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**An examination of temporal agency
in courtship narratives**

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**An examination of temporal agency
in courtship narratives**

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2012

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving husband and best friend, Peter Kurlak, who has been an ongoing source of support in the pursuit of my graduate career. Thank you for enabling me to pursue my dream of achieving a higher education so that one day I may become a professor and actively participate in the academic community through my love for research and interest in interpersonal relationships.

This thesis is also dedicated to my parents, David and Loretta Zaharias. They instilled in me the importance of education and bolstered my strong worth ethic for achievement.

Acknowledgements

I want to first thank my advisor, Matthew McGlone, for his aide in developing the initial concept for this thesis and his ongoing patience and willingness to pursue several types of linguistic analyses regarding the data set. More broadly, I want to thank Matt for inspiring my interest in the language aspects of interpersonal communication, and helping me to “marry” the two, which has resulted in this manuscript. I hope that our research endeavors will continue beyond this thesis.

I would also like to thank Anita Vangelisti, who served as a preliminary advisor of this research endeavor as a part of her graduate course. Her high standard for excellence and thorough, in-depth feedback has improved my critical eye and adeptness for clarity in my writing. I would also like to thank her for her kindness in being readily available to me as a resource. She has helped me to extensively hone the development of my research ideas in the past two years.

Finally, I would like to thank Ted Huston for allowing me to use his wonderfully expansive and thorough data set. Without his generosity, I would not have been able to pursue this research. Thank you for believing in me and my abilities, and the more qualitative nature of this thesis’ analyses.

Abstract

An examination of temporal agency in courtship narratives

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The reported study investigated temporal agency (i.e., the assignment of cause for temporal shift) in newlyweds' courtship narratives. Transcripts of courtship narratives generated by each partner of 23 recently married couples (approximately 3 months after marriage) participating in the PAIR project (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) were analyzed for the presence of different linguistic strategies for encoding temporal shift. Statements were coded as "human agency assignments" when they assigned the cause of temporal shift to humans (e.g., *We started seeing each other in June*); statements that assigned temporal shift to abstract entities such as the events themselves (e.g., *The summer started out well for us*) or to the relationship (e.g., *The relationship started to slow down*) were coded as "abstract agency assignments." The frequency with which narrators mentioned positive and negative emotions were also coded to explore the possibility that emotional valence mediated agency assignments. The frequency of different agency assignments and emotion words were considered in the context of

portions of the courtship accounts that narrators designated “upturns” (episodes that increased the likelihood of marriage) or “downturns” (episodes that decreased marriage likelihood). Results indicated that the frequency of human agency assignments and mentions of positive emotion were higher in upturn than downturn narrative segments; in contrast, abstract agency assignments and mentions of negative emotion were more frequent in downturn than upturn segments. Subsequent analyses indicated that positive word mentions partially mediated human agency assignments in upturns and that negative word mentions partially mediated abstract agency assignments in downturns. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating an association between the emotional valence of an event and temporal agency assignment: In general, people assign temporal agency to themselves when describing positive events, but prefer abstract agency assignments for negative events (McGlone & Pfiester, 2009).

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Method	21
Results.....	29
Discussion	32
References	39
Vita.....	54

List of Tables

Table 1:	Key Terms Used in Agency Assignment Analysis	13
Table 2:	Examples of Human and Abstract Agency Assignments Employing Key Terms in Upturns of Courtship Narratives.....	27
Table 3:	Examples of Human and Abstract Agency Assignments Employing Key Terms in Downturns of Courtship Narratives.....	28

Introduction

Past events are continually assimilated into a present that edges forward, like railroad ties laid across the prairie. (Gubrium, 1988)

The interdependence between partners that constitutes a romantic relationship derives in significant ways from their language use (Cappella, 1988; Duck & Pittman, 1993). Moreover, the manner in which romantic partners linguistically encode their experiences together – how they met, why they fell in love, when they decided to get married, etc. – is a window through which this interdependence can be richly observed. The reported study examines one specific linguistic device – grammatical agency assignment (Dowty, 1991) – that has not been examined in relational communication heretofore. The discourse context in which this device is examined is the courtship narrative – that is, a retrospective account of the circumstances under which one met his/her romantic partner and the subsequent sequence of events that led them to establish an enduring romantic relationship (Surra, Gray, Cottle, & Boettcher, 2004).

Courtship and Pre-Marital Relationships

Courtship is enacted between two prospective mates as an opportunity to evaluate the viability of a shared life together (Wilson, 2011). Naturally, the courtship process varies tremendously from couple to couple, with each couple's marital experiences augured by features of the courtship itself - its length, how quickly the two commit, the approval of family and friends, onset of cohabitation, and even premarital pregnancy (e.g., Booth & Johnson, 1988; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Cate, Huston, & Nesselroade, 1986; Hill & Peplau, 1988; Huston, 1994; Kurdek, 1991; Veroff, Douvan,

& Hatchett, 1995; Whyte, 1990). These events collectively contribute to each partner's perception of the overall chance of marrying the other (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Huston & Robins, 1982; Robins, 1990), which in turn anchors partners' reactions to each other (Huston, 2000). Thus, such interaction during the courtship period is identified as a sequence of interwoven subjective events and objective behaviors (see Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, Harvey, Huston, Levinger, McClintock, Peplau, & Peterson, 1983; pp. 486-503) that affect individual "states of being," which are experienced in context and, as a result, change in response to spouses' behavior (Huston, 2000). Although these "states of being" have previously been conceptualized in terms of partners' behavior and subjective events (e.g., Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Margolin & Wampold, 1981, Rausch, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), these mental states may become overt in terms of spoken communication and how individuals recall the courtship period linguistically. Despite the ability to displace the details of courtship events from the forefront of day-to-day awareness, spouses may continue to refine their perspectives, schemas, and evaluations of each other and the relationship over time depending on the kinds of thoughts and emotions stimulated in specific interactions that occurred during courtship (Huston, 2000). Thus, having individuals recall their courtship experiences shortly after beginning married life (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981) may already reveal revisions in partners' "states of being" through the outlet of language.

In a similar vein, researchers consistently find that negative or ineffectual premarital communication predicts marital distress (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman,

2004; Hill & Peplau, 1998; Huston, 1994; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010; Noller & Feeney, 1998; Smith, Vivian, O'Leary, 1990), thus suggesting that the enabling conditions for marital distress may be in place well before romantic partners are married (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004, p. 621; see also Adams, 1946; Burgess & Cottrell, 1939; Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002; Holman, 2001). Although communication has often been cited as a major component of marital distress literature, several issues have yet to be disentangled regarding how facets of the courtship may significantly affect marital outcomes. One feature of the current study is the examination of courtship narratives that were generated individually by each spouse, allowing each to assess his or her own perceptions of the probability of marriage in his or her own words. Spouses then identified events or turning points (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470) that, in their estimation, positively or negatively affected their chances of eventual marriage. Although prior research has focused on how these turning points function as substrates for change in a relationship (Huston, et al. 1981), the language used to describe these turning points has yet to be explored systematically.

Narratives

Narratives have the ability to reshape relationship histories by highlighting and omitting facts that shape ongoing interactions (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). By crafting and recrafting self-narratives, romantic couples position themselves and their romantic partners with regard to one another and the larger societal context (Sillars & Vangelisti, 2006). Thus, romantic partners are capable of projecting a story form onto their personal

experience (Weick, 1988, p. 307) of the courtship, and, in turn, allowing for the expression of these singular experiences to be accepted by an audience (Bruner, 1986). Courtship narratives may then serve as evidence forecasting for subsequent marital success, given the significant body of literature indicating that the courtship period is a critical time for predicting marital outcomes (Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006).

Beyond the basic elements of story-telling in a courtship narrative, these narratives often explain how and why partners behave the way that they do (Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990). In particular, researchers who study narratives in close relationships have found that individuals often behave in ways that confirm the perceptions they hold about their associations with others (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Byng-Hall, 1988). According to research that has examined the contextual model of marriage and specific attribution assignments, spouses naturally attend to, perceive, and assign meaning to behavior exhibited by both the self and the partner (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Bradbury and Fincham found that happy spouses in their courtship narratives make egocentric attributions for negative relationship events (e.g., arguments) and partner-centric attributions for positive relationship events (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989), indicating that, in general, individuals tend to give credit when scenarios go “right” rather than when they go “wrong.” Additional studies that have focused on attribution, divergent perceptions, and bias in the self and others have examined how differences in self-perception and social perception of other people’s actions, judgments, and priorities differ from one’s own (see Kelley, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Thus, these attributions and biases are markers of affect, attitude, and orientation toward

one's partner in a courtship narrative (Berman, 2005; Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968), and also indicate partners' priorities depending on which courtship episodes are selected to appear in the narrative.

In addition to selecting particular episodes for the courtship narrative, narrators also choose words to encode these episodes that reveal their beliefs and biases about the relationship above and beyond the manifest content of the events described. In this respect, narrative linguistic content may reveal new things about romantic relationships, with embedded language variables telling a story within a story and further playing an active role in shaping individuals' behavior through their perceptions and how individuals may recall their courtships.

Language in Relational Communication

Relationships affect language use. To be more precise, various language forms have been shown to indicate speakers' beliefs about their relationship status with others and also their evaluations of relational dynamics. Considered together, speakers' relational beliefs and evaluations constitute a significant component of their attitude toward a relationship (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975). The language forms that convey these beliefs and evaluations may be explicit or implicit. The most common explicit form for encoding relational beliefs is the relational label. There are two general types of relational labels: kinship terms (e.g., *mother*, *sister*, *uncle*, etc.) with relatively rigid meanings in a closed semantic system of familial relations (Pasternak, Ember, & Ember, 1997), and kinship terms that label "fuzzy set" relationship categories (e.g., *girlfriend*, *ex*, etc.) without precise definitions (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). These labels encode more than

mere role expectations for members in the relationship. For example, Knapp, Ellis, and Williams (1980) found that terms denoting sexual relationships (e.g., *mate*, *spouse*, *lover*) and terms denoting relationships in the nuclear family (e.g., *mother*, *daughter*, *sister*) were rated higher in intimacy than terms such as *neighbor*, *associate*, and *colleague*. Other relational labels clearly and primarily denote differences in power as well as role (e.g., *employee* vs. *boss*, *student* vs. *teacher*, *apprentice* vs. *master*), although such labels may imply degrees of intimacy as well (Ellis, 1992).

Explicit evaluations (e.g., *We have a strong marriage*) also appear in relational discourse, but their incidence and composition are limited by two factors. First, there is a limited lexicon for relational talk in contrast to the numerous terms available for describing individual moods, states, and traits (Berger & Bradac, 1982). As a result, relational evaluations commonly include more references to the traits and states of the individual partners than to those of the relationship itself (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Second, there appears to be a widespread norm prohibiting the communication of explicit evaluations among mere acquaintances; as Bradac (1983) observed, “acquaintances evaluate the performance of the local baseball team instead of evaluating each other” (p. 149). There is some evidence that the willingness to exchange relational evaluations increases with relational intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Thus friends and lovers should be more likely to explicitly evaluate one another than acquaintances. In the case of family relationships, however, parents typically have more freedom to voice explicit evaluations of their children than vice-versa, an asymmetry reflecting power differences in family systems (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2004).

Speakers also “leak” relational beliefs and evaluations in implicit language forms. This leakage may occur when speakers are talking about their relationships or when they are discussing non-relational matters with relationship partners. In their articulation of the “interactional” view of interpersonal communication, Watzlawick et al. (1967) drew a distinction between the explicit, literal meaning of a discourse message and an implicit meaning that often reflects relational dynamics (Bell & Healy, 1992; Danziger, 1976; Sillars, Shellen, McIntosh, & Pomegranate, 1997; Wilmot & Shellen, 1990).

Interpersonal scholars have since identified a variety of linguistic devices that encode these implicit meanings. First, certain lexical and syntactic forms provide information about a speaker’s position of power in a relationship (O’Barr, 1982). In particular, hedges (e.g., *I guess*), tag questions (e.g., *That’s the place, isn’t it?*), vocalized pauses (e.g., *um*), and filler expressions (e.g., *like*) are associated with low power; high power speech is characterized largely by the absence of these markers (Areni & Sparks, 2005; Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Ng & Bradac, 1993). Second, linguistic immediacy (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1967) and intensity (Bowers, 2006) signal a speaker’s affective orientation toward a relational partner or topic that comes up in conversation with a partner. Low immediacy, in the form of low referential specificity (e.g., *that person*) or probability (e.g., *I may talk with him later*) are generally indicative of more negative evaluations than high immediacy cues such as specific reference (e.g., *my boss*) or high probability language (e.g., *I will talk with him later*). In contrast, language intensity varies with the strength of the speaker’s evaluation regardless of its valence. With more extreme evaluations, speakers become increasingly likely to use intensifying modifiers (e.g., *very*,

extremely) and metaphorical language about affectively charged topics like sex and death (Bowers, 1963). Thus when hearing a speaker use highly immediate and intense language to describe a relational partner, a reasonable inference would be that the speaker is positively disposed; by contrast, a speaker who uses language of low immediacy but comparable intensity to describe a partner may be more likely to have a negative evaluation (McEwen & Greenberg, 1970).

Because people express feelings, beliefs, values, and attitudes through what they say, pronouns play a central role in discourse (Gordon, Grosz, & Gilliom, 1993). Some researchers have argued that first person plural pronouns (e.g., *we*, *us*, *our*) are markers of shared identity, affiliation, and interdependence (e.g., Ellis, 1992). One of the earliest literary records that examined the nature of interactions was by Goffman (1959), who analyzed the situational and social variations in language. Although he did not specifically focus on word usage, his analyses laid an important foundation for voice-shifting characteristics that rely on “the formality of the situation, the nature of the audience, and the degree to which the speaker is integrated with or excluded from the other[s]” (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003, p. 562). Thus, it would not seem surprising that highly committed partners use *we* pronouns more frequently when writing about their romantic relationships than do less committed ones (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). However, in the small group of studies that have examined language use during interactions between romantic partners, *we* usage frequency has shown no association with relationship satisfaction (Ellis & Hamilton, 1985; Sillars et al., 1997; Simmons Gordon, & Chambless, 2005; Williams-Baucom, Atkins, Sevier,

Eldridge, & Christensen, 2010) and only a marginal association with relational interdependence (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003).

Findings regarding usage of first person singular pronouns (e.g., *I*, *me*, *my*) have also been mixed. Sillars et al. (1997) found that couples who used fewer first-person singular pronouns tended to have higher relationship satisfaction than those who used them more frequently. However, Simmons et al. (2005) found *I* usage to be marginally positively associated with relationship satisfaction and *me* to be positively associated with negative behaviors during problem-solving discussions. Usage of *I*, as these researchers argue, reflects self disclosure and perspective taking, whereas use of *me* reflects feelings of passivity and victimization that are characteristic of less satisfying relationships. In a subsequent investigation of marital problem-solving discussions, Williams-Baucom et al. (2010) found the association between *I* usage and relationship satisfaction to be moderated by marital distress: *I* usage among distressed couples was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (consistent with Simmons et al., 2005) but, among non-distressed couples, it was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (consistent with Sillars et al., 2006), suggesting that the pronoun's function may reflect different thought patterns in these different groups (autonomy among the former and insecurity among the latter, perhaps). Finally, usage of second-person pronouns (e.g., *you*, *your*) by couples in problem-solving discussions has been shown to be negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Sillars et al., 1997) and positively correlated with negative relationship behaviors (Simmons et al., 2005; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010), a pattern that may reflect excessive other-focused attention (Ickes,

Reidhead, & Patterson, 1986). Although pronoun usage may indicate affiliation and interdependence with others, the language element of linguistic agency in research has been more straightforward in its research findings.

Linguistic Agency and Time

“Agency” broadly refers to the capacity of an entity to act in the world (e.g., Davidson, 1980). Grammatical or linguistic agency more specifically refers to the manner in which the assignment of this action capacity is encoded in the grammar of a language (Dowty, 1991). Entities assigned this capacity are grammatical “agents” and the entities they act upon are “patients” (Dowty, 1991; Fillmore, 1968). For example, in the statement *Angelina kissed Brad*, Angelina is the agent and Brad is the patient. Although the subject of the sentence is frequently also a grammatical agent, these linguistic roles are distinct. In the statement above, Angelina is both the grammatical agent of the action *kiss* and the sentence subject; however, if the proposition were encoded as *Brad was kissed by Angelina*, Brad becomes the sentence subject but remains the patient and Angelina remains the agent. The designated grammatical agent may be alive (e.g., *the girl fell*) or inanimate (e.g., *the snow fell*), natural (e.g., *the water is rising*) or artifactual (e.g., *the plane is rising*), and concrete (e.g., *the temperature increased*) or abstract (e.g., *the price increased*). The action ascribed may be brief (e.g., *the tree shook*) or lengthy (e.g., *the tree grew*), transitive (e.g., *the dog chewed his bone*) or intransitive (e.g., *the dog howled*), and literal (e.g., *the economy is improving*) or figurative (e.g., *the economy is recuperating*).

Although agency assignments are commonly made to living entities, assignments to inanimate and abstract agents are also common and easy to overlook (see Table 1). For example, English and most other languages permit speakers to figuratively assign the agency for temporal shifts to humans (e.g., *We are approaching the weekend*) or to an event (e.g., *The weekend is approaching*). These assignments are semantically equivalent, but as McGlone and Pfiester (2009) demonstrated, have different affective implications. Examining time language in a 14-million word corpus of English speech and text, they observed different assignment tendencies for positive and negative events. People preferred to assign agency to themselves when describing positive events (e.g., *We're approaching spring break*) but to the events when they were negative (e.g., *Final exams are fast approaching*). Affect not only influenced agency assignments but was also influenced by them, in that people inferred a speaker's attitude about an event from his or her assignment choices. These findings suggest a conceptual correspondence between temporal agency and affect, whereby we symbolically move toward events we "look forward" to, but passively observe the arrival of others we would rather avoid (McGlone & Harding, 1998). The pattern of agency assignments documented by McGlone and Pfiester (2009) constitutes a temporal analog of the self-serving attributional bias studied by social psychologists, whereby people prefer to make internal attributions for successes and external attributions for failures (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989; Miller & Ross, 1975). In fact, Malle, Knobe, and Nelson's (2007) recent folk-conceptual reformulation of attribution theory emphasizes the evidential value of language in documenting this bias, even language used to describe the behavior of

nonhuman entities. For example, Kiesler, Lee, and Kramer (2006) observed that the movement behavior of abstract computer stimuli were described in more agentic, humanlike terms by people encouraged to think of these entities as their belongings than others who did not form an attachment to them. McGlone and Pfister's findings point to a comparable manipulation of symbolic agency speakers employ to articulate their affective orientation toward temporal shifts.

Temporal Agency and Relational Turning Points

The courtship narrative, like any other narrative form, describes a sequence of episodes that unfold over time, and thus is replete with language describing temporal shifts within and between significant relational episodes. Consequently, an analysis of the language used to describe these shifts along the lines suggested by McGlone and Pfister (2009) may illuminate narrators' affective orientation toward their partners and the developing relationship at different points in time during the courtship. In this respect, the coding of temporal agency assignments offers a complementary tool for methods of courtship narrative analysis that employ a "turning point" perspective (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986). In general, relational turning points have been defined as events or occurrences associated with change, good or bad, in a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Rutter, 1996). The label "turning point" may be somewhat misleading because it implies a discrete event, but researchers include a wide variety of events (and sometimes even the absence of events) as turning points so long as they are viewed as connected to

Table 1: Key Terms Used in Agency Assignment Analysis

Term	Human Agent Expressions	Abstract Agent Expressions
<i>ahead</i>	We went <u>ahead</u> with our vacation plans.	Our whole lives are <u>ahead</u> of us.
<i>approach</i>	We are <u>approaching</u> our first anniversary together.	Our first anniversary is <u>approaching</u> .
<i>arrive</i>	We <u>arrived</u> at the conclusion together.	The midnight hour has <u>arrived</u> .
<i>begin</i>	We <u>began</u> seeing one another in June.	Our relationship <u>began</u> in June.
<i>behind</i>	She stood <u>behind</u> me through thick and thin.	The matter is <u>behind</u> us.
<i>close</i>	We were <u>close</u> to breaking up.	The relationship was <u>close</u> to death.
<i>come</i>	We have <u>come</u> so far together.	Our relationship has <u>come</u> so far.
<i>continue</i>	We <u>continued</u> to see each other.	The relationship <u>continued</u> in a downward spiral.
<i>develop</i>	We <u>developed</u> into dating steadily.	Our relationship <u>developed</u> because we were together.
<i>done</i>	When we got <u>done</u> yelling at one another, we made up.	When the fight was <u>done</u> , we made up.
<i>drop</i>	I <u>dropped</u> in unexpectedly to make amends.	The will to continue the relationship <u>dropped</u> off after that.
<i>end</i>	We <u>ended</u> the date with a kiss.	When the summer <u>ended</u> , our relationship did too.
<i>enter</i>	We <u>entered</u> a new phase in our relationship.	Our relationship has <u>entered</u> a new phase.
<i>fall</i>	I began to <u>fall</u> for him.	It just started to <u>fall</u> apart.
<i>finish</i>	When I've <u>finished</u> dinner, I'll drive home.	When dinner is <u>finished</u> , I'll drive home.
<i>forward</i>	We are moving <u>forward</u> with our plans.	Our plans are moving <u>forward</u> .
<i>from...to/until</i>	We dated <u>from</u> January to June.	Our relationship went <u>from</u> bad to worse.
<i>go</i>	We <u>went</u> the whole week without talking.	As the week <u>went</u> on, we didn't talk much.
<i>move</i>	Do you think we're <u>moving</u> too fast?	Our relationship is <u>moving</u> fast.
<i>near</i>	We are <u>nearing</u> our first anniversary.	Our first anniversary is drawing <u>near</u> .
<i>pass</i>	We <u>passed</u> the due date on Thursday.	The due date <u>passed</u> on Thursday.
<i>progress</i>	We <u>progressed</u> from acquaintance to lovers quickly.	Our relationship began to <u>progress</u> steadily.
<i>put</i>	We <u>put</u> the past behind us.	It <u>put</u> us in a tight spot.
<i>reach</i>	We <u>reached</u> the point where all we could was give in.	The election season has <u>reached</u> its last week.
<i>run</i>	We are <u>running</u> out of time.	Time is <u>running</u> out.
<i>start</i>	We <u>started</u> the summer madly in love.	Our relationship <u>started</u> out rocky.
<i>take</i>	We <u>took</u> our time getting to know each other.	Things <u>took</u> a turn for the worse.

changes in the relationship.

In an extensive program of research on relational turning points, Surra and colleagues (Surra, 1985, 1987; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra, Batchelder, & Hughes, 1995; Surra & Hughes, 1997; Surra, Hughes, & Jacquet, 1999) define a turning point as a period of time between two events. Surra and colleagues were interested in reasons why couples progressed to more commitment. Many participants in her studies noted that the turning points that moved them towards more commitment to their partners included spending more time together and getting closer, rather than particular defining moments (Surra & Hughes, 1997). For example, one participant mentioned that as he spent more time with his girlfriend they got closer to one another, and Surra and Hughes (1997) considered the increased time together to be the turning point.

Other scholars have defined turning points as singular events in the development of a relationship rather than the period of time between two events (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Some of these events include conflict (Baxter & Erbert, 1999), expressing physical affection (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999), and becoming exclusive (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Other definitions of turning points include conceptualizing a turning point as an isolated event that prompts permanent change in a relationship (Chang, Dado, Ashton, Hawker, Cluss, Buranosky, & Schoule, 2006). For example, Campbell, Rose, Kub, and Nedd (1998) noted that an escalation of abuse was a turning point that propelled women to leave abusive relationships. Baxter and Bullis (1986) argued that defining turning points as an isolated event glosses over how these events may fit into the broader progress of a relationship's development.

Ultimately, whether a turning point is a discrete event, the time between discrete events, or a nonlinear path through multiple nondiscrete events depends in large part on how the courtship narrator frames the course of relational development in a retrospective account. Employing a retrospective interview technique, Huston and colleagues (1986) asked newlywed couples to independently recount their courtship experiences and to designate which portions of their accounts were “upturns” (i.e., events that increased the subjective likelihood of marriage) and which were “downturns” (i.e., events that decreased the likelihood). Narrators’ subjective assessments of up- and downturns sometimes marked discrete events (e.g., a fun getaway weekend, a fight over money, etc.) and at other times occurred between events; nonetheless, the “turning” process was portrayed in their narratives as a shift in relational orientation unfolding over time. The evidence of these shifts is the language narrators use to describe temporal passage, rather than the labeling of discrete episodes per se. In this respect, McGlone and Pfiester’s agency assignment scheme for analyzing temporal language may prove especially useful in examining narrators’ affective orientation in relational up- or downturns, because it focuses on linguistic cues rather than designation of discrete events.

In their scheme, McGlone and Pfiester (2009) distinguish between agency assignments that attribute the causality for temporal passage to humans (e.g., *We went through a lot together*) or to events themselves (e.g., *As the night went on, our fight got worse*). By attributing temporal passage to a non-human entity such as time, the latter can be described as an “abstract agency” assignment. In the context of a courtship narrative, another form of abstract agency is likely to be common – specifically,

attributions to the relationship rather than to relational partners per se, as in *our relationship went through some serious changes* or *things between us went from bad to worse*. This form of abstract agency – referred to here as “relationship agency” – has not been investigated heretofore.

When relational partners assign the causation for temporal change to the relationship, this suggests that *the relationship* can be used to represent both partners simultaneously without distinguishing any individual romantic partner’s roles or responsibilities. This would instead represent the dyad as an interdependent unit that shares responsibilities. It is expected that this particular type of agency may also be expressed through other terms, such as *this*, *getting together*, *it*, *we*, *us*, etc. Although *the relationship* can serve as a shared affiliation between romantic partners (e.g., *Our relationship is going strong*), *the relationship* may also serve as a scapegoat when romantic partners want *the relationship* to embody an ambiguous entity. This allows partners to disassociate themselves from becoming vulnerable at an individual, personal level, and establish greater autonomy from their partners through independent relationship agency (e.g., *Our relationship is struggling*). It is possible, then, that relationship agency assignments may also be contingent on the perceptions of recalled events, with the degree of perceived closeness dictating how events are recalled and expressed through relationship agency.

Even though displacing responsibility from one party to another can be achieved through agency assignment, it is possible that the affective valence of human and abstract agency may be inferred and not substantiated. For example, the current study may find

that human agency is used more frequently with upturns in the relationship, but the causal relationship between the two variables may be confounded unless the token concordance is analyzed in terms of its original context (McGlone & Pfeister, 2009). This means that some spouses in the sample may have discussed upturns using human agency, but the use of negative emotion may be present (e.g., latent anger, frustration). The same scenario may also appear for downturns and abstract agency with positive emotion. Thus, as suggested by prior research, it is necessary to consider how affect in the form of expressed emotion words may mediate the relationship of turning points and agency since agency itself does not suggest an affective valence.

Emotion

Since the portrayal of events tend to favor the self over other, it is important to evaluate how positive and negative emotions could alter communicative goals when discussing one's romantic relationship. In fact, it is possible that different emotions may produce different agency assignments. In terms of felt emotion, "what determines the course of a relationship...is in large measure determined by how successfully the participants move through conflict episodes" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011), which may be affected by how people perceive the circumstances. For example, an optimistic individual may describe a downturn in the relationship in a more positive light using positive emotion, whereas a more pessimistic person may describe the downturn with more negative emotion. It is possible, then, that the resurfacing of romantic partners' past emotions while recalling courtship experiences could influence how romantic partners express themselves in terms of linguistic agency. In turn, these felt emotions

may act as a lens through which individuals internally assess what a courtship should look like and how their partner's behaviors match those assessments. Therefore, the felt emotional state of romantic partners while recalling courtship experiences could influence how romantic partners express themselves in terms of linguistic agency.

The case for examining potential associations between agency and emotion is further made through two additional studies whose results indicate that positive emotions predict the initiation of relationships, while negative emotions predict their dissolution (Gottman 1994, 1999). As one study recently noted, little attention has been given to the concept of how emotion plays out in relationships (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005), with virtually no study at the present evaluating if and how emotion is associated with linguistic agency and language. Laurenceau and his colleagues did, however, find that positive and negative emotions were inversely correlated, indicating that the types of affect may be distinct and opposite experiences. Importantly, the correlation was not strong, and, as such, the polarity of positive and negative emotion is not conclusive. By contrast, Caughlin and Huston (2002) argued that affectional expressions buffer the inverse association between satisfaction and demand/withdrawal in marital interactions. These researchers conclude that the effects of certain type of communication behaviors may be modified when they are embedded in other behaviors. Inasmuch this is the case, positive and negative affect should not be viewed as polar opposites, but in terms of how they may mediate linguistic behaviors when used in courtship narratives. Given the contrasting findings of these two studies, it is difficult to hypothesize how emotion may be associated with temporal agency since romantic partners who possess a sense of “we-

ness” tend to express both positive and negative emotion more often than those who do not (Clark & Brissette, 2000). So, it is paramount to discover whether an increased display of negative emotions will indicate any difference in linguistic behaviors versus more positive emotions. Since no research to date has looked at how abstract and human temporal agency assignments are associated with emotion unless in a pre-assigned condition format (McGlone & Pfeister, 2009), it is necessary to identify whether or not this phenomena occurs naturally in relational discourse.

Hypotheses

Although the current body of literature has examined how individuals’ temporal use agency assignments are influenced by the emotional valence of events, researchers have yet to explore agency assignments in courtship narratives.

The effects of specific communication formulations used during recalled transgressions or even highly satisfying relational periods could indicate how romantic partners attribute behaviors to other individuals or to events, and potentially reveal how couples handle relational upturns and downturns. In addition, the resurfacing of past emotions of romantic partners while recalling courtship experiences could influence how romantic partners express themselves in terms of linguistic agency expressions. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine temporal agency assignments in courtship recollections, and any possible associations between these assignments and narrators’ subjective designation of relational turning points in their narratives. The following hypotheses are posed:

H1: *Human agent assignments will occur more frequently in courtship narrative segments describing upturns.*

H2: *Abstract agent assignments will occur more frequently in courtship narrative segments describing downturns.*

H3: *The use of positive emotion words will mediate the relationship between turn type (up or down) and human agency assignment frequency.*

H4: *The use of negative emotion words will mediate the relationship between turn type (up or down) and abstract agency assignment frequency.*

Method

Participants

This study uses data from the first phase of the Processes of Adaptation in Intimate Relationships (PAIR) Project. The original sample of 168 newly married couples was collected using marriage license records from four counties in central Pennsylvania, with dyads representative of newlyweds in the sampling area for the time period. Of the potential respondents, 42% agreed to participate. Respondents were similar in age, education, and parental occupation status compared to those who declined participation (Robins, 1985). Spouses were typically in the first two months of their first marriage, spoke English, and had no intention of moving from the area within two years. The final sample was representative of the largely White (99%), working-class profile of the region (Huston, 2009), and the majority resided in rural areas, towns, and small cities.

Courtship Narrative Transcripts

In the original study (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986), researchers collected data beginning in 1981 when the couples were newlyweds and then conducted a follow-up study approximately 13.5 years later. The initial study consisted of unstructured face-to-face interviews, typically carried out in the respondents' homes with participants reporting their courtship experiences without their spouse present. With the events of the courtship fresh in their minds, participants were asked to think about their courtship in terms of the increased or decreased chance of probability of marrying their spouse, which were then charted on graphing paper to indicate these up and downturns in their respective courtships. All individuals participated in this first stage of the study within

three months of their wedding date. In the subsequent follow-up study (e.g., Phase 4), researchers ascertained the current marital status of all but four of the original 168 couples (three of whom were widowed). A total of 105 couples remained married over the 13-year study. The divorce status of all remaining couples (n=56 couples) was obtained through court records or personal testimony.

As part of the initial interviews, each spouse independently provided a detailed account of the chance of marriage and its' evolution from the first date until the wedding day. Spouses' confidence that they would marry was depicted graphically - the horizontal axis represented time in one-month increments, and the vertical axis indicated the chance of marriage. Participants were first asked to give a brief and informal description of their courtship, and then they were provided a blank sheet of graph paper. To help facilitate their memory, respondents initially marked significant events that occurred during their courtships. Next, participants were asked to estimate their chance of marriage when they first met their partner, taking into account their own ideas about marriage and those of their spouse. The interviewer then asked participants to think about when they were first aware that this probability changed and to indicate the chance of marriage at that point in the relationship. Participants then drew a line connecting the two points (or guided the interviewer on how to draw this line) to best demonstrate how this change occurred (e.g., sudden, linear, or curvilinear change). Participants also explained what led to that turning point in their chance of marriage. This process was repeated until a complete trajectory was drawn up to their wedding date (see Huston, 1994

for detailed review of the graphing procedure) and resulted in a total of 336 courtship graphs.

Once the graphs were complete, respondents were shown a series of events that often take place during courtship (e.g., first felt love, first felt partner loved them, first felt certain of marriage, first felt partner was certain of marriage). Respondents noted whether or not these events occurred and the timing of such events during the courtship. Finally, interviewers located the period in which respondents identified themselves as a couple, but were not yet committed to marriage. Interviewers primed respondents to recall their feelings during this phase of their courtship by reviewing events that occurred during those three-months and then asked participants to indicate the amount of love, ambivalence, conflict/negativity, and maintenance behaviors exhibited at that time in the courtship. This procedure took approximately 15 to 45 minutes to complete for each respondent, depending on the length and complexity of the courtship.

Sampling Method

In the present study, transcripts of courtship narratives produced by 23 couples (46 narratives total) were drawn from the larger sample of 168 newlywed couples. These transcripts were selected based on the availability of complete courtship transcripts for both spouses.

Current Study Procedures and Analyses

The unit of analysis for the evaluation of temporal agency assignment is any sentence that attributes temporal change to a human or abstract (event or relationship) entity. The operational definition of human agency for the present analyses was that the

sentence attributed the cause for temporal change to one or more humans (e.g., *We've gone through so much together*). Abstract agency is reflected when a sentence attributes temporal change to an event (e.g., *The summer went by so quickly*) or to the relationship (e.g., *Our relationship went through a rough patch*). Examples of human and abstract agency tokens from the transcripts are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Data processing and analyses proceeded in three distinct phases. In the first phase, original paper transcripts of courtship narratives were digitized via optical character recognition to prepare them for computerized text search. After the digitized transcripts were uploaded, each was compared to each hard copy transcript (e.g., physical transcript file located in the PAIR Lab) to ensure accuracy between the two documents. After any transcription errors were corrected to accurately reflect the hard copy transcripts, the data were saved into two separate files for each transcript – one that reflected both the interviewer and the respondent, and the other that reflected the respondent's personal narrative. Only the respondents' text was subject to agency analysis for the present study.

In the second phase, the language corpus was explored to identify instances of agency assignment used by each individual. The corpus was searched using MonoConc Pro (Barlow, 2002), a commercial software package designed for corpus analysis. This procedure creates concordances for each search hit in Key Word in Context (KWIC) format, which enabled the analysis of words that precede and follow the token used in context, and allowed for the extraction of agency assignment use cases. The concordances, which consisted of 10 words before and after identified keywords, were

then fed into Microsoft Excel and coded by two blind judges. Many of the key words were taken from prior research (McGlone & Pfeister, 2009) because they had been useful in distinguishing between human and event agency. Additional key words were identified in the coding process of agency expressions (e.g., *continue*, *develop*, *drop*, *progress*, *put*, *took*) because they were 1) words that could be used in event or human agency expressions and 2) were words that were based on our observations commonly occurring in relational discourse. Therefore, they were added to Table 1 and calculated as part of the agency rates presented in this study. The addition of these tokens may enhance future language analyses beyond its current precedence.

In the third phase, two teams of blind judges were instructed to code language elements in all of the transcripts. The first pair of judges coded for human and event agency, and were both provided with examples and guidelines in order to appropriately code the data set. This coding process achieved an acceptable intercoder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.86$). In addition, the number of agency assignments that were identified in the narrative transcripts were standardized by invoking the established unit of language token frequency (per 100 words) to comply with convention of linguistic analyses (e.g., Bradac, & Mulac, 1984; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Then, agency tokens were analyzed via SPSS to determine any associations with upturns and downturns.

Next, the 46 transcripts were analyzed through the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007). The raw percentages, which also represent a mathematical rate of word usage (e.g., number of emotion words

per 100 words) of both positive and negative emotion outputs for each spouse were then taken from LIWC, and inputted into SPSS in order to compare emotion rates to agency rates.

Table 2: Examples of Human and Abstract Agency Assignments Employing Key Terms in Upturns of Courtship Narratives

Term	Human Agent Expressions	Abstract Agent Expressions
<i>begin</i>	<i>I <u>began</u> to appreciate her more for the way she interacted with her family.</i>	<i>The thoughts of marriage <u>began</u> at that time.</i>
<i>come</i>	<i>I guess she was reassured to see me <u>come</u> back and still want to go out with her and be with her.</i>	<i>We had just started talking about our past relationships with other people and marriage <u>came</u> up as one of the subjects.</i>
<i>go</i>	<i>Before we even <u>went</u> out, I even asked her, just out of the blue I asked her would you marry me.</i>	<i>Because our relationship was still <u>going</u> strong.</i>
<i>pass</i>	<i>I 'm looking in there and here I <u>pass</u> right by it. In fact I pushed it aside because I 'm looking for a perfume bottle.</i>	<i>I would say it was a steady increase as the months <u>passed</u> through our engagement that it was really going to happen.</i>
<i>start</i>	<i>We just <u>started</u> seeing each other and we didn't date anybody else.</i>	<i>Things <u>started</u> to calm down and I went home and everything but then they just started going back again.</i>

Table 3: Examples of Human and Abstract Agency Assignments Employing Key Terms in Downturns of Courtship Narratives

Term	Human Agent Expressions	Abstract Agent Expressions
<i>end</i>	<i>So I ended up crying it out of my system.</i>	<i>Here I had just started something and now it ended.</i>
<i>go</i>	<i>When I finally did abandon the situation and let her know I was going to do so, it took like two days and then the thing turned around.</i>	<i>So Thanksgiving isn't going to increase it any nor is Christmas.</i>
<i>pass</i>	<i>I see this fear of time passing by without realizing for sure that this was the right thing to do for her.</i>	<i>I knew it would pass, and the best way to forget about it was just to go out.</i>
<i>start</i>	<i>When this happened I thought here I am on my own again, I got to start over.</i>	<i>It just sort of started falling apart after school started in September.</i>
<i>take</i>	<i>That coupled with the fact that what happened, she was losing weight, I had to take her to the doctor.</i>	<i>She hurt my feelings and things took a turn for the worse.</i>

Results

The results are presented in four parts. The first two sections present the results involving agency expressions with turning points. The last two sections present the results involving the mediation of agency expressions and turning points by the presence of emotion words.

Human Agency and Turn Type

The judge's classifications of each of the tokens were in agreement for 86% of the cases in the corpus, with disagreements resolved by the input of a third party, Cohen's $\kappa = .86$. For the analyses of H1, the agency assignment token data were analyzed using a sign test in order to assess the dependency between agency use and turning points by taking the difference of the paired values for each spouse type (husband and wife). In support of H1, husbands used human agentic expressions more often in the reporting of upturns of the relationship, sign test $p = .0002$. Also in support of H1, wives also used human agentic expressions more often in upturns than downturns, sign test ($p = .045$). These results indicated that human agent assignments did in fact occur more frequently when describing upturns in the probability of marriage. A planned comparison indicated that, consistent with H1, the mean frequency of human-agent tokens in narratives was more prevalent in upturns versus downturns ($M = 1.90$ vs. 1.59), $t(45) = 5.195$, $p = .0002$, Cohen's $d = 1.51$.

Abstract Agency and Turn Type

Did spouses use more abstract agency assignments when describing the downturns of their courtship? A sign test was also used for the analysis of H2. However,

for husbands, there was no noted significant increase in frequency of abstract agentic expressions when reporting the downturns of the relationship, sign test ($p = .105$). By contrast, H2 was supported in the wives' narratives: Wives used abstract agentic expressions more often in downturns than upturns, sign test ($p = .017$). A planned comparison indicated that the mean frequency of abstract-agent tokens in narratives was not significantly more prevalent in downturns versus upturns ($M = 1.88$ vs. 2.02), $t(45) = 1.773$, $p = .083$, Cohen's $d = 0.52$.

Emotion Word Frequency by Valence and Turn Type

The frequencies of positive emotion (e.g., happy) and negative emotion (e.g., anger) word types generated by LIWC were analyzed to determine whether they occurred in different proportions in upturn and downturn segments of courtship narratives. These analyses indicated that the mean rate (per 100 words) of positive emotion words was higher in upturn segments ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.92$) than in downturn segments ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.89$), $t(45) = 3.24$, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = 0.96$. In contrast, there was not a significant difference in the mean rate of negative emotion words between upturn ($M = 0.81$, $SD = 0.48$) and downturn ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 1.23$) segments, $t(45) = -1.82$, $p = .075$, Cohen's $d = 0.54$. These findings indicate a partial correspondence between turn type and emotion word mention – specifically, positive emotion mention was reliably associated with upturns, but negative emotion mention was not reliably associated with downturns.

H3 and H4 hypothesized that emotion salience (as reflected in emotion word frequency) would mediate the relationship between turn type (up or down) and agency

assignment type (human or abstract). The logic for assessing mediation recommended by MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002) was employed. Regression analyses established the key conditions for emotion salience's mediation of turn type's effects on agency assignment rates. Specifically, turn type was reliably associated with both positive word mention ($\beta = 2.37, p = .003$) and negative word mention ($\beta = -0.97, p = .035$); positive word mention was reliably associated with human agency assignment frequency ($\beta = .17, p = .022$); and negative word mention was reliably associated with abstract agency assignment frequency ($\beta = .102, p = .041$). Subsequent Sobel tests (MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995) indicated reliable mediation effects such that a) consistent with H3, positive word mention reliably mediated the relationship between turn type and human agency assignment (Sobel $z = -3.08, p = .0021$), and b) consistent with H4, negative word mention mediated the relationship between turn type and abstract agency assignment (Sobel $z = -2.18, p = .028$). No other relationships were significant.

Discussion

Although communication scholars may perceive communication as a relational state or as a “pattern of interconnections” (Rogers, 1998), most relationship research has emphasized communicative behavior patterns (e.g., demand/withdraw pattern, turn-taking, utterances, etc.) rather than the linguistic elements of communication (e.g., word choice, sentence construction, etc.). This study contributes to the literature through the identification of linguistic patterns and how emotion mediates turn type and agency expression patterns, helping us to understand the importance of how language elements can influence relational stability and outcomes.

As a whole, the present investigation revealed how temporal agency assignments in tandem with the reporting of the ups and downs of courtship can affect how he or she will recall and report his or her perspective. The findings suggest that temporal agency assignment follows specific patterns without the need to predispose individuals to a positive or negative condition (see McGlone & Pfeister, 2009), but instead, that these patterns occur as a natural phenomenon when describing positive and negative events as evidenced in the upturns and downturns of courtship. In the present study, PAIR respondents were significantly more likely to grammatically “take credit” for an action when describing an upturn in their courtship than a downturn; in contrast, they were more likely to abdicate agency to abstractions (e.g., *time*, *the relationship*) when describing a downturn than an upturn, further supporting the idea that agency assignments typically have attributional consequences (Bradac, 1990; Ng & Bradac, 1993). These attributions, in turn, influence spouses’ impression formation (McGlone & Pfeister, 2009), even while

recalling their respective courtship narrative with an outside party. I contend that the pattern of linguistic agency assignments as evidenced in this study derives from a non-conscious tendency to highlight responsibility when things go right and create a cursory abdication of responsibility when things go wrong. This pattern of agency assignment supports prior research (see Miller & Ross, 1975; McGlone & Pfeister, 2009) regarding the self-serving nature of attributions where individuals prefer to make internal attributions for successes and consequently external attributions and passivity for failures.

In addition, the pattern of emotion and motion (as exhibited by agency) (Gibbs, 2006; Niedenthal, Barasalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric 2005) also supports embodiment theorists' ideas that people describe the symbolic motion of temporal passage in their courtship narratives; this pattern also largely appears to occur on a subconscious level. The pattern of perceived progress towards intimacy (e.g., increased probability of marriage) as evidenced by upturns is also apparent in the linguistics of the narratives (see Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005). The affective valence of narrative statements suggest that positive emotions will more often than not yield human agentic tokens whereas the presence of negative emotions will frequently produce abstract agentic tokens.

Limitations

The conclusions of the study are qualified by several limitations. The fact that the study relied on language use gathered from interviews could pose as a limitation, since interviewers may have prompted certain kinds of responses. Evidence of prompting or leading questions was in some of the transcripts, which may have refocused interviewees

onto events that were more salient for the interviewer than the interviewee. Yet, the study does capture interviewees' own cognitive interpretations through their spoken communication and these data resulted in statistically significant findings. This issue may be addressed by allowing individuals to report relationship formation in an uninterrupted format. Another issue that may affect the data interpretation is the fact that some spouses may have felt more inhibited in the presence of an interviewer when originally reporting and recalling their courtships, and thus offered less detail in their spoken language and less language (e.g., less spoken words, statements) overall. So, it is possible that inhibited participants who communicated less overall may not have been accurately evaluated in tandem with more expressive participants. In addition, the generalizability of the study's findings is limited by the characteristics of the language samples examined. The fact that the corpus was analyzed in terms of partners' affective orientation towards the events described in the courtship narratives (e.g., dating other people, getting back together, etc.), and was not analyzed in terms of the affect of the events themselves (e.g., *tragedy* vs. *triumph*; *conflict* vs. *unity*), implies the reliance on a limited set of linguistic cues. It is therefore possible that the affective orientation of the data is misrepresented in terms of agentic expressions and, in turn, unwarranted conclusions were drawn about the influence of emotion words on agency assignment. Future research should identify affective valence of the events (e.g., positive vs. negative) described in turn types through additional coding to dispel this issue.

Finally, there were no significant gender differences noted in the study. Previous studies that have also analyzed narratives identified that natural speech patterns between

the sexes can differ; when describing a hetero-sexual breakup account, females are more likely to mention autonomy than their male counterparts (Baxter, 1986). In light of the present study, it is unclear why females did not demonstrate higher rates of abstract agency in the reporting of downturns in order to conform to this pattern. It is just as equally surprising that males did not exhibit higher rates of abstract agency in the reporting of downturns since males were more likely to mention the lack of a “magical quality” as the reason for a breakup; this reference to a “spark” would be expected to be described in more abstract terms and refer more ambiguously to the relationship to be at fault than either party involved (e.g., *It just didn't have that spark*). Another narrative study found that adolescent males were more likely to have higher levels of communication awkwardness in connection to their relationship with their partner (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). This finding may indicate that males should have had overall higher abstract agency rates because of their inability to articulate and attribute temporal change to another human (i.e., their romantic interest). Additional research should seek to resolve these discrepancies.

Future Research

Because the present research is one of the first to examine agency assignments within the context of marital relationships and relationship formation, the study serves as a springboard for future research in this area. Therefore, future research should make strides beyond the preliminary baseline established here, and evaluate language in terms of self-report with no interviewer present, allowing participants to uninterruptedly convey their recollections of the relationship as it burgeoned into a committed partnership.

Future efforts should also address temporal agency usage longitudinally as well as across different topics in order to establish baseline usage that can be used address the stability of the phenomena, and how these patterns may affect relationship stability.

Additional analyses will be needed to confirm how agency plays a role in romantic relationships and relational outcomes. Beyond attributing agency to humans or abstract events as was done in the current study, agency can also be assigned to an outside entity, such as *the relationship*. It is hypothesized that *the relationship* can be used to represent both partners without distinguishing any individual romantic partner's roles or responsibilities, but represent the dyad as a unit. Although *the relationship* can serve as a shared affiliation between romantic partners, *the relationship* may also serve as a scapegoat when romantic partners want *the relationship* to embody an ambiguous entity that allows partners to disassociate themselves from becoming vulnerable at an individual, personal level. Thus, future research should further explore the effects of assigning agency to an outside entity, such as *the relationship* in more depth, and what the effects of relationship agency use can have on a relationship.

In addition, the examination of pronoun usage rates (e.g., *I* vs. *we*) is also encouraged in order to evaluate agency rates and determine whether those couples with more positive outcomes tend to draw closer to their partner or distance themselves from their romantic partners (e.g., *We make a great pair* vs. *We just aren't who we used to be*). Pronoun usage could be used as a validation or cross-check of agentic expressions in order to identify any possible associations between pronoun usage and the forementioned variables.

In terms of beliefs, Knee (1998; as cited in Sprecher and Metts, 1999) identified two general types of relationship belief structures; growth beliefs which imply that good relationships are accomplished through hard work, and destiny beliefs which imply that relationships are meant to be. It would be interesting to explore whether or not belief structures are associated with certain agency assignment patterns. Partners' feelings toward each other can also be assessed in tandem with linguistic agency by having participants report inclusion-of-other-in-self (IOS) to determine whether human agency is used more often when partners feel closer to one another, a step beyond affective valence. In addition, deception could also be a tool for assessing agency assignment against each individual's baseline of agency assignment by having participants withhold information, and then identify any differences in normal conversations (e.g., *describing the past week's events, their relationship with their romantic partner*) versus deceptive conversations (e.g., *omitting information, being instructed to not reveal certain facts, etc.*).

Concluding Thoughts

Although the present investigation is one of the first to consider how agency and emotion words play a role in courtship narratives, future research should strive to expand and refine how scholars examine romantic relationship communication. The main premise of this investigation was to identify whether temporal agency expressions were associated with turning points in courtship. However, research considering the importance of language elements and the subsequent effects of these elements on the relationship is still limited. The present study is one of the first to consider how agency

expressions occur as a natural phenomenon when describing the inevitable ups and downs of a relationship. Thus, the findings should supply the impetus for the development and refinement of language analysis in order to aid premarital programs in addressing focal communication areas. How an individual describes the relationship may put a romantic pair en route to greater long-term relationship stability.

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