

The Business Brain

## Reading between the lines in e-mails

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**SUSAN PINKER**

Imagine WikiLeaks just cracked open your e-mail inbox. What would those exchanges reveal about you and your business relationships?

Quite a lot, it seems. If you think that your messages are sterile bits of content, you're in for a surprise. A study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in September shows that an analysis of the small connecting words in any e-mail or text reveals how engaged two correspondents are, with each other and with the subject they're discussing. The more their grammatical structures match – the more they echo each other's ifs, ands, or buts – the more mutual interest and trust in the relationship.

"This is about style, not content," said Molly Ireland, lead author of the study, and a PhD student working with social psychologist James Pennebaker at the University of Texas at Austin. "These are just the junk words, or connectors, that don't mean anything on their own," she explained. But even if they fly under our radar most of the time, these "junk words" lay bare the nature and stability of our workplace connections.

Working with Professor Pennebaker and other colleagues, Ms. Ireland used a computer program that analyzes how well two people synchronize their pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions when they write to each other. "That's how you can tell how much they're paying attention to each other," she said. Whether they're colleagues, a mentor and protégé, or a married couple, the analysis of the connecting words in their written interactions can predict whether the relationship has a future, or whether it's on the skids.

"If there's a decline in their language-style matching ... it could indicate that they're disengaged," said Ms. Ireland. Higher overlap is a sign they're trying to earn each other's trust: "Greater matching shows that two-way street."

Matching communication styles, known as linguistic mimicry, is easy to spot when two people belong to the same in-group, or when they're on the same wavelength. That's why you can tell if your colleague is talking on the phone with her spouse, her six-year-old, her office manager, or her bank manager: The closer the relationship, the more her intonation and grammar conforms to the other speaker's.

"The more your language matches, the more your attention is focused on that person," Ms. Ireland said. Interestingly, women are more likely than men to synchronize their speech and writing.

A good example of linguistic mimicry is that of skilled police negotiators in a hostage-taking situation. A 2008 study found that such negotiations are more likely to end peacefully when the two sides synchronize their language styles.

While a heightened sensitivity to another person's communication style can be critical to successful negotiations or smooth teamwork, it can also unveil intimacies that you might not want revealed. A new study, to be published in January by Ms. Ireland and Prof. Pennebaker and colleagues, shows that "language style matching" can predict the likelihood and stability of romantic attachments.

If you're curious, you can test the language matching of some of your e-mail exchanges at Prof. Pennebaker's website ([utpsyc.org/synch](http://utpsyc.org/synch)). And given our brave, new WikiLeaks world, you may want to try this before someone else does.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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