

Strangers reach mutual understanding through talking and asking questions, not from non-verbal cues

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Two UTA students in discussion. Credit: UTA

Psychologists at The University of Texas at Arlington have discovered that when two strangers meet and interact for the first time, the extent to

which they develop mutual understanding depends on how much they talk and ask questions rather than on non-verbal cues such as gestures or exchanging glances.

The UTA researchers used a specialized linguistic program to measure the extent that two strangers "get in synch" linguistically, providing new insight into the processes that underlie how people come to understand each other when they meet for the first time.

"Beginning in the 1970s, many researchers touted the power of non-verbal communication in creating first impressions and connecting with others," said William Ickes, co-author of the study and UTA Distinguished Professor of Psychology. "Our research indicates that the exchange of words in conversation is all that is really needed for the development of common-ground understanding in initial, unstructured interactions."

Ickes, along with the study's lead author, Vivian Ta, and co-author Meghan Babcock, both UTA psychology doctoral students, recently published their results in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* as "Developing Latent Semantic Similarity in Initial, Unstructured Interactions: The Words May Be All You Need."

The first of their two studies focused on 26 female-female pairs and 20 male-male pairs, all volunteers from UTA undergraduate psychology classes, who were seated in a "waiting room" situation while their initial, unstructured interaction was covertly video- and audiotaped for six minutes while the experimenter left to run an errand before the session. A second study used a much larger sample that contained male-female pairs in addition to male-male and female-female pairs.

A specialized linguistic program was used to analyze the transcripts of their conversations. This program measured each pair's latent [semantic](#)

[similarity](#), or the the degree to which they used words in the same way during their interactions. The researchers also recorded verbal and non-verbal behaviors seen in the video.

The results clearly showed that the pairs of strangers achieved higher levels of mutual understanding when they exchanged more words with each other and asked more questions.

On the other hand, pairs in which the partners looked at each other more did not achieve significantly greater "semantic similarity" scores than pairs where the partners looked at each other less, and the same was true when comparing pairs in which the partners acknowledged each other more versus less or where they gestured to each other more or less.

"We all know it's important to be able to establish common-ground understanding with the people you're interacting," lead author Vivian Ta said. "Our study shows that the key to this is verbal, not non-verbal."

Psychology Department Chair Perry Fuchs added, "This research on basic human interactions between strangers has implications for all aspects of our social lives and work contexts. It will be interesting to see how the researchers extend this work into the online space and telephone space where so many of our initial interactions are happening now."

The research reflects UTA's increasing focus on Health and the Human Condition within its Strategic Plan 2020: Bold Solutions|Global Impact and the psychology department's growing reputation in psychological sciences, including social psychology and personality.

Vivian Ta is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her primary research interests include semantic similarity in dyadic interactions, interpersonal relationships, and personality.

Meghan Babcock is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her primary research interests include interpersonal relationships, attraction, semantic similarity in dyadic interactions, and individual differences.

William Ickes is a distinguished professor of [psychology](#) at the University of Texas at Arlington. He is a coeditor of the three-volume series *New Directions in Attribution Research* and the author of *Everyday Mind Reading* (2003) and *Strangers in a Strange Lab* (2009). His research on empathic accuracy has received three international research awards.

More information: V. P. Ta et al, Developing Latent Semantic Similarity in Initial, Unstructured Interactions: The Words May Be All You Need, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0261927X16638386](#)

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