satisfaction, and more closely taps into dyadic coping processes.

Rentscher, Soriano, Rohrbaugh, Shoham, and Mehl (2017) replicated the findings of Hallgren and McCrady (2016). In a sample of couples in which one partner abused alcohol and participated in a couple-focused therapy program, partners' we-talk during the intervention predicted patients' successful treatment outcomes, whereas both patients' and partners' I-talk predicted unsuccessful treatment outcomes. They further extended previous findings by showing that partners' use of active I-talk ("I": "I feel bad"), and patients' use of passive I-talk ("me": "It makes me feel bad") were associated with unsuccessful treatment. This adds to previous suggestions of the negative function of passive I-talk (Rentscher et al., 2013; Simmons et al., 2005), which may mark defensive or victimizing attitudes and lead to unsuccessful therapy outcomes. Similarly, the support-provider's active I-talk may mark an individualistic rather than communal coping perspective that hinders work on the problem together as a team, and may in turn negatively impact the patient's health.

In an earlier study, Rentscher et al. (2013) investigated a more diverse sample of couples who were coping with different health issues (heart failure, alcohol abuse, or smoking despite the presence of heart and lung deficiencies) and discussed a health-related disagreement. The aim was to investigate *demand–withdraw behavior* (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In this asymmetric couple pattern, a "classic" in couple research, the demander exerts pressure on the partner by nagging and criticizing, provoking the partner to withdraw and to engage in defensive and passive behavior, such as stonewalling—a vicious circle. As a novelty, they focused on dyadic patterns of we-talk rather than mere individual levels of we-ness. More specifically, they looked at asymmetric we/I-ratios (i.e., if one partner shows high levels of we-talk and the other partner high levels of I-talk). Their findings confirmed their expectation that partner's asymmetric we/I-ratios reflect maladaptive marital interaction, namely, demand–withdraw behavior. On the one hand, partners with higher levels of couple-focus (we-talk) tended to take on the role of the demander in discussing the health-related issue with the patient ("Please stop filling our lungs with smoke"). Patients who showed relatively higher I-focus, on the other hand, tended to withdraw from the conversation ("It's my body and I'll smoke if I want to"; both examples are from Rentscher et al., 2013, p. 692). Similar associations were found for asymmetries in partner-focus (i.e., when one partner showed greater you-focus than the other, which likely reflects finger-pointing behavior in relationship conflict (Pennebaker, 2011). Along with findings from Lin et al. (2016), discussed earlier in this chapter, this illuminates a further boundary condition of the adaptiveness of we-talk, namely, when it represents a dynamic that goes along with the other partner's self-focus and withdrawal. The innovative strength of the Rentscher et al. (2013) study is its consideration of the dyadic nature of couple interaction and methodological implementation of taking the dyad as a unit, as opposed to common procedures in dyadic data analysis, in which the focus is mostly on individual predictors and outcomes while partialing out partners' interdependencies (actor–partner interdependence model [APIM]; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Focusing on genuinely dyadic parameters (e.g., dyadic level, dyadic contrast or synchrony) rather than individual levels is a promising direction for future research (Iida, Seidman, & Shrout, 2017)

Altogether, the current state of research supports the idea that pronouns serve as behavioral markers of health and treatment outcomes and that we-talk, as a marker of communal orientation in coping overall, links to adaptive processes. Although beneficial effects of both partners' we-talk have been observed (e.g., Rohrbaugh et al., 2012), the overall picture is that we-talk by the support-providing partner rather than the patient has prognostic significance for patients’ treatment success, and there needs to be balance in the dyadic pattern of we-ness (Rentscher et al., 2013). On the other hand, I-talk and you-talk reflect more individualistic perspectives on coping that seem to be dysfunctional when couples are coping with health problems.

General Conclusions and Outlook

Our aim in this chapter has been to elaborate on central concepts in close relationships and how they may be observed in language use. The work described here was built on a conceptual framework, in which pronoun use in interactions in close relationships indicates where the focus of the conversation lies: on the self, the other, or the relationship as a unit (see Figure 3.1). Our goal has been to give a comprehensive overview of relevant concepts and empirical findings in the field. The empirical paradigms commonly used to study language use and relationships mostly rely on transcripts of couple interactions or interviews in the lab, with some innovative exceptions such as speed dating (Ireland et al., 2011). Only recently has audio sensing, as realized in the EAR method (Mehl, 2017), allowed for the study of couples’ conversations as they naturally unfold in daily life.

Across all studies, the use of we-talk in couples’ conversations and interviews about couple-related processes has shown consistent associations with positive outcomes (Karan et al., 2019). This marker of shared identity and we-ness seems to be of particular importance when one partner has limited resources due to physical or mental health problems. In other words, maintaining we-ness in couples for better, or for worse, in good and bad days, is a resource strongly linked to positive outcomes in not only the relationship domain but also other, more individual domains such as health and well-being. In contrast, self- and partner-focus, as reflected in I- and you-talk, provide a less coherent picture. In highly distressed couples, a self-focus, as manifested in the disclosure of personally relevant content, seems more functional than a blaming focus on the partner. However, in some studies, particularly in those with couples who show high relationship satisfaction, I-talk possibly has competed with we-ness in a dysfunctional way and has therefore related to less favorable outcomes. Moreover, the framing of you-talk as a marker of blaming in conflict may explain its consistent negative associations in conflict interactions. However, when the context is not primarily characterized by conflict, such as couples' conversations about their coping with disease, a certain level of partner-focus might prevent the couple from overseeing individual needs (e.g., a caregiving or distressed partner) and reflect more favorable couple processes in these contexts. It is important to note, however, that all studies were conducted in cultural contexts with an individualistic focus. Whether the observed interplays between communal and individual focus generalize on collectivistic cultures remains to be explored.

Furthermore, the reflection of a more subtle form of we-ness, namely, automatic dyadic attunement processes have been studied through LSM and provide promising insights as well. LSM may reflect processes related to the establishment and maintenance of psychological intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988), a generic process constitutive of all close relationships. With their focus on the alignment of function words, LSM studies do not take semantic co-construction and the resulting shared idiomatic vocabularies into account, but rather take into account automatic processes at the core of social connection. Further research combining this basic process with more differentiated ways to assess verbal mimicry (e.g., by taking semantic information into account) seem promising, providing novel insights in the establishment and maintenance of close relationships.

Relationships and their affective correlates are not static phenomena. Even though these first studies are important contributions for the understanding of the role of language in close relationships, a more dynamic view on these processes is desirable for future research. Current progress in methodological solutions for this kind of analyses will open the door for more sophisticated elaborations on dynamic aspects. On top of the inclusion of a more process-oriented, dynamic view, this has the further potential to provide much-needed answers on the context-dependent functionality of linguistic reflections of self-, other-, or relational focus. Systemic therapy suggests corresponding needs satisfaction as a dance, balancing out individual and communal needs, or, in other words, a focus on the self, the other, and the dyad. If this is successful, a healthy codevelopment of both individuals in a close relationship may occur (Willi, 1985). Moreover, current directions in related areas could inform future research in this field, namely, recent contributions in (individual-focused) coping and emotion regulation research. After reducing the picture to checklists of adaptive or maladaptive strategies, the field is now moving toward a dynamic view; it is proposed that a broad repertoire of strategies allowing flexible adjustment to the situational demands is most functional (Aldao, Sheppes, & Gross, 2015; Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014). In order to be able to tap into strategy–situation matches, flexibility, and broadness of the regulatory repertoire also in the domain of couple conversations, intensive longitudinal research is needed. New technology allows for the ambulatory assessment of conversations in daily life across different situations in more and more sophisticated ways, opening up intriguing avenues for future research (Timmons et al., 2017). This is of particular importance, especially in light of the opinions questioning the ecological validity of the kind of situations that were commonly studied in the lab conflict, support, or dyadic coping, and disclosure processes might in real-life not play the dominant role that typical lab paradigms suggest (Robbins et al., 2014). For more generalizable findings, the study of a broader range of interactive situations is required. Furthermore, we need information about the communication context within and around the individuals talking to each other. This in turn will allow us to study the fit of situational demands and the different social units of regulation reflected in linguistic markers. In light of the language-based interventions that are beginning to be considered in the field (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013; Kross & Ayduk, 2011), this seems to be highly relevant information to address the undesirable potential risk of implementing interventions with undifferentiated suggestions.

Considering our social nature, research on relationships is research on well-being and health (House, 2001). Hereby, language does not just serve communicational functions. It is furthermore the substrate of the mental representations of ourselves and of our relationships, allowing us to mentalize and regulate our responses to environmental demands (Fonagy et al., 2018). Being able to co-construct shared identities in close relationships and to benefit from that in times of need lie at the core of human functioning. Language markers, such as personal pronouns, capture the social units and perspectives of our thoughts and communication, and thus our potential to benefit from our relationships. With prospects of implementing more elaborated ways to capture language in real life and gather information on the context in the future, studying language use bears the promise of yielding indicators of processes fundamental to human functioning and health.

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