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# 伴侶言談與關係親密感：以關係促進策略和逾界語言建立伴侶中心立足點

# Couple's Discourse and Relational Closeness: Relational-enhancing Strategies and Verbal Transgressions in Constructing a Couple-Centered Footing

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*In every word and heartfelt conversation,*
*Lies the essence of connection, love's foundation.*
*Communication is the bridge we build,*
*The path that leads to hearts fulfilled.*
*Without this bond, there's no motivation,*
*No way to rise, to reach our destination.*
*With gratitude, we cherish each phrase,*
*For in love's dialogue, our souls blaze.*

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# CHINESE ABSTRACT

本論文探討語言如何協助伴侶提升親密感，和建立幸福伴侶關係；以互動社會語言學的研究方法，來檢視親密伴侶在互動中，使用關係促進策略（如：親暱稱謂、幽默對話）和逾界語言（如：講髒話、性相關談話、兒語）建立伴侶中心立足點；我將伴侶中心立足點定義為，伴侶輸出與解讀語句時，優先考慮維繫關係和諧與促進親密感的溝通方式。

本研究的語料來自美國和臺灣情侶的訪談及自然對話，總計超過 120 小時的錄音內容，透過分析這些語料，討論伴侶如何於語言情境中，以伴侶中心立足點溝通，進而增進伴侶親密感、緩解傷害關係的情境、並為彼此提供情緒支持。伴侶的語言使用，構成伴侶中心立足點的三個概念領域，分別為愛情區、安全地、遊樂場，這些概念領域，為伴侶相處提供相關的心理動機、概念資源、及對親密關係的期待，支持伴侶建立以關係和諧為優先的溝通。

隨著親密關係發展，伴侶通過互文性語言使用，反覆協商和創造語意，將增進關係親密感的語言資源，整合成他們專屬的伴侶語，藉著使用伴侶語中的語言策略，伴侶可在伴侶中心立足點和個人中心立足點間切換，在對話中兼顧親密連結和個人需求。本論文對語言如何建立親密伴侶關係的研究成果，能為社會語言學和關係科學領域，提供理論及應用層面的寶貴見解。

**關鍵字：**伴侶中心立足點、關係促進策略、逾界語言、親暱稱謂、幽默對話、髒話、性相關談話、兒語、伴侶語、伴侶言談、關係親密感

# ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of language in enhancing intimacy and building fulfilling relationships in the context of romantic relationships. Taking an interactional sociolinguistic approach, I examine the relational-enhancing strategies (i.e., terms of endearment and conversational humor) and verbal transgressions (i.e., swearing, sex-related talk, and babytalk) romantic couples may use as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing in interaction. I define a couple-centered footing as the ways romantic partners align with each other to prioritize the harmony of the relationship and foster intimacy in utterance production and interpretation.

Based on over 120 hours of conversational data from American and Taiwanese couples' elicited conversations, interviews, and naturally occurring interactions, I investigate how couples establish a couple-centered footing to enhance relational closeness, mitigate relational-harming situations, and provide emotional support in context. Three conceptual spheres—the love zone, the safe space, and the playground—emerged as the main sources that constitute and are constituted by the linguistic constructions of the couple-centered footing, providing the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations for romantic couples to manage their conversations.

As relationships develop, couples negotiate and create meaning through intertextual language use, integrating linguistic resources into their couple-lect to achieve relational and communicative goals. By balancing between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversations, romantic partners can tend to their relational connection while managing a sense of selfhood. With a view to bridging the fields of sociolinguistics and relationship science, the current research provides valuable insights into the ways couples can use language to nurture intimacy and loving connection in romantic relationships.

**Keywords:** couple-centered footing, relational-enhancing strategies, verbal transgression, terms of endearment, conversational humor, swearing, sex-related talk, baby talk, couple-lect, couple's discourse, relational closeness

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Language and communication are at the heart and center of any healthy relationship. From budding romantic and passionate feelings to establishing stable and fulfilling relationships, communication plays a critical role in fostering intimacy, creating emotional connections, resolving differences, aligning perspectives, and maintaining overall satisfaction in an intimate relationship. Unlike the marital standards of the twentieth century, where men and women entered into unions with distinct and socially prescribed roles as the breadwinners and the homemakers, couples nowadays value deep emotional connections in addition to practical arrangements in a partnership. The desire for intimacy, companionship, and mutual emotional support defines the love and romantic relationship of the twenty-first century (Giele & Holst, 2003; Real, 2007).

As we navigate the changing standards and expectations for an ideal romantic partner, we are also in search of effective and practical ways to cater to the varying emotional and relational needs one may have in a romantic relationship. For this reason, scholarship bridging the fields of linguistics and relationship science is particularly important as it can provide valuable insights into how couples can verbally nurture intimacy, emotional connection, and relational closeness. This dissertation explores the ways language can support romantic couples in fostering intimacy and building satisfying and egalitarian relationships in romantic contexts.

## 1.1 Overview

When searching on the internet for "the key to having a good relationship," most of the advice was given by counseling professionals and relationship experts

emphasizing the importance of effective and open communication. Studies in the field of relationship science and family psychology showed that 'positive' communication between partners is generally associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, whereas 'negative' communicative behaviors are often indicators of a distressed relationship (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006; Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gill et al., 1999; Meeks et al., 1998; Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007; Williamson et al., 2012). While research following a psychology tradition acknowledged the importance of having "positive" and "effective" communication, the understanding of how such behaviors are manifested on a conversational level and constructed by speakers' utterances and responses in interaction is still limited. How exactly can language facilitate the maintenance and enhancement of intimacy in a romantic relationship? How can we use certain linguistic cues to verbally nurture the loving connection we crave in an interpersonal relationship?

To answer these questions, researchers can turn to the field of sociolinguistics for analytic tools to investigate the specific linguistic and interactional strategies that constitute "positive" and "effective" communication in intimate interactions. In the study of family discourse, concepts are drawn from 'interactional sociolinguistics' (Gumperz, 1982) and 'framing' (Goffman, 1974) to study the ways families make meaning and build rapport in daily communicative activities. In her study on family interaction, Gordon (2009) explored how families create shared meaning and construct family identity in everyday conversations through 'intertextuality' and 'framing.' According to Gordon (2009, p. 5), "intertextuality serves as a resource for both making meanings in interaction and binding members of a family together into a distinctive social group." The repeated words, phrases, sentences, and paralinguistic features in a family's conversations are key to creating their 'familyness' and forming their unique 'familylect' (Søndergaard, 1991) to build rapport. Her elaboration of

'intertextuality' and 'familylect' demonstrated how these concepts could aid scholarly exploration of the ways people create shared meanings and enhance solidarity in close relationships. The current research adopts these notions in analyzing how couples develop their own couple's language or "couple-lect" through repetition and meaning-making in context.

Another study that took a framing approach to family discourse is Kendall's (2006) investigation of the frames and footings in American families' dinnertime discourse. Based on her data, Kendall identified four different footings in the 'sociable frame' of families' dinnertime discourse: 'the parent-child footing,' 'the couple-centered footing,' 'the family footing,' and 'the child-centered footing.' Her research focused on the linguistic construction of a child-centered footing in interaction as well as the families' negotiation of this footing when other footings and frames are in competition with each other. As her study was to understand the family dynamics and illustrate the ways that the child-centered footing can serve to maintain family solidarity, less focus was paid to exploring the couple-centered footing. In her analysis, a couple-centered footing is invoked when the husband and wife speak directly to each other without using child-centered kinship terms or other child-centered cues.

Kendall's (2006) research provided a view of how interlocutors can achieve relational goals through shifting between footings. However, for one who seeks to understand more about the dynamics between a couple's verbal interaction and their maintenance of intimacy, much is left to be explored. Specifically, what is a couple-centered footing? Other than the absence of child-centered cues, how is the couple-centered footing verbally constructed in context? When romantic partners engage in dyadic conversation, what may be competing with a couple-centered footing? This dissertation investigates the concept of couple-centered footing further to learn more

about the ways romantic partners may maintain intimacy and strengthen coupledom in daily conversations.

Borrowing concepts from Gumperz's 'contextualization cues' (1992), the current study views linguistic strategies with the potential to achieve relational-enhancing purposes as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing. Following Goffman's definitions of 'footing' (1981), I define a couple-centered footing as the ways romantic partners align with each other to prioritize the harmony of the relationship and foster intimacy when producing and interpreting their utterances. In contrast to a couple-centered footing, I identify an individual-centered footing where one aligns with one's own thoughts, beliefs, and needs, as well as prioritizes self-expression and individuality in managing their utterances. Similar to how a child-centered footing may create solidarity in family interactions (Kendall, 2006), the couple-centered footing is found to contribute to maintaining intimacy and strengthening coupledom in couple's discourse.

Other than examining the linguistic constructions and the functions of the couple-centered footing, I propose the theoretical notion of the "conceptual sphere" to discuss the underlying psychological motivations for couple's communicative behavior. From couples' language use in expressing affection, committing verbal transgressions, and engaging in verbal play in my data, I identify three conceptual spheres—the love zone, the safe space, and the playground. These conceptual spheres operate within the couple-centered footing and provide the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations for couples to produce and interpret their utterances in a couple-centered conversation. In line with Gumperz's (1982) framework of cross-cultural miscommunication, couples may experience miscommunication when they have yet to learn to use and interpret the linguistic cues to construct a couple-centered conversation. Couples may draw resources from

different conceptual spheres to make new meanings in contexts and incorporate varying relational-enhancing strategies and even verbal transgressions into their couple-lect through repetition and 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009).

The study analyzes couples' naturally occurring conversations and finds that couples constantly balance between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing, especially in disagreeing contexts. As couples negotiate between footings in conversations, they manage their needs for relational closeness and self-expression simultaneously. I argue that having a healthy balance between conversing under a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing is key to building a fulfilling and egalitarian relationship. By shifting between the two footings, couples can foster relational closeness and strengthen coupledom while expressing selfhood and maintaining individuality.

This argument echoes the findings of Baxtor and Montgomery (1996). Based on their analysis of the tensions inherent in romantic relationships, three occurring contradictions were identified: 'connectedness–separateness,' 'certainty–uncertainty,' and 'openness–closedness.' While couples embrace relational ideals of closeness, certainty, and openness in relationships, they often have to balance their individual desires for autonomy, independence, and privacy. Thus, tensions and contradictions manifest as a continuous dynamic interplay in couple's communication. Similar views can also be seen in psychotherapy and relationship science research. According to family theories (Bowen, 1978; Olson, 2000) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), a healthy relationship requires a balance between connectedness and individuality with couples. A secure individual is capable of building close relationships defined by relatedness and intimacy while maintaining a sense of independence and autonomy. The current study bridges the fields of linguistics and relationship science to shed light on the important role language plays

in nurturing intimacy, achieving communicative goals, and fulfilling emotional and relational needs in building a satisfying romantic relationship.

## 1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The dissertation aims to explore how language can help couples maintain and enhance intimacy in daily conversations. Specifically, I address the following questions:

1. What are the relational-enhancing strategies that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing?
2. What are the verbal transgressions that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing?
3. What conceptual resources or spaces are shaped and utilized in context to support utterances within a couple-centered footing?
4. How do the shifts between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing facilitate the enhancement of intimacy and sustainment of individuality in couples' conversations?

Guided by my research questions, I examine the relational-enhancing strategies that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing and foster relational harmony in couple's communication. To capture the complexities of couples' language use, I also explore some of the "riskier" or "unconventional[1]" linguistic strategies couples may adopt in their conversations to achieve relational

[1] I am aware that the evaluation of "conventionality" and the categorization of "verbal transgression" may be context-based. Each of the strategies analyzed in the current research can improve or hinder relational closeness. In addition, depending on the language and culture, certain strategies may be evaluated as more "conventionally" relational-enhancing than others. In the current research, the categorization is based on the discussions of past works on these strategies and my own data. Different scholarly interests may have different views on their interpretation, evaluation, and categorization.

goals. Linguistic uses typically evaluated as 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987), taboo, and negative are analyzed as verbal transgressions in the current study. By investigating how different linguistic strategies can establish a couple-centered footing, this study aims to elucidate the components of a couple-centered footing and its role in facilitating couples' alignment in conversations.

Based on my data, terms of endearment and conversational humor emerged as the more "conventional" relational-enhancing strategies used the most by couples. To further understand the intricacies of these strategies, I discuss them in subtypes. For terms of endearment, I name the subtypes as spousal titles (e.g., husband and wife), affectionate nicknames (e.g., babe, honey, dear, sweetie), name-related nicknames (e.g., diminutives of first name and family nicknames), and pejorative nicknames (e.g., booger, chubby, poopy, stinky). My research shows that different types of terms of endearment may be used in varying contexts to express affection, maintain relational closeness, and achieve communicative goals. Furthermore, conversational humor in the forms of banter, comical hypothetical, and teasing in couples' conversations are explored by the current research. Co-constructing conversational humor allows couples to engage in verbal fun and strengthen coupledom through entertaining all the parties involved. Couples' reciprocal uses of relational-enhancing strategies can be seen as co-constructing a couple-centered footing and making a joint effort to prioritize relational harmony in conversations.

In the exploration of relational-enhancing strategies, verbal transgressions or some of the less "conventional" strategies are also found to establish a couple-centered footing. Couples in my data adopted swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk in their daily conversations to enhance relational closeness and strengthen a sense of coupledom. Compared to the more readily recognized and accepted strategies for relational enhancement, verbal transgressions may require couples to negotiate and

make meanings intertextually before they become a part of a couple's repertoire of relational-enhancing strategies. However, due to their taboo nature and inherent risks, verbal transgressions can perhaps index a high level of trust, connection, and quality of the relationship between romantic partners.

Analyzing the relational-enhancing strategies and verbal transgressions in couples' conversations, the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground in the couple-centered footing emerged from couples' language use. The love zone supports the expression of affection and commitment between romantic partners. The safe space allows the romantic partners to freely express their feelings and transgress social norms without fearing judgment. The playground encourages romantic partners to jointly engage in verbal play for mutual entertainment. Each of these conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing contains the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations of how romantic partners should align with each other when producing and interpreting utterances. As relational-enhancing strategies adopt conceptual resources from different conceptual spheres to establish a couple-centered footing, they also shape the conceptual spheres in the process.

The study collected and analyzed over 120 hours of couples' interactions, encompassing three types of data from American and Taiwanese couples. The first type of data is the elicited conversations from the couples performing two communicative tasks. In the first task, the 20 Questions Game, couples take turns asking and answering questions about each other and their relationship. The second task, the Desert Island Survival Game, requires couples to negotiate and discuss before coming to a consensus. The second type of data is collected from couples' interviews about their relationships and daily interactions. The task and the interview questions were designed to elicit contexts where couples may express affection,

discuss sensitive and emotional topics, negotiate differences, co-construct narratives, and engage in humor or play. With data collected from the United States and Taiwan, the research investigates the shared communicative and conceptual resources couples of different sociocultural backgrounds may use to establish intimacy and relational closeness.

The third type of data comes from the spontaneous recordings of two couples. The couples were instructed to audio-record themselves whenever they spent time together, ideally without the presence of other people[2]. The recordings reveal a wide variety of topics and conversations couples may have on a daily basis. As couples navigate the highs and lows in their relationship, the ways they verbally express affection, commit transgressions, and engage in play with each other may be key to promoting intimacy. In addition, keeping a healthy balance between verbally maintaining relational closeness under a couple-centered footing and expressing one's selfhood under an individual-centered footing may also be critical to building a fulfilling and egalitarian relationship.

By answering the research questions, the dissertation contributes to the existing literature on footing and interactional sociolinguistics, language and intimacy, and relationship science by shedding light on how couples express affection, commit verbal transgression, and engage in verbal play to establish a couple-centered conversation. The study reveals the process of how couples make meaning and enrich their couple-lect in their interactions to maintain and strengthen intimacy. Through 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009), couples can develop a communicative style unique to their dyadic interactions and relational history. The study also bridges the gap between linguistics and psychology research, providing a more comprehensive look at

[2] The couples' recordings also include contexts where they interact with family and friends. However, to complement the interview data, which inevitably involved the researcher's presence, the analyses of the naturally occurring data were mostly based on the couples' private interactions.

how relational closeness and coupledom can be strengthened through linguistics strategies in couple's communication.

The findings of this study have practical implications for researchers in sociolinguistics, psychology and counseling, and gender equity education. For linguists interested in how intimacy and coupledom are verbally maintained and performed in daily conversations, the current research laid the groundwork for investigating the dynamics and effects of footing shifts in conversation. The concept of a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing can be expanded to explore other types of dyadic relations, such as parent-child relationships and friendships. In addition, this research offers insights for marriage counseling professionals and romantic couples seeking to improve dyadic communication skills and relational satisfaction. The relational-enhancing strategies and the conceptual spheres of the couple-centered footing can be devised into an informative guide or training material for couples to improve their communication. Moreover, the findings of this research support gender equity education. According to Taiwan's "Gender Equity Education Act[3]," the goal of gender equity education is "to generate respect for gender diversity, eliminate gender discrimination and promote substantive gender equality through education." To establish healthy boundaries and promote respect between genders, one must have the necessary knowledge and tools. The findings of this research illustrate how certain language uses may have relational-enhancing or relational-harming effects in conversations. Learning materials and guidelines can be created to teach one how to verbally set boundaries by refraining from co-constructing a couple-centered footing with others prematurely. Furthermore, one can also be

[3]. The Gender Equity Education Act of Taiwan was enacted on June 23, 2004. The General Provisions of this act state that its goal is to "promote substantive gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination, uphold human dignity, and improve and establish the education resources and environment for gender equality." (https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=H0080067)

instructed to avoid making others feel uncomfortable or offended when using verbal transgressions to foster closeness in interpersonal relationships. In brief, the objective of the current research is to uncover the secrets of how language may contribute to building a satisfying, egalitarian, and meaningful romantic relationship. It is my goal to share my findings and help couples, as well as individuals, enrich their lives by verbally cultivating healthy and rewarding relationships.

## 1.3 Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 2 reviews relevant theoretical frameworks and studies, specifically focusing on (1) interactional sociolinguistic approach to couple's discourse, (2) language, relational work, and relational-enhancing strategies, and (3) couple's communication and relational closeness. Chapter 3 offers methodological information on the data collection, research design, and data analysis of the study.

Chapter 4 analyzes the relational-enhancing strategies, including terms of endearment and conversational humor, used by couples to establish a couple-centered footing. In addition, the chapter also investigates the verbal transgressions that can be used as relational-enhancing strategies to initiate a couple-centered footing. From couples' uses of these linguistic strategies, three conceptual spheres of the couple-centered footing emerged: the love zone, the safe space, and the playground. The chapter ends with a discussion of the three conceptual spheres of the couple-centered footing and how each may provide the conceptual resources for fostering intimacy in context.

Chapter 5 provides analyses of two extended transcripts from couples' naturally occurring data to demonstrate the dynamic shifts between a couple-centered footing

and an individual-centered footing in couple's communication. The chapter aims to illustrate how maintaining a healthy balance between taking a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in daily interactions helps build a fulfilling and egalitarian relationship. The dissertation concludes in Chapter 6 with a summary of major findings and implications for future research and practices.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the relevant theoretical frameworks and studies to the current research's exploration of the dynamic relationships between language use and the maintenance of intimacy in couple's conversations. Specifically, I review past works under the scope of (1) interactional sociolinguistic approach to couple's discourse, (2) language, relational work, and relational-enhancing strategies, and (3) couple's communication and relational closeness. Drawing theoretical concepts from the fields of sociolinguistics and relationship science as the foundation for my analyses of couples' conversations, I seek to bridge the gap between the two fields and provide valuable insights into the ways language can achieve the communicative goals of relational maintenance and emotional management critical to building a fulfilling and egalitarian romantic relationship.

## 2.1 Interactional Sociolinguistic Approach to Couple's Discourse

The current study takes an interactional sociolinguistic approach to studying the ways language can support the maintenance of intimacy in couple's discourse. This section reviews relevant studies and theoretical concepts from interactional sociolinguistics and connects these concepts to the analysis of the current study. In Section 2.1.1, I briefly discuss the main ideas developed in the approach Gumperz initially referred to as the 'theory of conversational inference' (1982) and later as 'interactional sociolinguistics' (2001). The theoretical concepts of 'contextualization' and 'miscommunication' in this approach inspired early works in gender discourse to examine breakdowns and misinterpretations in cross-sex communication as a type of 'cross-cultural' issue between members from different 'sociolinguistic subcultures'

(e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen 1990). The current research adopts concepts from the interactional sociolinguistic framework to study couple's discourse. However, instead of discussing gender differences and their effects on relational closeness, I follow the approach of more recent works in family discourse (e.g., Gordon, 2009; Kendall, 2006; Tannen, Kendall, & Gordon, 2007) to examine how language can support relational enhancement and strengthen coupledom in daily interaction.

In Section 2.1.2, I cover relevant theoretical concepts of 'frame' and 'framing' (Goffman, 1974), another influential notion in the interactional sociolinguistic approach. Studies taking a framing approach draw concepts from 'footing' (Goffman (1981), 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009), and 'familylect' (Gordon, 2009; Søndergaard, 1991) to study interpersonal interactions, particularly in the context of family discourse. The current research builds on these works and investigates what Kendall (2006) referred to as a 'couple-centered footing' to reveal how couples may adopt linguistic strategies to maintain intimacy and a sense of coupledom in everyday conversations.

### *2.1.1 Contextualization, Miscommunication, and Gender Discourse*

Interactional Sociolinguistics is an interpretive approach to analyzing language use in the context of social interactions. The key concepts of this approach were developed in Gumperz's (1982) 'theory of conversational inference' in the late 1970s and laid out in his book *Discourse Strategies*. Based on the notion that language can only be analyzed in the context that it also constitutes, meaning is thus a joint creation of speakers who use language to achieve interactive goals. To study the encoding and decoding of meanings in interaction, one must consider the crucial factor of 'contextualization.' According to Gumperz's (1992, p. 229) definition,

contextualization is the use of verbal and nonverbal cues "to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended." Contextualization cues on different levels of speech production, such as prosodic choices, paralinguistic signs, code-switching, lexical forms, and styles, all contribute to the speaker's and listener's situated interpretation in interaction. Such an approach is influential in the study of interpersonal interactions as it allows researchers to explore deeper into how social knowledge is integrated into everyday conversation to achieve communicative goals. As the aim of the current study is to examine how couples may use language to support intimacy in daily interactions, taking an interactional sociolinguistic approach made possible the exploration of the dynamic interplay between everyday language use and relational maintenance in the contexts of romantic relationships.

Accounting for the interpretative nature of conversations, the interactional sociolinguistic approach allows for the investigation of miscommunication and conversation breakdowns in intercultural encounters. Through illustrating how unshared contextualization conventions for speakers from varying sociocultural backgrounds may lead to misunderstandings and misjudgment of intentions, Gumperz (1982) showed that different expectations about what happens in a specific communicative context and different interpretations of certain language uses may result in stereotyping and injustice, particularly against ethnic minorities.

One of the earliest works to apply the interactional sociolinguistic approach and the notion of miscommunication to gender and discourse is Maltz and Borker's (1982) examination of gender differences in communication. Based on their arguments, the varying socialization experiences of men and women may result in different patterns of language use and interpretations of contextualization cues. Miscommunication may

thus arise in cross-sex talk, not because of ill-intention but the effect of its speakers belonging to different 'sociolinguistic subcultures' and having different ideas about certain language uses. To illustrate this point, Maltz and Borker hypothesized that women viewed minimal responses, such as 'mm hmm,' as a way to indicate active listening, whereas men considered them cues for agreement. For this reason, women tend to use minimal responses more often in conversations than men to signal their engagement as listeners, while men refrain from using minimal responses in conversations as they do not always agree with or follow the speaker's argument. The different uses and interpretations of minimal responses may lead to problematic impressions of members from different 'subcultures:' women often complain about men not listening, and men often complain about women being hard to read.

Maltz and Borker's (1982) study served as the foundation for Tannen's application of Gumperz's framework to exploring communication between men and women. In Tannen's (1990) research on conversational coherence of different genders, girls and women were observed to align in a more direct manner with each other topically and physically than men. They were quicker to establish conversational topics and showed more signs of physical alignment through proximity, occasional touching, and eye contact. However, this was not to say that boys and men did not demonstrate engagement or display intimacy in talk. Two tenth-grade boys were seen to show involvement by having a personal discussion about the state of their current friendship while physically aligning away from each other. According to Tannen, this showed that different genders may achieve similar communicative goals through different strategies. These gender-related communicative patterns could lead to miscommunication between the sexes.

Tannen's contribution to the study of gender and discourse can also be seen in a collection of her academic published works reprinted in *Gendered Discourse* (1994).

Influenced by Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistic approach, she argued that "some frustrations in conversations between women and men can be understood by reference to systematic differences in how women and men tend to signal meaning in conversation." (Tannen, 1994, p. 7). In other words, gender miscommunication may occur when each 'sociolinguistic subculture' (Maltz & Borker, 1982) interprets the communicative behaviors of the other based on their own expectations. In analyzing gender discourse, Tannen (1993) argued for the importance of considering both the power and solidarity aspects of linguistic strategies. Using 'interruption' in conversation as an example, Tannen demonstrated how the same linguistic strategies can be used to dominate or show support. According to Tannen's (2005) analysis, speakers that are 'high involvement' in 'conversational style' tend to 'interrupt' or 'overlap' in conversation to express enthusiasm, create connection, and build solidarity. Others, however, may be inclined to interpret such interruption as a powerful or dominating move. While agreeing with the potential for specific linguistic strategies to create dominance, she seeks to point out the 'ambiguous' and 'polysemous' nature of language use.

In her popular book, *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), Tannen further adopted the 'cultural difference framework' to account for the troubles people experience in cross-sex communication. While the book was originally aimed at a general audience, it played a critical role in bringing recognition to the 'cultural approach' to the study of cross-sex communication (Bailey, 2015). The chapters outlining the key concepts of Tannen's (1990) book were also reprinted as one of the essential readings in *A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication* (Monaghan & Goodman, 2007), a collection of works representing and defining the field of interpersonal communication in theory and practice for an academic readership. According to Tannen's (1990) argument, women and men acquired different ways of

communication, or ‘gender-lect,’ from childhood playtime with same-sex peers. Based on her observation, women engage more in ‘rapport-talk,’ a style of communication that is more ‘private’ and personal in nature for the purpose of social affiliation and emotional connection, while men participate more in ‘report-talk,’ a communication style that is more ‘public’ and informational to help one establish social status within a group.

Since these earlier works, research taking the interactional sociolinguistic approach to gender and discourse has come a long way. Scholars shifted their focus from highlighting the ‘cultural differences’ between the sexes to paying more attention to examining how conversational rapport can be created when cultural backgrounds and conventions are shared. Since the early 2000s, Tannen and her students (Tannen, Kendall, & Gordon, 2007) have turned to family discourse to explore how members may build rapport and negotiate identities in daily communicative activities. Based on the naturally occurring conversations of four families, the researchers revealed the interactional strategies family members may use to create solidarity and a sense of ‘familyness.’

The current research borrows concepts from Gumperz’s ‘contextualization cues’ (1992) and views strategies serving relational-enhancing purposes as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered conversation and maintain relational closeness. Rather than focusing on the sociolinguistic subcultural differences between members of varying sociocultural backgrounds, the current study aims to reveal how couple may develop their unique “couple-lect” through repetition and ‘intertextual meaning-making’ (Gordon, 2009) to establish a ‘couple-centered footing’ (Kendall, 2006). Miscommunication or breakdowns may occur when couples have not established a relational-enhancing interpretation for certain language uses, particularly the use of less “conventional” relational-enhancing strategies or verbal transgressions. The study

proposes that resources may need to be drawn from multiple conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing for couples to access a relational-enhancing meaning in the uses of verbal transgressions.

In the next section, I explored the important concepts of 'framing,' 'footing,' and 'intertextuality' within the interactional sociolinguistic approach and discussed how they help shape the design and analysis of the current research.

### *2.1.2 Framing, Footing, Intertextuality, and "Couple-lect"*

The theoretical concepts of 'frame' and 'framing' have been central to the field of interactional sociolinguistics. A frame can be comprehended as the understanding of "what it is that is going on" (Goffman, 1974, p. 10). This understanding involves expectations regarding each individual's participation in the interaction, the types of linguistic registers they will use, and the typical exchanges in these types of interactions (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The notion of framing came from anthropologist Gregory Bateson's (1972) observation of monkeys' playful interactions at the zoo. According to Bateson, metacommunicative signals can be exchanged to establish a 'play frame' and define a monkey's bite as playful rather than aggressive. In *Frame Analysis*, sociologist Goffman (1974) adopts the notion of frame to explore further how people make sense of everyday activities, such as in business meetings, a lecture, and a game of chess. Goffman (1981) also introduced the concept of 'footing' to account for the ways participants negotiate interpersonal relationships as they dynamically frame an interaction. According to Goffman's (1981) definition, footings are "the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance" (p. 128). A shift in footing would require a 'change in tone' signaled by linguistic features and an 'alteration in the social

capacities' or identity of the persons involved, and often a change in the 'participation status' of the individuals present (1981, p. 137).

In Gumperz's (1982) initial theorization of the interactional sociolinguistic approach, he did not use the term 'frame.' Nevertheless, at the core of his theoretical and methodological framework lies the understanding that utterances in conversation can only be interpreted with reference to a 'speech activity' identified by what he refers to as 'contextualization cues.' The concept of 'speech activity' is similar to, if not synonymous with, the uses of 'framing' in Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974). Studies following an interactional sociolinguistic approach often incorporated the concepts of framing to study how speakers manage to shift between frames by adjusting their styles of speech. Tannen and Wallat's (1993) application of frame theory in studying a pediatrician's shifts among the social encounter frame, the examination frame, and the consultation frame. As the pediatrician addresses different parties, she switches between different registers. While the different registers indicate the intended audience of the doctor's speech, the notion of frame remains necessary to clarify and differentiate the doctor's communicative goals.

Gordon's (2009) study of family interactions also adopts the concept of framing to illustrate how families create shared meaning and construct family identity in everyday conversations. Through her analysis of the 'embedding,' 'overlapping,' and 'blending' of frames in conversations, Gordon demonstrates how 'intertextuality' contributes to the 'lamination' of frames and footings (Goffman, 1974, 1981). The concept of intertextuality is used to illustrate the role of language in creating family meaning and a sense of 'familyness' (Gordon, 2009). Intertextuality is a term that came from Kristeva's (1980) interpretation and translation of Bakhtin's (1984) concepts of 'dialogicality,' which was drawn by Gordon to account for family members' intertextual uses of words and expressions. A particularly relevant notion of

intertextuality in Bakhtin's (1984) discussion of dialogicality is 'double-voiced discourse.' A double-voiced discourse is created by the repetition of "words that both refer to a referential object or event in the current interaction and are directed toward the other person's prior discourse" (Gordon, 2009, p. 8).

Gordon argues that the repetition of words, phrases, and paralinguistic features in a family's conversations is crucial for creating their unique 'familylect' (Søndergaard, 1991) and fostering family solidarity. The reason for this is that repetition can redirect the interlocutors to think about a mutual memory and invite them to "pay attention to this again" (Johnstone, 1994, p. 13). This would affirm the shared history, knowledge about a prior text or event, and membership between the interlocutors to create what Tannen (1989) referred to as 'involvement.' As stated by Tannen (1989, p. 12), involvement is "an internal, even emotional connection individuals feel which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words."

Familylect was introduced by Søndergaard (1991) as a way to describe the sociolect shared among the members of a family. Gordon (2009) builds on Bakhtin's theorizing about culture to make sense of familylect. Bakhtin reinterprets culture as something that "consists in the discourses retained by collective memory..., discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself" (Todorov, 1984, p. x). This understanding suggests that shared culture is derived from a shared repertoire of previous language exchanges. Gordon's (2009) work illustrates how repeating family-specific texts symbolically frame the family by conveying a sense of shared family membership, negotiating family meaning and identity, and constructing family boundaries.

Kendall's (2006) exploration of the frames and footings in American families 'dinnertime homecoming' conversations is another study that took a framing approach

to studying family interaction. With data collected from the naturally occurring conversations of two families, Kendall found four main frames in family dinnertime interactions: 'the dinner frame,' 'the managerial frame,' 'the caregiving frame,' and 'the sociable frame.' Within the sociable frame, she analyzed the shifts between four footings: 'the parent-child footing,' 'the couple-centered footing,' 'the family footing,' and 'the child-centered footing.' According to Kendall, her use of the term 'footing,' similar to Tannan and Wallat's (1993) use of 'frame,' includes "all the components Goffman describes in his treatment of footings—participation frameworks, linguistic registers, and functions of talk—rather than restricting footings to participation frameworks alone" (Kendall, 2006, p. 416).

In her study, Kendall focused on exploring the linguistic construction of a child-centered footing and how families negotiate this footing with other competing frames and footings in dinnertime conversations. She illustrated the ways the child-centered footing can serve to maintain family solidarity and fulfill the varying needs of family members. While offering a view of how interlocutors may achieve relational goals through balancing between footings and frames, Kendall's work paid less attention to investigating the details of each footing. Based on her research, 'a couple-centered footing' is established when spouses directly speak to each other without using child-centered kinship terms (e.g., 'mommy' and 'daddy') to foreground their 'non-parental social relations' as a couple (Kendall, 2006, p. 424). This understanding makes a couple-centered footing a "byproduct" of a child-centered footing in family contexts. However, for researchers interested in studying how romantic partners may align, connect, and bond with each other in conversation, this notion of a couple-centered footing is overly simplified and cannot account for couples' interactions in contexts without the presence of a child.

To gain a deeper understanding of the couple-centered footing, the current study explores its role in maintaining couple's intimacy by investigating its linguistic construction in interaction as well as the conceptual spheres that emerged from language uses. In line with Goffman's definitions of 'footing' (1981), I examine the couple-centered footing by analyzing how romantic partners align with each other to prioritize relational harmony and foster intimacy during utterance production and interpretation. In contrast to a couple-centered footing, I also identified an individual-centered footing in which self-expression and alignment with one's own thoughts, beliefs, and needs are prioritized in managing one's utterances. Couples are seen to balance between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversations to maintain coupledom and individuality in an egalitarian relationship.

The concept of 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) is drawn to account for the process of couple's meaning-making in context. Borrowing concepts from 'familylect' (Gordon, 2009; Søndergaard, 1991), I use the term "couple-lect" to refer to the "repeated, ritualized ways of speaking" (Gordon, 2009, p. 22) romantic partners may use to establish a couple-centered footing. Through repetition in their daily interaction, couples can incorporate relational-enhancing strategies and verbal transgressions into their "couple-lect" to construct and shape their couple-centered footing. In couples' language uses, the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground emerged as the sources of shared knowledge and expectations of romantic partnerships. These conceptual spheres operate within a couple-centered footing and provide the conceptual resources for romantic couples to manage their utterances in a couple-centered conversation.

## 2.2 Language, Relational Work, and Relational-Enhancing Strategies

In the body of work that studies language and social interaction, one of the most extensively cited and researched concepts pertains to speakers' face and politeness concerns in communication and how these concerns might influence and manage discursive interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Mao, 1994; Pan & Kádár, 2011; Terkourafi, 2015). Much like the interactional sociolinguistic approach, the politeness theory was also heavily influenced by Goffman's (1967, 1971) work, particularly the notion of 'face' in social interaction. According to the politeness theory, face is the motivating force for people to be polite. The desire for approval (i.e., positive face) and autonomy (i.e., negative face) drives people to manage their social relationships. The theory argues that speakers can use different strategies to mitigate 'face-threatening acts' such as order-giving, request-making, disagreeing, criticizing, and correcting others.

To include broader elements in the management of social relations, Spencer-Oatey (2000) expanded Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) and proposed a modified framework – 'rapport management.' She suggested that managing harmony and disharmony among people entails three interconnected components: 'face,' 'sociality rights and obligations,' and 'interactional goals' (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 13). In her later works (2000; 2007), she incorporated concepts from Brewer and Gardner's (1996) analysis of self-presentation levels to highlight the importance of considering the individual, relational, and collective aspects of identity when analyzing face and facework. Based on this threefold perspective, a person's identity can be understood as comprising three dimensions: (1) the personal attributes or characteristics that define them as individuals, (2) the relational aspects shaped by

their connections and roles with significant others, and (3) the collective membership and participation in a shared social group. In Culpeper's work (2011), he further clarified and refined Spencer-Oatey's (2000; 2007) framework, elaborating on Spencer-Oatey's previously brief definitions of these categories. In addition, Culpeper (2011) named the dimensions 'quality face,' 'relational face,' and 'social identity face'[4]. Out of the three dimensions, the relational aspect is most related to the current study. Since romantic partners are associated with one another in terms of their relational roles as boyfriends and girlfriends or spouses, they are expected to perform relational work to manage their intimate relationships. Based on Locher and Watts's definition (2005), 'relational work' refers to the actions taken by people to navigate and manage their relationships with others. Their framework suggested that politeness is just one aspect of relational work and should be considered alongside other types of interpersonal meaning. From the views of these politeness studies, an increasing emphasis on the importance of analyzing face and (im)politeness from a relational perspective can be seen (e.g., Arundale, 2006; Culpeper, 2011; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

Exploring the relational dimension to a broader extent, Spencer-Oatey's (2013) study on the concept of 'relating' in the workplace pointed out that employees and employers may have different facets of concerns than just the consideration of rapport and harmonious relations. She argued that "'relational work' has become too conflated with 'facework' and that it needs to be studied from a much broader perspective and in its own right" (2013, p. 135). Furthermore, concepts from Baxter and Montgomery's Relational Dialectic Theory (1996) were borrowed by Spencer-

[4] To my knowledge, Spencer-Oatey has not referred to her categorizations as 'quality face,' 'relational face,' and 'social identity face.' Though these concepts were mentioned under her component of face in the rapport management model, they were discussed as a person's sense of 'identity' closely related to the concept of face. In other words, Spencer-Oatey has not equated these different levels of self-concepts with face, but only suggested their relations.

Oatey (2013) to analyze the intricate relating concerns speakers may have in a corporate setting. Baxtor and Montgomery's (1996) analysis of the tensions inherent in romantic relationships illustrated three occurring contradictions:' connectedness–separateness,' 'certainty–uncertainty,' and 'openness–closedness.' Although couples strive for closeness, certainty, and openness, they must balance their desire for independence, autonomy, and privacy. For this reason, tensions and contradictions are a constant element in couple's communication.

The current study agrees with Spencer-Oatey's view (2013) that relational work should go beyond the scope of facework and politeness. Concepts from 'relational work' (Locher & Watts, 2005) and the three contradictions inherent in romantic relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) should also be considered when analyzing couple's communication. When discursive struggles arise, the main concern is usually not the loss of one's face but the loss of relational closeness and emotional connection. For this reason, I examined couple's footing shifts under the concepts of relational enhancement and relational harm. In my analysis, the notion of 'face threat' is considered more for its detrimental effects on the interpersonal relationship. I discussed such situations as a kind of "relational harm" in couple's conversation. Adopting relational-enhancing strategies to initiate a couple-centered footing, couples may mitigate potentially relational-harming situations and foster intimacy. While the concept of face will always have a place in any interpersonal interaction, I wish to emphasize the relational aspect of maintaining intimacy and connecting emotionally in close relationships by analyzing couples' conversations under the notions of relational enhancement and relational harm.

The research draws concepts from previous studies on the linguistic strategies that may serve relational-enhancing purposes in different communicative contexts. These linguistic strategies include the more readily recognized or "conventional"

forms of relational-enhancing uses, such as terms of endearment (e.g., Bailey, 2017; Baumgarten, 2022; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Gordon, 2009; Pauletto, Aronsson, & Galeano, 2017) and conversational humor (e.g., Coates, 2007; Everts 2003; Gordon, 2009; Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017; Norrick 2010).

Research on terms of endearment generally agrees on the effect of terms of endearment in fostering intimacy. As discussed in Gordon's (2009) study on familylect, terms of endearment are another key feature often seen in family discourse. In the settings of Italian and Swedish families, researchers (Pauletto, Aronsson, & Galeano, 2017) found that parents' use of terms of endearment can maintain an intimate bond with children, especially in contexts where relational closeness may be at stake. Bartholomaeus and Riggs (2017) also studied the use of terms of endearment in family discourse. Based on the data of Australian families, they expanded the concepts of terms of endearment to include all the words people can use to describe family, such as kinship terms. They found that the use of terms of endearment can engender feelings of belonging, love, and care between family members. However, such feelings can also be excluded when they are used by extended family members, leading to mixed responses and misunderstandings. Other researchers exploring the use of terms of endearment with corpus data (Baumgarten, 2022) and naturally occurring data (Bailey, 2017) both pointed out how terms of endearment can index affect and intimacy. These studies showed that the use of terms of endearment in close relationships could promote relational closeness and mitigate face-threatening situations. The current research builds on these works and demonstrates the different types of terms of endearment couples may use as relational-enhancing strategies to initiate a couple-centered footing.

Past scholarship on conversational humor often mentioned the positive interpersonal effects of humor in conversations. Everts (2003) explored the 'family

humor styles' in a case study of a Kansas family. The analyses showed that the family uses humor to achieve interactional goals such as relational harmony. In Gordon's (2009) study on family discourse, humor is also found in the family's daily conversations to invite play and bonding. Researchers studying humor in contexts also highlighted how conversational humor and shared laughter foster intimacy and promote solidarity in interpersonal relationships (Coates, 2007; Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017; Norrick 2010). In line with the findings of previous works, the current study illustrated through analyzing the banter, comical hypothetical, and teasing in couples' conversations how the use of humor offers couples a chance to express affection, transgress social norms, and engage in verbal play to enhance intimacy and a sense of coupledom.

To capture the complexities of couples' conversations, I also referenced research that explored the use of 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) linguistic strategies to mark relational closeness in interpersonal communication. In the current study, these strategies are analyzed as verbal transgressions. The verbal transgressions most commonly used by the couples in the data for relational-enhancing purposes are swearing (e.g., Daly et al., 2004; Dynel, 2012; Pluszczyk, 2015), sex-related talk (e.g., Pichler, 2007; Vaynman, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020), and baby talk (e.g., Bombar & Littig, 1996; Yueh, 2017).

Though typically taboo and socially unacceptable in many social contexts, verbal transgressions have been examined by researchers in a positive light for their relational-enhancing effects on interpersonal relationships. Pluszczyk (2015) analyzed the nature and the functions of swearing in a variety of contextual settings to illustrate a positive perspective toward its usage. Based on examples collected from selected movie scenes, Pluszczyk found that swearing can serve to vent negative emotions, insult others, invite laughter, and foster solidarity. The same is also pointed out by

Dynel (2012) in her study on anonymous Internet users' comments on YouTube. While acknowledging swearing as a form of abuse and instrumental aggression in power hierarchy building, she also highlighted the potential for swearing to encourage affiliation and create bonds among netizens. Drawing on naturally occurring data of factory workers, Daly and colleagues (2004) found that the expletive *fuck* can serve as a solidarity marker in face-threatening situations. Based on the findings of these studies, the current study explores the use of swearing as a relational-enhancing strategy between romantic partners. Couples were found to commit such verbal transgressions together to co-construct a couple-centered footing. By doing so, romantic partners may express affection, create verbal safe space, and engage in play for emotional and relational purposes.

Another type of verbal transgression that can be used positively in interpersonal settings is sex-related talk. In single-sex groups, men may bond with each other by sharing stories about their erotic experiences with women (Vaynman, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020). Adolescent girls were also seen to perform gender and sexual identity work among friend groups (Pichler, 2007). In dating chatrooms, participants are found to engage in flirtatious sex talk to create verbal play and build rapport (del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006). In her analysis of a lovers' phone call, Channell (1997) illustrated how talking about sexual desire can be a playful and flirtatious way for romantic partners to express love, affection, and emotional support for each other. Following the findings of these works, the current study examines how couples use sex-related talk as a relational-enhancing strategy to initiate a couple-centered footing and foster intimacy. Specifically, couples in my data tend to engage in sex-related talk the most when talking about sexual preferences and adopting sexual humor. As these types of talk rely on couples' shared relational history, knowledge about each other's

sexual preferences, and comfortableness to verbally transgress, their uses index intimacy and strengthen a sense of coupledom.

While stigmatized as the speech trait of the feminine and powerless, the uses of baby talk and *撒嬌 sajiao*-related practices are also studied by researchers as a strategy that may support the development of interpersonal relationships. In Yueh's (2017) work on *撒嬌 sajiao* in Taiwan, she considered *撒嬌 sajiao* as the behavior of 'infantilizing' oneself as someone that requires affection and attention from others. In the context of Taiwan, *撒嬌 sajiao* is discussed as a 'cure-all' for maintaining intimacy in romantic relationships. The acoustic features of *撒嬌 sajiao* are overall high pitch, vowel lengthening, rising intonation, elongation of sounds, nasal voice, and inarticulate pronunciation of words. These features are similar to those identified in baby talk. As discussed in a psychology study (Bombar & Littig, 1996), baby talk is a speech register for emotional bonding. Individuals who engage in baby talk with a romantic partner tend to feel more secure in the relationship. The frequency of baby talk use was also positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. The findings of these works showed that the use of baby talk plays an important role in the maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships.

Through analyzing couples' use of baby talk in context, I demonstrate how romantic partners, regardless of gender, may adopt baby talk to construct a couple-centered footing. Other than modifying morphophonological features to signal a switch to baby talk, couples can also contextually create exchanges that are similar to those between a young child and a caregiver. In couple's uses of baby talk, two types of dynamics can be observed. Depending on how couples engage with each other, the couple can construct what I name the "caregiver-child dynamic," in which one takes the roles of the nurturing caregiver and the adorable child to express affection and provide emotional support. They can also take a "child-child dynamic" and engage in

play for mutual enjoyment (See Section 4.5 for more discussion on the two dynamics identified in couples' uses of baby talk).

To highlight the relational aspects of maintaining intimacy in couples' conversations, I analyze the relational-enhancing strategies couples may use to establish a couple-centered footing. In addition, I explore how the shifts to a couple-centered footing may help foster intimacy, provide emotional support, and mitigate potentially relational-harming situations between romantic partners. My study shows that taking a couple-centered footing in daily conversations may support the expression of affection, safety to transgress social norms, and the joint creation of play, providing romantic couples the necessary verbal nurturance for intimacy and relational harmony to grow and prosper.

## 2.3 Couple's communication and Relational Closeness

Effective communication lies at the core of every thriving relationship. Whether one intends to convey affection and commitment at the early stages of romance or establish a stable and fulfilling partnership at later stages, both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication can support or hinder the success of a relationship. Our abilities to communicate positively and effectively are generally acknowledged as critical for cultivating intimacy, forging emotional bonds, addressing and resolving conflicts, aligning perspectives, and ensuring overall satisfaction within an intimate relationship.

Research in the fields of relationship science and family psychology has found that 'positive communication' between partners is linked to higher levels of relationship satisfaction, while 'negative communication' behaviors often indicate a troubled relationship (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006; Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gill et al.,

1999; Meeks et al., 1998; Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007; Williamson et al., 2012). Some of the negative verbal behaviors include faulting, rejection, hostility, presumptive attribution, defensiveness, disengagement, and avoiding responsibility (Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gill et al., 1999). On the other hand, positive behaviors are description, disclosure, qualification soliciting disclosure, negative inquiry, problem-solving, empathy/support, emphasizing commonalities, and responsibility (Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gill et al., 1999). However, these studies often offer categorizations of positive or negative communicative behaviors without providing a detailed analysis of how these behaviors are manifested or constructed by speakers in conversation. To bridge this gap, the current study examines how couples linguistically achieve emotional and relational goals in context. In this section, I review relevant past works on couple's communication from the fields of relationship science and linguistics. Specifically, I illustrate the importance of considering couple's disagreement, emotion management, and co-narration when examining the dynamics between language use and the maintenance of intimacy.

Couples participate in various activities involving negotiation, persuasion, cooperation, and emotional connection in their daily lives. When romantic partners have different interests, views, or opinions, it can lead to conflict or disagreement. Some degree of conflict is generally viewed as typical and expected in romantic relationships (Markman et al., 1988). However, the ways a couple deals with conflicts and negotiates different expectations over time are found to predict destructive or constructive relational outcomes (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). For this reason, couples' strategies to work through their differences as individuals and align with each other as a team during negotiation, disagreement, and persuasion can be essential to maintaining intimacy and relational harmony.

Based on Lakoff's (1981, p. 28) definition, persuasion is "the attempt or intention of one participant to change the behavior, feelings, intentions or viewpoint of another by communicative means." Though studies in the past were conducted to examine how persuasive strategies are used by couples in problem-solving and conflict-resolution contexts (Berg et al., 2003; Brinberg & Jaccard, 1989; Sillars et al., 2022; Spiro, 1983; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006; Wilson et al., 2022), they seldom focused on the turn-by-turn process of how such negotiation and alignment are done in context. Consequently, there is much to gain from examining the interactional processes of how couples discuss, persuade, and align with each other when holding different perspectives.

As discussed by marriage counseling experts, a more egalitarian and emotional bonding approach toward reaching a consensus and making a joint decision is associated with higher levels of relational closeness (Berg et al., 2003; Godwin & Scanzoni, 1989) and marital satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1999). My data showed that when couples express varying views and seek to gain compliance from each other, they often adopt linguistic strategies to shift between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing. By doing so, they can maintain a balance between aligning with their personal wants and relational needs. This can also avoid a potential escalation in the disagreement or a conversation breakdown. In other words, romantic couples are concerned about gaining compliance from their partner as well as monitoring and maintaining intimacy during negotiation and disagreement.

Another factor to consider in couple's daily conversations is the emotions that may arise when dealing with the highs and lows of the relationship. With their mix of passion, intimacy, and conflict, romantic relationships are a fertile ground for emotions to play out. Throughout the course of a relationship, a couple's ability to manage and regulate emotions can contribute to their relational satisfaction.

According to Levenson and colleagues (2014, p. 269), “Couples often find themselves in a complex emotional landscape that changes continuously as partners express and regulate their own emotions, respond to each other’s emotions and regulatory attempts, and try to regulate each other’s emotions.” The managing of negative emotions, as well as the up-regulating of positive emotions, are critical for building and maintaining intimate relationships throughout a couple’s life.

When building a romantic bond at the beginning of a relationship, couples tend to focus on up-regulating positive emotions such as passionate love, affection, joy, excitement, and enthusiasm (Gable et al., 2006) while down-regulating negative emotions such as jealousy (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Research also found that less escalation of negative emotional behavior was associated with higher marital satisfaction in couples of long-term relationships (Carstensen et al., 1995). For couples in later life, focusing on up-regulating emotions related to reminiscing about past accomplishments (Erikson, 1982) and companionate love (Sternberg, 1986) can also benefit the relationship.

While psychology experts recognize the importance of emotion management and regulation in close relationships, the field primarily focuses on trait-like qualities and measures to study how couples regulate emotions. For example, the three particularly promising measures in emotion management are ‘emotional reciprocity,’ ‘emotional linkage,’ and ‘physiological soothing’ (Levenson et al., 2014). Nonetheless, these studies have devoted less attention to how strategies are implemented and constructed in couple’s communication and discursive interaction. In other words, we might get a sense of the principles to keep in mind when attempting to manage each other’s emotions in conversation from psychology studies, but we are still uncertain about the specific linguistic means for achieving the communicative objective of emotion management.

My data showed that taking a couple-centered footing in conversation allowed romantic partners to invite and offer the emotional support and connection required to maintain relational closeness. By constructing a couple-centered footing using relational-enhancing strategies, couples may manage the positive and negative emotions that arise in their daily interactions while strengthening relational closeness and coupledom in the process.

Lastly, couples' co-narration can offer a deeper view into how romantic partners make meaning of their relationship as well as manage their coupledom and selfhood (Custer et al., 2008; Orbuch et al., 1993; Ponzetti Jr., 2005; Veroff et al., 1993). Studies in the field of family counseling highlighted the therapeutic value of a couple's narrative about their dating stories and its ability to predict relationship satisfaction (Custer et al., 2008; Holmberg et al., 2004; McCoy et al., 2017; Rotter & Cretzmeyer, 1998). As discussed before, family theories (Bowen, 1978; Olson, 2000) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) suggest the importance for romantic partners to maintain a balance between connectedness and individuality in a healthy relationship. The current study found that such balance can be achieved through shifting between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in couples' conversations.

Narrative is widely claimed to play a role in the construction of the self. Thornborrow and Coates (2005, p. 7) asserted that "stories tell us who we are: they are central to our social and cultural identity." Sociolinguists explore the emergent self in a social and cultural world by analyzing the narrative one produces and maintains in interaction (Coates, 2005; Coupland et al., 2005; Thornborrow & Coates, 2005). Other than investigating the relationship between narrative and the self, much attention has also been paid to the collaborative telling and retelling of shared

experiences (Coates, 1997; Coates, 2005; Falk, 1980; Norrick, 2005; Peng et al., 2021).

Coates (2005) analyzed the collaborative discussions in single-sex and mixed-sex groups and found that heterosexual couples often engage in joint storytelling to express their coupledom. The "careful syntactic, semantic and prosodic monitoring on the part of both speakers" in a couple's collaborative narration "is characteristic of people who know each other well, have shared knowledge of the topic, and are prepared to do the work of co-narration." (Coates, 2005, p. 90). This suggests that shared knowledge, linguistic monitoring, and a willingness to collaborate in joint narration can facilitate the display of a close and intimate dyadic dynamic. By studying how couples engage in collaborative talks and co-narration, we can gain deeper insights into the ways couples maintain their identities while tending to their relational needs for intimacy. In the current study, couples were seen to shift between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversations to keep a balance between sustaining individuality and maintaining intimacy (See Section 5.3 for more discussions). Whether the couple is recounting their dating story, making meaning of their relationship, negotiating varying views, or expressing affection for each other, the concern to convey a sense of connectedness and independence is always present in couples' language use.

Due to the sensitive and private nature of couple's communication, obtaining naturally occurring data on couples' conversations is challenging for linguistics researchers. Conversation analysts often have to turn to fiction or other published materials to study couples' talk. For instance, one of the earliest attempts to study the courtship talk of romantic couples at different relational stages used data from romance novels (Alberts, 1986). Moreover, Channell (1997) analyzed the discussion about love and desire in a lover's phone call. The study utilized transcripts of a private

conversation between members of the British royal family that were published by British newspapers. The playful and erotic conversations between prospective partners were also researched by collecting data from online dating chatrooms accessible to the public (del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006).

Pragmatics studies also provided us with insights into couple's communication. Research on affection and verbal play focused on the use of teasing (Chen, 2019; Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017), banter (Korobov, 2017), and affectionate expression (Pichler, 2016) in conveying affection and initiating intimacy. Studies on couple's disagreement and disaffiliation examined the accusations of infidelity (Korobov, 2016), resistance in couples counseling (Muntigl, 2013), silence in couples' conflicts (Pietikäinen, 2018), and Chinese couples' bickering (Yu et al., 2019). Based on the personal written accounts of relationships, researchers also examined how the language used in dating stories differs based on gender (Meinhof, 1997) and relationship quality (Robinson et al., 2019). With data acquired from elicited conversations, interviews, and naturally occurring interactrions, the current research seeks to add to the existing literature on couple's communication and explore how intimacy can be strengthened through couples' everyday language use.

To uncover the secrets of how language can help couples maintain and enhance relational closeness in conversations, I explore the linguistic strategies used to construct a couple-centered footing in relational-enhancing and relational-harming contexts. As discussed in this section, the ways couples navigate through disagreement, emotion management, and co-narration may contribute greatly to the maintenance of intimacy and overall relational satisfaction. These ideas were taken into consideration in the design and analyses of the current study. Drawing concepts from sociolinguistics and relationship science, my work bridges the gap between

disciplines and offers valuable insights into the ways language can contribute to nurturing relational closeness, emotional connection, and coupledom.

# CHAPTER 3: DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

This research comprised three types of data – elicited conversation, interview, and authentic discourse. The elicited conversation and interview data were collected from 6 American and 11 Taiwanese couples, resulting in over 30 hours of recorded data. The authentic discourse data was gathered from over 90 hours of naturally occurring conversations in the everyday interactions of two couples. The three types of data allowed for a comprehensive approach to couple's communication. Through collecting data from different cultures, the current research provided observations of shared communicative and conceptual resources couples of different cultures may use to maintain intimacy and relational closeness.

The elicited conversation and interview data allowed for comparable data between couples from different sociocultural backgrounds. Couples were presented with communicative tasks and interview questions that required them to negotiate, discuss, co-narrate, and support each other emotionally and relationally. Taking a more structured approach to data collection, a wide range of discursive interactions of multiple couples can be observed in the elicited conversations and interviews without the need to shadow a couple for an extended period of time. Due to the private and sensitive nature of couples' intimate interactions, these methods made a less intrusive way into couples' daily communication possible. They can also ensure that the analyses captures a wide spectrum of communication patterns and strategies from different couples. Nevertheless, the structured nature of the communicative tasks and interviews can sometimes affect couples' interactions, casting doubts on the representativeness and authenticity of the data. To address this concern, naturally occurring self-recorded data from two couples were also incorporated into the research to complement the interview data.

The naturally occurring data set came from couples' self-recordings of their daily interactions for about three to four months' time. In the data, couples engage in varying life events together, such as having meals, doing chores, making plans, talking about work and family, etc. Compared to the elicited conversations and interview data, the authentic discourse revealed a more in-depth view of couples' daily communication. I also had follow-up interviews and played some recordings back to the couples to learn more about the nature of their interactions. This allowed me to analyze their verbal interactions more comprehensively and explore deeper how couples verbally navigate through daily events.

These three types of data provided the research with a balance between range and depth in the analysis. By observing the patterns of language uses recurrent in different types of data, the research offers valuable insights into couples' constructions of a couple-centered footing in the maintenance of intimacy as well as the intricacies behind the dyadic meaning-making process of certain language use.

## 3.1 Elicited Conversation Data

As the goal of the research is to investigate how language can be used by romantic couples to maintain a sense of intimacy and coupledom in their daily interactions, communicative tasks are adopted to elicit similar communicative contexts that couples may engage in on a regular basis, such as problem-solving, emotion management, and co-narration. Specifically, couples were invited to engage in two communicative tasks – the 20 Questions Game and the Desert Island Survival Game.

Most couples performed the tasks on campus in a conference room or classroom, while a few of them were carried out at the participant's residences. The locations

were chosen for their privacy and quietness to ensure high-quality audio and video recordings. The locations also provided a safe and comfortable space for the couples to discuss their relationships, views, and personal lives. Some couples chose to face each other when completing the tasks without the interviewer's presence. The audio and video recording devices were placed directly in front of the couple.

### *3.1.1 The Couples*

The elicited conversation data for this research was collected from two sites. The first data collection site was in Berkeley, California, from March to July 2019. Six US couples participated in the research. Couples were recruited through the psychology and linguistics classes I attended while studying at the University of California, Berkeley, as a visiting student researcher. Many of the participants are classmates and/or friends of mine who have knowledge of my past works on couple's communication. Their academic backgrounds and training in psychology and linguistics perhaps further motivated them to participate in my research exploring the dynamics of close relationships, intimacy, and language.

The second data collection site was mostly in Taipei, Taiwan. The data collection period was mainly from January 2021 to March 2022. Eleven Taiwanese couples participated in the study. Several of the couples had prior acquaintance with the researcher and volunteered to take part in the research, while others heard about the research through mutual friends and agreed to participate. The current research recruited 17 couples in total, comprising 6 American and 11 Taiwanese couples. The American couples used English, and the Taiwanese couples used Mandarin Chinese during the communicative tasks.

Most of the couples in the research consist of at least one partner who is a classmate and/or friend of mine. Many of them knew about my research interests and

were aware of my exploration of the ways language can help people live better relational lives. This prior knowledge and connection with the researcher may be a reason why the couples that volunteered in the study are generally ones that considered themselves as having "good" relationships. Some of the couples I approached rejected my invitation because they felt that the quality of their conversation or relationship was not "good" enough for anything to be learned from their interactions. As for the couples that agreed to be in my research, they had an average rating of 8.71 at the time of their participation when asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their relationships on a scale of 1 to 10. In other words, many of the couples in my research identified their relationships as being "good" and "satisfying" relationships, possibly presenting themselves as such and putting on their "best" behaviors as a couple when engaging in the research. While this may cast doubts on whether these couples' interactions can represent the everyday interactions of all couples, this may also allow us to see what couples consider "good" conversations and interactions in an intimate relationship may be like. As the goal of the research is to investigate how language can support the daily maintenance of intimacy, American and Taiwanese couples' shared ideas and behaviors in the interaction of a "good" and "intimate" relationship may also provide us with a view of the communicative and conceptual resources different languages may offer to help sustain a satisfying relationship.

Couples of any age, race, gender, or sexual orientation were welcomed, with the only requirement being that at least one partner in the dyad was born and raised in the US or Taiwan (Please refer to Appendix 1: Research Invitation for the research invitation for couple recruitment). Though attempts were made to include different social backgrounds, the participants in the study were less diverse than anticipated. In

terms of age, most couples were in their early 20s to 30s at the time of the recruitment. The racial backgrounds of the couples were mainly White Americans and East Asians.

Nevertheless, representations of heterosexual and queer couples (i.e., 8 straight couples, 6 lesbian couples, and 3 gay couples) were included in the interview data. The participants in the study identified as having various sexual orientations, such as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and queer. The couples had varying lengths of dating time, ranging from 2 months to 10 years at the time of their interviews (Please see Appendix 2for further details of the couples' basic and relationship information). Two Taiwanese couples were married, while all the other couples had never been married. All participating couples provided written consent to partake in the study and undergo video and audio recordings of their interview sessions for research purposes.

### *3.1.2 The 20 Questions Game*

The 20 Questions Game activity in the current research was adapted from "The Love Map 20 Questions Game" developed by psychologist John Gottman. The game was designed by Gottman to help couples enhance understanding and closeness by learning more about their relationship and relevant information about their partner's life. It is argued that the more a couple knows about each other, the better they are equipped to cope with conflict and stressful events (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In Gottman's original design, couples were instructed to randomly pick 20 out of 60 questions to answer in the game (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The questions ranged from basic preference questions (e.g., What is my favorite color? What is my favorite holiday?) to more personal and private questions (e.g., What is my favorite way to be soothed? What do I fear the most?).

For the sake of comparability, couples were not given the freedom to select their own 20 questions from the complete list. Instead, twenty questions were picked in advance and printed on cards for the couples to draw and take turns answering during the activity (please refer to Appendix 3: Questions Used in 20 Questions Game for a complete list of the questions used in the 20 Questions Game). The questions chosen for this activity consisted of basic questions (e.g., What kinds of books do I most like to read?) as well as questions of a more personal and delicate nature (e.g., Name one of my concerns or worries.). In addition, some of the more sensitive questions were selected to see how couples will navigate through speech events that might trigger feelings of embarrassment, sadness, irritation, disappointment, etc. For instance, "What turns me on sexually?" "What was my worst childhood experience?" and "What personal improvements do I want to make in my life?" are some of the questions that could potentially require couples to focus more on relational maintenance instead of factual accuracy.

After explaining the game's rules, the researcher would exit the room and leave the couple to play the 20 Questions Game by themselves. The couples were given the option to skip the questions they did not want to answer. During the game, the couple was instructed to take turns answering the questions on the cards as well as given the authority to decide whether their partner's answers were correct. Due to this design, it should be noted that many of the couples ended up discussing or negotiating their answers. In some cases, the judging partner would even help the other get the correct answer by offering hints or accepting answers they originally did not have in mind. From the couples' communicative behaviors in this activity, I observed how couples disagree and negotiate with each other while maintaining a sense of closeness. The couples also demonstrated the different ways they could verbally support each other through topics that might be more sensitive or taboo than others.

### *3.2.1 The Desert Island Survival Game*

The Desert Island Survival Game in this research was adapted from "The Gottman Island Survival Game." According to Gottman and Silver's (1999) book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, accepting influence and learning to yield was proposed as one of the principles to increase marital satisfaction. The exercise was designed by Gottman to help couples examine their abilities to share power and work together as allies when facing difficult situations (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The couples were asked to imagine that their cruise ship just sank in the Caribbean, and they woke up on a desert island. They had no idea where they were and were unsure if anyone knew about the ship's misfortune. One of the partners was injured, and a storm was fast approaching. The couples were told to individually select and rank 10 items from the ship's inventory based on the items' importance to their survival plan without consulting each other. After that, they were to come together and make their joint decision on the 10 items and their rankings.

In Gottman's design, there were 26 items from which the couples could select. Most of these items were commonly believed to be crucial to survival. For instance, "matches," "knife," and "small life raft, with sail" were some of the items on this list. All the original items from Gottman's list were kept except for "one change of clothing" in my research design. As there was also the item of "two changes of clothing," it is considered repetitive to keep both. I also added the items "a picture of loved ones," "coffee beans," "a book about survival skills," "20,000 dollars," and "2 fishing hooks" to the inventory in my version of the Desert Island Survival Game (Please see Appendix 4: Prompt for Desert Island Survival Game for a complete list of the ship's inventory). These items were added to broaden the types of negotiation that might be involved during the task. Other than focusing on what would be the most "practical" items for survival on a deserted island, items such as "a picture of

loved ones" and "20,000 dollars" might spark up conversations about emotional ties with family members or values on money and the future. Items like "coffee beans" or "2 fishing hooks" might allow partners to discuss their preferences or hobbies. The item "a book about survival" was added to accommodate the possibility that some more academic-oriented or city-based couples might feel insecure about their lack of survival knowledge. The data showed that some of these newly added items did lead to further discussions between partners.

After the researcher explained the rules of the game, the couple would be left alone to discuss their joint selections and rankings on the 10 items. From this activity, I observe how couples discuss, negotiate, and align with each other in a joint-decision making and problem-solving task. Couples often adopt conversational humor to maintain a sense of closeness and camaraderie when expressing different views.

## 3.2 Interview Data

Following the completion of the communicative tasks mentioned above, the same couples (i.e., 6 American and 11 Taiwanese couples) were interviewed about their relationship. All the couples filled out a questionnaire regarding their basic information, such as their age, nationality, ethnicity, biological sex, gender, and relationship self-rating questions (Please see Appendix 5: Pre-Interview Questionnaire for the pre-interview questionnaire used in the research). In the interview, couples were asked to share their relationship story and answer questions about their initial and later impressions, daily interactions, relationship progression, evaluation, etc. (Please see Appendix 6: Interview Questions for a complete list of the interview questions). The couples were informed that they could skip any questions if they did not feel comfortable answering.

As mentioned before, many of these couples consist of at least one partner who is a classmate and friend of mine. Most, if not all, were comfortable sharing details of their relationships in the interview with me. While the interview setting and my presence can potentially impact their interaction, these factors can also contribute to the couples "performing" their ideas of the communication between a "good" and "happy" couple in front of a third party. This can allow for the observation of how couples may maintain a sense of coupledom and sustain intimacy in a non-private setting.

In line with the rationale of the design of the 20 Questions Game, some interview questions might be more sensitive or difficult for couples to answer. These could require the couples to verbally create a safe space for each other to speak their minds or help manage the potential relational harm triggered by some of the topics. For instance, questions such as "What are some things you think your partner can improve on?" or "What do you think is the weakness of your relationship?" may result in relational-harming consequences if the answers are not managed appropriately. Furthermore, I include questions that may lead to tender and affectionate moments, giving couples the opportunity to showcase or strengthen their closeness through their answers. Such questions may include "Can you tell me what your partner is like in your eyes?" or "If you can say something nice to your partner right now to make them feel appreciated, what would it be?"

The purpose of the interview is to explore how couples may balance between maintaining a sense of coupledom and expressing individualities. By examining how couples may co-narrate their dating stories, share their relational experiences, and support each other emotionally and relationally in conversations, I can gain a deeper understanding of how couples may discursively maintain intimacy and express their (dis)similar viewpoints about their relationships.

## 3.3 Naturally Occurring Data

The naturally occurring data for this research was collected from the self-recordings of two couples. The first couple is a Taiwanese couple in their late 20s. The couple recorded over 24 hours of their private interactions from June to August 2023. The couples' conversations are mainly in Mandarin Chinese. The second couple is an interracial and intercultural couple in their early 30s. From July to October 2023, the couple recorded over 66 hours of dyadic interactions. The conversations are mainly in English. The naturally occurring data captured a wide range of conversation topics between romantic partners, including talks about family and friends, work, hobbies, finances, chores, values, and views. The recordings also consisted of various situational contexts such as meal preparation, mealtime/dinnertime, TV/show-watching, homemaking, bedtime rituals, etc. Discursive activities like problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, argument, co-narration, and emotion management were found in the data as well. As couples go through the highs and lows in their relationships, they are constantly managing between nurturing their coupledom and sustaining their own individualities. The naturally occurring data complemented the interview dataset in the research and revealed a deeper view of couples' daily communication, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of couples' language use in maintaining relational closeness and intimacy.

### *3.2.1 Couple 1: Jerry and Lynn*[5]

Jerry and Lynn are a Taiwanese couple in their late 20s. They were asked to record their interactions from June to August 2023. At the time of their recordings, they had been dating for over five years. The couple lives and works in the same city

[5] Jerry and Lynn also participated in the interview of this research in November 2019. They are the first Taiwanese couple to volunteer to be in the study.

in Taiwan and generally sees each other every day. Jerry has his own apartment, and Lynn shares an apartment with her mother. Though Lynn still lives with her mother, Lynn stays over at Jerry's place for about 3 to 4 days a week, making them a "part-time" cohabitating couple. Most of the recordings were done in Jerry's apartment, where the couple spends most of their quality time together every week. The couple usually spends time with each other after work on weekdays and sometimes all day on weekends. Therefore, many of their recordings were made during dinnertime or when they hung out in the evening. There were also a few recordings of their outings during weekends, mostly to go try out new restaurants or play at a claw machine arcade.

In their interactions, the couple often engages in discussions on a variety of topics. Some of the recurring talks include discussions about family members or pets, work-related issues, shared hobbies, food preparation and preferences, financial decisions and purchases, and newfound ideas. When having conversations, Jerry and Lynn would adopt relational-enhancing strategies such as terms of endearment and conversational humor to express affection, construct a safe space, and create verbal entertainment. These linguistics uses were also found in couples' interview data, confirming their important roles in the maintenance of intimacy in couple's communication. In addition to adopting the linguistics strategies most commonly used by couples to fulfill relational purposes in the data, Jerry and Lynn have incorporated other linguistic means, such as code-switching and 'ventriloquizing' (Tannen, 2003; 2004), into their couple-lect to maintain closeness.

### *3.2.2 Couple 2: Anita and Kyrios*

My husband and I are the second couple who contributed to the naturally occurring data recordings of this study. With my husband's consent, I could turn the audio recording device on whenever we spent time together. This offers unparalleled

access to authentic interactions that are central to understanding couple's communication. Other researchers taking the interactional sociolinguistic approach also adopted a similar data collection method to study the interactions between families (Gordon, 2003) and couples (Tannen, 1990). Due to the sensitive nature of couples' private interactions, studies using personal self-recorded data provided an unfiltered look into the intricacies of the relationship, offering a more in-depth view into the lives of couples.

As a researcher, I am aware that my role as both the observer and the observed may result in some challenges and potential biases in my analysis. By the same token, my deep knowledge about my relationship and our changing dynamics and communicative styles over the years also provided me with comprehensive insights that I could not have gained through brief interactions with other couples. As the aim of the research is to a acquire deeper understanding of couple's communication in general, I focus on analyzing linguistic patterns and strategies most widely found in the conversations of all couples in my data. This also helps eliminate biases and enhance the representativeness and validity of my analyses.

My husband and I are in our early 30s. We had been together for almost a decade and married for nearly a year at the time of our recordings, which were made from July to October 2023. My husband is an African American man, and I am a Taiwanese woman. We dated long-distance for the majority of our relationship. After we got married in 2022, we started cohabitating. Most of the recordings were done in our room at night, where we spent most of our quality time together. There were also some recordings of us sharing the afternoon together in our apartment on our off days.

Our conversations cover a wide range of topics. We often discuss our family and friends, work-related matters, hobbies, social and racial issues, and thoughts about the world. In these conversations, we use relational-enhancing strategies such as terms of

endearment and conversational humor to express affection, create a safe space, and engage in verbal fun with each other. Similar to other couples in our data, we also committed many verbal transgressions in our conversations to achieve relational-enhancing goals. In addition, my husband and I have made meaning of certain language uses (e.g., code-switching) and incorporated them into our couple-lect as cues for relational enhancement.

## 3.4 Data Analysis

This research borrows concepts from interactional sociolinguistics to study the relationship between language and intimacy. Adapting concepts from Gumperz's 'contextualization cues' (1982; 1992), I examine the relational-enhancing strategies that can be interpreted as linguistic cues to initiate and construct a couple-centered footing and foster intimacy in couples' conversations. Concepts are also drawn from Gordon's (2009) notion of 'intertextuality' and 'familylect' to discuss how each couple can create their "couple's language" or "couple-lect" through intertextual meaning-making. The study is also influenced by Kendall's (2006) application of frame theory in studying the dinnertime homecomings of American families. I investigated further what she called a 'couple-centered footing' when studying the dynamics between romantic partners in my data. The study followed Goffman's (1981, p. 128) definition of 'footing' as "the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance." I argue that having a balanced shift between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in couple's communication can contribute to a fulfilling and egalitarian relationship.

To prepare my data for linguistics analysis, I used AI transcribing services[6] to generate transcriptions for all the recordings. I then went over my data and the transcripts several times to get a sense of prominent linguistic patterns and phenomena in the couples' communication, taking notes and marking down parts of excerpts most relevant to answering my research questions. With the marked excerpts, I manually transcribed the linguistic details using conversation analytic transcription conventions (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) (Please see Appendix 7: Glossary of Transcription Symbols for the glossary of transcription symbols). After the transcriptions were done, I moved on to coding the data.

To further understand the couple-centered footing and how it can be initiated and constructed by language use between romantic partners, I coded the relational-enhancing strategies used by couples in my data. My codes were based on the concepts from previous research on the linguistic strategies that can support relational development in interpersonal relationships. Some of the more frequently occurred codes include "terms of endearment" (e.g., Bailey, 2017; Gordon, 2009; Pauletto, Aronsson, & Galeano, 2017; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Baumgarten, 2022), "we-pronoun" (e.g., Brown & Gilman, 1960; Clancy, 2020; Du Bois, 2012; Margolin, 1995), "humor" (e.g., Coates, 2007; Everts, 2003; Gordon, 2009; Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017; Norrick 2010), "co-narration" (e.g., Coates, 2005; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Kotthoff, 2009; Norrick, 2005) and "code-switching" (e.g., Chen, 1996; Heller, 1988; Lo, 1999; Mäkilähde, 2018, Su, 2009). In addition, I explored the verbal transgressions that were used to fulfill relational goals in the data. I analyze language uses that are typically considered inappropriate or offensive as verbal transgressions. The codes for verbal transgressions also came from past studies on the 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) and less socially acceptable

[6] I used Transkriptor for the English data and Yating (雅婷逐字稿) for the Mandarin Chinese data.

linguistic strategies to achieve relational closeness. The more commonly used codes are "swearing" (e.g., Daly et al., 2004; Dynel, 2012; Pluszczyk, 2015), "sex-related talk" (e.g., Channell 1997; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; Pichler, 2007; Vaynman, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020), "baby talk" (e.g., Bombar & Littig, 1996; Yueh, 2017), and "graphic storytelling" (e.g., Coupland & Jaworski 2003).

As the research goal is to reveal some of the most common strategies couples may use to initiate a couple-centered footing, I present a qualitative analysis of the strategies that can be identified in most couples' interactions. I also examined the uptakes of these strategies in context to confirm the relational-enhancing effects of such uses. Generally speaking, if the strategy is used reciprocally or other relational-enhancing strategies are adopted to respond, I would consider them a pair of couple-centered footing initiation and co-construction. Other supportive responses such as laughter, agreement, or further elaboration may be cues that the initiation of couple-centered footing is acknowledged. However, for the footing to be jointly established in context, the couple both have to exhibit uses of relational-enhancing strategies. In other words, when a partner phrased an utterance with one or more relational-enhancing strategies, it would be considered a potential shift to a couple-centered footing. If relational-enhancing strategies are used reciprocally in context as a response to the initiation, it is viewed as a co-construction of the couple-centered footing. In contrast to the concept of the couple-centered footing, utterances without apparent use of relational-enhancing strategies would be considered as taking an individual-centered footing (See Section 5.3 for more discussion on the differences between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in couple's discourse).

To further understand the shared communicative and conceptual resources motivating couple's language use in establishing intimacy, I also conducted a data-

driven analysis on the conceptual spheres of the couple-centered footing. Based on the types of psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and relational expectations revealed in couple's language uses, I outlined the three conceptual spheres couples may invoke to produce and interpret relational-enhancing meanings in context.

# CHAPTER 4: RELATIONAL-ENHANCING STRATEGIES AND VERBAL TRANSGRESSIONS IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Maintaining intimacy in close relationships requires constant effort. Without the proper nurturance and relational work, romantic partners can easily grow distant as they move through different stages of a relationship. Weathering the highs and lows in the relationship, couples engage in all types of conversations and share a myriad of emotions along the way. The language used in a couple's everyday interaction may either facilitate or hinder their love and affection, commitment and trust, and pleasure and enjoyment. A thorough examination of my data reveals that couples adopt a wide range of linguistic strategies to achieve communicative and relational goals in their daily conversations. To comprehensively understand couples' intimacy maintenance strategies, I examine both the "conventional" as well as the "unconventional" or "riskier" linguistic strategies for relational enhancement.

Drawing concepts from past sociolinguistic works on the relations between language, rapport, and interpersonal relationships, I analyzed the more steadily established relational-enhancing strategies most commonly and widely adopted by the couples in my data. Specifically, couples were found to use 'terms of endearment' (e.g., Bailey, 2017; Gordon, 2009; Pauletto, Aronsson, & Galeano, 2017; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Baumgarten, 2022) and 'conversational humor' (e.g., Coates, 2007; Everts 2003; Gordon, 2009; Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017; Norrick 2010) the most to construct a couple-centered footing and foster intimacy in interaction. I present my analysis and findings in subtypes to capture the variety within these two relational-enhancing strategies. In Section 4.1, I discuss the four types of terms of

endearment used by couples in my study: spousal titles (e.g., husband and wife), affectionate nicknames (e.g., babe, honey, dear, sweetie), name-related nicknames (e.g., diminutives of first name and family nicknames), and pejorative nicknames (e.g., booger, chubby, poopy, stinky). In addition, I explore the conversational humor couples use in the forms of banter, comical hypothetical, and teasing in Section 4.2.

These relational-enhancing strategies are examined as linguistic cues that can initiate shifts into a couple-centered footing, which may foster relational harmony in contrast to an individual-centered footing. These strategies were identified in contexts where couples maintain intimacy and mitigate potentially relational-harming exchanges in daily interaction. It should be noted that the goal of using subtypes to discuss couples' uses of these relational-enhancing strategies is not to provide a comprehensive list or 'clear-cut taxonomy' (Dynel, 2009) of the strategies, but to showcase the range of some of the most common strategies couples may adopt to fulfill relational and communicative goals.

As mentioned before, romantic partners' interactions are not all roses and rainbows. Couples may use offensive language, experience tension, exhibit raw emotions, and engage in socially unacceptable behaviors in their everyday interactions. I also examine the "riskier" or less "conventional" linguistic strategies couples may use to achieve relational goals. I consider linguistics uses typically evaluated as 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987), taboo, and negative as verbal transgressions. After examining my data, the uses of swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk emerged as the verbal transgressions couples may commit in their daily conversations to enhance their relational closeness.

In linguistics studies, there has been much scholarly attention attributed to the use of 'improper talk' as a way to index closeness between the interlocutors and the nature of the conversation as 'intimate' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987).

Coupland and Jaworski (2003) discussed in their study how transgression in graphic and hyperbolic storytelling can be a form of play to foster intimacy. Politeness researchers proposed the concept of 'mock impoliteness' to describe the use of 'face-threatening' strategies in enhancing solidarity (e.g., Culpeper, 2011; Haugh & Bousfield, 2012; McKinnon & Prieto, 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). The use of taboo language and swearing, such as the sexual expletive *fuck*, is found to support in-group solidarity (e.g., Daly et al., 2004; Dynel, 2012; Pluszczyk, 2015). Sex-related talk, another type of conversation that is sensitive and taboo in nature, is pointed out by linguistics studies as a means for men and women to socially bond and perform sexual identity work (e.g., Pichler, 2007; Vaynman, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020). Channell's work (1997) on the talk of love and desire in a lover's phone call also showed the important role sex-related talk may play in supporting couple solidarity. In addition, the use of baby talk, an infantile or *撒嬌 sajiao*-related register, may invite judgment as well as affection in adult communication. Previous studies found that adult use of baby talk may express intimacy and fondness in romantic relationships (e.g., Bombar & Littig, 1996; Yueh, 2017). Unlike the more "conventional" relational-enhancing strategies, these verbal transgressions may be risky for their inherently improper or offensive nature. However, it is also for this very nature that such strategies can be used to signal closeness and foster intimacy in couple's interaction.

Through repetition and 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009), couples may include different linguistic devices into their couple-lect to support their relational needs in everyday interactions. When used reciprocally, these strategies can establish a couple-centered footing that prioritizes relational harmony and emotional needs. Furthermore, different uses of these linguistic strategies can shape and invoke different conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing to support the maintenance

and improvement of intimacy in couples' daily conversations. Couples' language use in constructing a couple-centered footing draws resources from the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground. Section 4.6 discusses the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations of romantic relationships in each of these conceptual spheres for romantic partners to align and connect with each other when producing and interpreting utterances. It also explains how verbal transgressions may draw linguistic resources from multiple conceptual spheres to ensure a relational-enhancing interpretation.

In short, this chapter offers insights into how relational-enhancing strategies and verbal transgressions can establish a couple-centered footing to support relational closeness in romantic relationships. In addition, through exploring the linguistic construction of a couple-centered footing, I present data-driven findings on the three conceptual spheres that constitute and are constituted by couples' language use in couple-centered conversations.

## 4.1 Terms of Endearment

Terms of endearment are words or phrases used to address a target of affection. These terms were found as one of the main features in familylect (Gordon, 2009). According to Gordon (2009), such terms are often used in reciprocal pairs between spouses. By adopting terms of endearment in their daily conversations, couples were able to cooperate and align with each other as well as convey the metamessage of rapport and familiarity. In my data, many couples also used terms of endearment when addressing each other in daily interactions. With a view to revealing how couples may use different types of terms of endearment to achieve communicative and relational goals in context, I discuss couples' uses of (1) spousal titles (e.g.,

husband and wife), (2) affectionate nicknames (e.g., baby/babe, honey/hun, loves/lovey, dear, sweetheart/sweetie), (3) name related nicknames (e.g., diminutives of first name and family nicknames), and (4) pejorative nicknames (e.g., booger, chubby, poopy, stinky) in the following sections. Some couples might use one type more than the other, while others may adopt a wider array of these terms in their daily interactions. The current research proposed that couples' use of terms of endearment can help establish a couple-centered footing to support a sense of coupledom and enhance couple solidarity.

### *4.1.1 Spousal Titles*

Spousal titles are terms of endearment used to address one's marital spouse or one's own marital title in a relationship[7]. These terms include husband and wife in English or *老公* 'husband' and *老婆* 'wife' in Mandarin Chinese. When used in context, they can also appear in diminutive forms such as hubby/hubs and wifey/wifu in English or *公* and *婆* in Mandarin Chinese.

As these terms are directly related to one's marital status, they might suggest a sense of exclusivity, commitment, and obligation. In cultures where monogamy is mandated like the US or Taiwan, individuals are legally allowed one spouse at a time. That is to say, the use of spousal titles underscores the exclusive nature of the relationship and signifies a commitment to a single partner. Holding a spousal title

[7] It should be noted that when referring to a spouse to a third party, there could be terms such as *先生*, *丈夫*, and *外子* for husband as well as *太太*, *妻子*, and *內人* for wife in Mandarin Chinese. However, these terms are seldom used when referring to each other without the presence of a third party. As the focus of my research is to explore how these terms are used between partners in a relationship to enhance a sense of intimacy, only the terms used to address one's spouse or oneself in a relationship will be discussed. Furthermore, there are also regional or dialectal differences regarding spousal titles in Mandarin Chinese. In China, the term *媳婦(兒)* 'wife' is used by husbands to refer to their wives. In Taiwan, the same term is used by a groom's parents to refer to their 'daughter-in-law' instead. As the Taiwanese couples did not use the term to address female partners in my data, it is not discussed in the research.

also implies one's acknowledgment of the legal duties and familial responsibilities that are associated with the marital role. When spousal terms are used between couples, these inherent traits allow spouses to maintain a couple-centered footing where they foreground their committed roles and emotional needs as a couple instead of individuals in a relationship.

In my data, only married couples used spousal titles to address each other. Two out of the three married couples in the research were found to use these terms. However, this does not mean that only married couples can adopt these terms to address one another. Dating partners may use these terms to refer to each other to express affection and commitment in their relationship.

The following excerpt came from Emily and Harry, a Taiwanese couple that had been together for more than nine years and married for over two years at the time of the interview. When asked what was something Emily would say to make him feel loved and appreciated, Harry said being called husband would make him happy.

**Example 1: Call me husband**

1 H: °可能叫我**老公**我就很開心了吧°(.)>因為<她都會不喜歡講一些親暱的詞=

Maybe call me **husband** then I'll be happy already, because she doesn't like to use affectionate words.

2 E: =°越難聽到的越覺得好°.

The harder it is (for him) to hear it, the better (he) thinks it is.

3 H: 她都會故意說什麼(.)她-她-

She will say something on purpose like, she-she-

4 E: 就是我喜歡逗他啦.

I like to mess with him.

5 H: 比方說(.)欸↑妳說一下**老公**很棒(.)她就會說什麼=

For example, eh you say (this) real quick, "**Husband** is awesome." Then she will say something like.

6 E: =£嗯(.)很棒£.

Mmm, awesome.

7 H: 很棒(.)呵呵呵(.)£不然說老公公很棒£(.)呵呵呵(.)£在那邊鬧£(.)£然後我們就會在那邊 hh 玩很久£(.)[就我會說(.)妳說.]

Awesome. Hehehe, Or say old man is awesome. Hehehe. Mess around. Then we'll play for a while. I will say, "You say (it)."

8 E: [£我喜歡-我喜歡]鬧£.

I like -I like to mess around.

9 H: £然後她就一直鬧我£(.)£就不講這樣子£.

Then she will keep messing with me and not say it.

The couple's response indicated that spousal titles could convey intimacy and affection, drawing resources from the conceptual sphere of the love zone (See Section 4.6 for more discussions on conceptual spheres). The couple was aware that these terms could elicit a positive evaluation from their spouse. Emily's selective use of *老公* 'husband' further increases the meaning and appeal for Harry. Their account also suggested that the use of this term has become a playful and affectionate 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967) or 'day-to-day patterns of interaction' (Gordon, 2009) between the couple, providing further opportunities for relational enhancement.

To initiate this ritual, Harry would request Emily to utter some words of praise or affection along with the spousal title *老公* 'husband.' Emily usually follows with partial compliance with Harry's request. Though she would omit the spousal title or shift the semantic meaning of the term by duplicating the word-ending (i.e., *老公*

'husband' to 老公公 'old man'), her response supplies the cooperation and playfulness required for the ritual to continue until Harry eventually stops making the request. In this case, unlike how one would generally use terms of endearment to address another to show affection, the addressee was the one who requested to be addressed by his spousal title to feel loved and appreciated. Though Emily does not always fully comply with Harry's requests, their ritual still achieves the goal of reinforcing their intimacy, as illustrated by the example below.

Towards the end of the interview, the couple was asked to say a few words to each other to make the other person feel loved and appreciated. Harry went first. As he was speaking, Emily got visibly emotional and started crying. When it was her turn, she stated how she had been feeling stressed and sick, explaining why she was having a hard time saying anything affectionate to him. She ended her statement by stating that she hoped to get better soon so that everything would be back to normal again. This was when Harry initiated their ritual.

**Example 2: Husband, I love you**

1 H: 快點對我說(.)快點.

Hurry say it to me, hurry.

2 E: 努力啊. ((touch Harry's face))

Work hard (on the relationship). ((touch Harry's face))

3 H: ((hug Emily)) 妳要說-妳要說老公我愛你(.)快點(.)妳要說老公我愛你.

((hug Emily)) You should say-you should say, "**Husband,** I love you."

Hurry, you should say, "**Husband,** I love you."

4 E: ((pat Harry's head))

5 H: 好結束(.)哈哈哈哈

Ok done. Hahahaha.

Since Emily could not voice her affection through her own words, Harry initiated the ritual to encourage her to do so. Though she still did not express it verbally, she used her touch and gaze to show her affection. During this exchange, Emily was still crying and having difficulty speaking. Initiating this ritual to shift the interaction to a more playful one may be a way to help regulate the tearful emotional responses as well as mark the end of the exchange. From the video recording, Emily smiled during the ritual, and the conversation ended on a more light-hearted note as Harry laughed out loud and accepted her response.

Perhaps it was Emily's communicative style or my presence that made it more difficult for Emily to utter loving words and the spousal title to Harry. It is nonetheless evident that she was aware of the meaning and positive effect the term has on her spouse. Her statement in the last excerpt shows that "the harder it is (for him) to hear it, the better (he) thinks it is." If used reciprocally by the couple, the spousal titles can promote intimacy and mark the moment as affectionate.

Another couple that uses spousal titles in their daily lives to help enhance relational closeness is my husband and me. Though spousal titles can be used by non-married couples, my husband and I only started using them after marriage. Our reason was that we felt the terms imply a serious and lifelong commitment that should be reserved until marriage. This is not to say that all couples may feel the same and want to wait until marriage to use spousal titles. However, the legal aspect associated with the terms still indicates a stronger commitment than terms like boyfriend or girlfriend. Even when used by nonmarried couples, the terms promote intimacy by indicating one's willingness to commit deeper to the relationship.

From our recordings, the use of spousal titles was seen the most when making requests to each other regarding household duties, or discussing relational achievements as a married couple. For instance, toward the end of dinner cooking, I

would say, “Hubby, can you help set up the table? I’m almost done here.” Or he would sometimes say, “Wifey, can you make your husband some coffee?” when he sees me making my morning coffee. In these cases, the spousal titles highlight our status as married partners and frame the request as a part of our joint effort in homemaking. Such uses invoke concepts of love and commitment from the conceptual sphere of the love zone to establish the couple-centered footing. As we are both committed to this marital partnership, sharing household duties is expected and agreed upon in an egalitarian relationship. The commitment and the exclusivity aspects implied by these terms supported the relational intimacy between the partners, mitigating the directness of the request.

The excerpt below was an example from our discussion of our relationship achievement. An hour before this exchange, we were talking about his brother’s recent pregnancy scare. In that discussion, we revisited a topic we have been talking about and agreeing on for years. That is, we are currently not ready to have children and will continue to use contraceptives until we are certain about having children. The following exchange was initiated an hour after that conversation.

**Example 3: Me and my wife don’t want kids**

1 K: Me and **my wife** don’t want kids that’s why we don’t have a↑ny:: ((the utterance was sung in an upbeat and happy tune))

2 A: £That’s right↑ **husband**↑£

3 K: £We’re gonna get a dog or cat£(.) £Or both↑£

4 A: £Sure£(.) £It’s better than kids£.

In this excerpt, the spousal titles were used in pairs. Such reciprocal usage co-constructed a couple-centered footing as the spousal status was mutually

acknowledged. The consensus on the topic also reinforces the 'alignment' (Gordon, 2003) between the couple. 'Supportive alignment' is when participants in a conversation agree with and validate each other's contributions, promoting a sense of teamwork and collaboration. Some conversational features identified to construct supportive alignment include shared smiles and laughter, repetition of words and phrases, supportive back channeling, and collaborative sentence building (Gordon, 2003; Kangasharju, 1996; Kangasharju, 2002). On the other hand, nonaligning actions tend to be delayed and signaled by turn-initial objects, providing cues for recipients to anticipate nonaligning responses and modify their prior actions before encountering rejection or disagreement (Lindström, 2009).

As a married couple, we shared similar viewpoints regarding childbearing and acknowledged each other's roles in the decision. Having different views on childbearing could be troubling or deal-breaking for a couple (Jonason et al., 2015). The fact that our views aligned could be considered a noteworthy achievement in the relationship. This was perhaps the reason the topic was reinitiated in a singsong and playful manner, as shown in the excerpt. By using spousal titles to address each other in this context, we highlighted our roles as married partners and celebrated our previous discussions and agreement on childrearing as a relationship achievement.

From the examples mentioned above, spousal titles, due to their legal association with marital status, imply exclusivity, commitment, and obligation in the relationship. These traits allow these terms of endearment to maintain a couple-centered footing in which a couple's affection/emotion, shared duties, and (aligned) views can be expressed and negotiated while reaffirming a sense of coupledom. In other words, when spousal titles are used in daily conversations between couples, partners acknowledge each other's roles in the relationship and support couple solidarity.

*4.1.2 Affectionate Nicknames*

Affectionate nicknames are terms of endearment generally used between intimates to show connection and affection. Such nicknames include terms like babe/baby, boo, sweetheart/sweetie, cutie, love/loves/lovey, snookums/snooks, honey/hun, dear and darling in English or *寶貝/寶* 'baby/babe', *親愛的/親* 'dear', *小可愛* 'cutie', *小甜心* 'sweetheart' in Mandarin Chinese. These terms are commonly used by adults to address children or pets in family settings.

Affectionate nicknames are also widely used by couples when addressing each other. Though often evaluated positively, previous studies noted the condescending and sexist undertones of these usages, particularly when used by men toward women outside of intimate contexts (e.g., Ilie, 2018; Hildebrand et al., 2022). However, when romantic couples use these terms of endearment with each other, they can be used to express love and affection in daily conversations. The reciprocal uses of affectionate nicknames can also create a couple-centered footing in which the partners regard each other as a target of affection and adoration. Furthermore, since these terms are often used by a parent to a child, extending these terms to address one's spouse can also mean that the partner is creating a conceptual safe space for the other person to act "childlike" or "cute." In other words, using these terms allows the couple to act lovingly and dotingly toward one another as if caring for an adorable or vulnerable child or pet.

When Harry was asked by Emily in their "20 Questions Game" what was a way to comfort her, Harry said to hug her and say, "*我的親親小寶貝，老婆屁屁* 'my dear little baby, wifey booty.'" Emily was laughing and slapping Harry's leg as she heard the answer, yet she considered this answer correct and gave Harry points. This example showed that affectionate nicknames and spousal titles, along with hugs, may

help comfort a spouse. When one is in need of comfort, being reminded that they are the target of their partner's affection could offer the necessary emotional support to help them through a difficult time.

It is worth noting that when Harry said those words, he said it in a similar way to the 'baby talk' (Bombar & Littig, 1996) used by an adult speaking to a baby or a young child. Unlike how he usually speaks, he protruded his lips, raised his pitch, and used duplication in his utterance. This way of speaking, combined with the use of affectionate nicknames, can create a couple-centered footing that fosters a sense of intimacy (more on how couples may use baby talk in conversation to enhance relational closeness will be discussed in Section 4.5).

Other than comforting a romantic partner, these affectionate nicknames can perform other functions in different contexts. For instance, they can be used for attention-getting when initiating a topic with a partner (e.g., "Babe, when I was at school today…"). They can facilitate the softening of a request (e.g., "Lovey, can you bring me a glass of water?" as opposed to "Can you bring me a glass of water?"). Naturally, affectionate nicknames can support the expression of loving and tender feelings for another (e.g., "Babe, I love you." and "I love you too, boo."). Couples can also use affectionate nicknames to greet and reassure each other, as demonstrated by the following examples from my husband and me.

In this excerpt, I was moving towards the nightstand to grab something when I accidentally woke my husband. He opened his eyes to look at me. That was when I gave him a kiss and said the following words.

**Example 4: Little cutie**

1 A: ((kissing sound))((baby talk-caregiver))It's a **li↓ttle↑ cu↑tie↓**(.) Hi↑ **cu↑tie↑**

2 K: Hi **babe**. ((went right back to sleep))

To fully understand this excerpt, one must have some relational information about us first. My husband and I have quite different sleep schedules. It's often that one of us is asleep when the other is up. In the past, we had discussions about this, and he stated that he felt like his body was trying to stay alert at night so that he could protect the household. When he manages to sleep, I try not to wake him. And if it happens by accident, I usually let him know that everything is alright so he can go back to sleep without worrying.

The above excerpt showed that I greeted my husband with an affectionate nickname in the baby talk register after waking him up unintentionally. The couple-centered footing established by the affectionate nickname foregrounded him as the target of my adoration and constructed a safe space for him to become childlike and vulnerable. In this context, the term may serve as a reassurance that there is no need for him to stay alert because I would be the adult on watch. Furthermore, his reciprocal use of an affectionate nickname helped co-construct the couple-centered footing. The reciprocal use showed that he wasn't upset or alarmed by the disturbance. The fact that he could go back to sleep right after his response is further evidence that affectionate nicknames can serve as a way to comfort or reassure a spouse.

Affectionate nicknames may also be used as a response to accept gratitude. The following excerpt also came from my husband and me. This time, I was the one sleeping. Upon entering the room and noticing that I was not covered by a comforter, my husband took the initiative to place one over me and gave me a kiss. This gesture woke me from my sleep. Realizing his thoughtful action, I expressed my gratitude.

**Example 5: You are the snookums after all**

1 A: Thank you.

2 K: ((baby talk-caregiver)) You're wel↑come **snookums**(.) You are the **snoo↑kums** after all.

Similar to the previous example, the affectionate nickname created a couple-centered footing in which I was addressed as a target of adoration and a "vulnerable sleeping child" worthy of being nurtured by a "caring adult." The doting tone of his baby talk use further enhanced the affection expressed in his words and promoted relational closeness.

As a part of the response and acceptance of my gratitude, the affectionate nickname used in this occurrence may also serve as a way to mitigate the relational harm created by my "thank you" statement. When expressing thanks, the speaker accepts a debt and, in doing so, humbles their own face. At the same time, the hearer may feel constrained to minimize the debt. This creates a delicate situation where potential threats are posed upon both the speaker and hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The use of the affectionate nickname may redress the debt implications of thanks when gratitude is expressed and accepted between romantic partners. By taking a couple-centered footing and suggesting that the act of affection and care is warranted, one may minimize the indebtedness and shift the focus to the relational-enhancing aspect of loving and giving in the relationship.

Affectionate nicknames can also express disapproval and disagreement while mitigating the potential relational harm involved. During Laura and Kevin's 20 Questions Game, Kevin asked Laura to name one of his hobbies.

**Example 6: Babe…**

1 K: Name one of my hobbies.

2 L: Hehe(.)£being a troll£.

3 K: ((baby talk-caregiver)) £**ba**::**be£.**

4 L: Ok just kidding(.) Ok umm(.)one of (…)

Here, Laura used a tease as a response. Without stating directly that he disagreed with Laura's answer, Kevin's use of the affectionate nickname suggested his disapproval. Whether he disagreed with the truth value of the answer or the timing of the tease, his response served its purpose in making Laura give a more thoughtful answer in the next turn, to which Kevin approved and gave her points.

As proposed by Haugh and Pillet-Shore (2017), teasing can invite intimacy in initial interactions between acquaintances. When a tease is initiated, though it sometimes runs the risk of being taken as criticizing and face-threatening, it offers the hearer a chance to show their affiliation with the speaker through "laughter, agreement, and elaborations of the tease" (p. 264). Between intimates, teasing can continue to be used as a relational maintenance strategy in daily interaction to generate deeper connection and affiliation.

In the case of Laura and Kevin, Laura's attempt to invite intimacy through the tease was not accepted by Kevin. This led to Laura's claim of 'non-serious intent' (Haugh, 2016), "ok just kidding," and a more serious answer. However, Kevin's laughing tone and the use of an affectionate nickname in a babytalk register might alleviate the relational harm caused by his disapproval of Laura's answer and his rejection of her laughter invitation. As the use of affectionate nicknames can create a couple-centered footing in which the romantic partner is viewed as the target of affection and protection, the sense of intimacy was still maintained, even though

Kevin did not join in on the tease to create an affiliative moment with Laura (More on teasing is discussed in Section 4.2.3).

In this section, I have demonstrated through examples how affectionate nicknames can perform different functions in couples' conversations. These terms of endearment can be used to express loving and affectionate feelings and create a safe space for a romantic partner to act "cute" and "childlike," utilizing conceptual resources of the love zone and the safe space. They also support a couple-centered footing that allows the couple to manage harmony and foster intimacy during times that could potentially be challenging or relational-harming

*4.1.3 Name-related Nicknames*

Name-related nicknames are names that stem from one's birth name or legal name, often used by family and close friends. These nicknames mostly take the form of diminutives. However, while using these name-related nicknames can index familiarity and solidarity, they are not exclusive to intimate relationships. For people who prefer to be addressed by a diminutive form of their names on a daily basis (e.g., Mike for Michael or *小明 xiaoming* for *家明 jiaming*), these name-related nicknames might not have the same pragmatic force in marking closeness as ones that are reserved between intimates.

In the current research, I look at name-related nicknames that are used only by romantic partners or family and close friends. In other words, only a select few people may use these intimate forms of address. People outside of this immediate circle have other more preferred and appropriate forms of address to refer to this person. Take my name as an example, I am mostly referred to as Anita by colleagues and acquaintances in social settings. When at home, my family and husband address me

by my name-related nickname, Yen or Yen Yen. If my husband decides to call me Anita when we are in private, it would be a very marked situation for me as the name did not reflect the appropriate closeness that we have. Nor would I feel comfortable if one of my colleagues decide to call me Yen Yen at work.

The differences between who can use these names suggest that name-related nicknames as terms of endearment can mark not only closeness but also exclusivity. That is, only the closest in one's social circle have access to these forms of address. In the setting of couple's communication, it is common for romantic partners to choose exclusive forms of address to call each other. These chosen nicknames are usually agreed upon by the couple and used in the relationship as a way to mark coupledom and intimacy. It should also be noted that these name-related nicknames may have different origins and meanings exclusive to the romantic partners. Consequently, while the use of these terms of endearment could generally contribute to fostering relational closeness, they may emphasize different aspects of the couple's history and draw on different relational resources to nurture intimacy, depending on the experiences of each couple.

In this section, I discuss how these name-related nicknames as terms of endearment are used by couples to maintain a couple-centered footing and support relational harmony. Before moving on to analyzing examples from my data, I will briefly discuss some of the main ways these name-related nicknames can be formed in English and Mandarin Chinese.

In English, it is common to address one by the shorter form of their first name, usually the first syllable or sound of the name. For example, Al or Alex could be used instead of Alexander and Jen for Jennifer. Diminutives of English names can also be formed by adding the *-y/-ie* suffix to a shorter form of one's original name. Examples of this type of nickname include Johnny for John, Matty for Matthew, Debbie for

Deborah, and Lizzie for Elizabeth. Duplication of a syllable from the original name is another way to form diminutive nicknames in English. Jojo for Joseph or Josephine, Momo for Monique, Gigi for Georgina, and Mimi for Naomi or Emilia are some of the nicknames formed by duplicating a syllable from the original name. These English diminutive forms of one's birth name can be used by intimates or people outside of their immediate circle. For some people, diminutive forms of their name often become habitual in their daily use. It is not uncommon for English speakers to go by a nickname form of their birth name when interacting with acquaintances or colleagues. If this is the case, the nickname would lose its ability to index familiarity and closeness in intimate relationships.

In Mandarin Chinese, one's birth name usually consists of a monosyllabic surname[8] and a disyllabic given name[9]. According to the statistics announced by Taiwan's Department of Household Registration in 2023, *家豪 jiahao* and *淑芬 shufen* are the most used given names for men and women in Taiwan. As for surnames, *陳 Chen*, *林 Lin*, *黃 Huang*, *張 Chang*, and *李 Li* stand out as the top five surnames with the highest population in Taiwan. Unlike English-speaking cultures, it is not as common for Mandarin-Chinese speakers to address each other only by given names in non-intimate settings. Using the 'surname + title/profession' form, such as *陳先生* 'Mr. Chen,' *林女士* 'Ms. Lin' *黃醫生* 'Dr. Huang,' *張老師* 'Teacher Chang,' or *李老闆* 'Boss Li' is more preferred in social and formal settings. In institutions like government offices, schools, or hospitals, full names may be used for

[8] Disyllabic surnames also exist in Mandarin Chinese. However, these are not as common as monosyllabic surnames. According to the report released by Taiwan's Department of Household Registration in 2023, there are only 118 disyllabic surnames out of the total 1,785 surnames in Taiwan, taking up only 0.1% of the entire population.

[9] Monosyllabic given names are also a part of Chinese-speaking culture. Yet, such naming practice is also comparatively less than the common disyllabic given names. Based on the report given by Taiwan's Department of Household Registration in 2023, over 390,000 people have a monosyllabic given name. This number represents only 1.67% of the total population.

identification purposes. This is not to say that full names are not used in other contexts. Within different 'communities of practice' (Eckert, 2006), there may be different norms for one to address each other. Students in the same class might call each other by their full names as the class norm, regardless of their level of familiarity.

Generally speaking, to address one by their given name without being evaluated as impolite in Chinese-speaking culture, one or more of the following conditions have to be met. First, the person being addressed holds less power than the person addressing them, possibly due to a younger age or lower social standing. For example, it is socially more acceptable for a teacher to call their students by their given name, but not the other way around. Second, the person being addressed is considered to have equal standing to the speaker. For instance, students in the same class may call each other by their given names. Members of the same club, regardless of age or profession, can also use given names to address each other. Lastly, the person being addressed is of close social distance with the person addressing. This often happens between close friends or potential romantic partners. These conditions indicated that calling someone by their Chinese given name could index power relations, social relations, and familiarity.

Aside from using Chinese given names to address people in close relationships, diminutives of the given name are also adopted by family and close friends. These name-related nicknames can take a shorter form of the original name, such as 豪 *hao* for 家豪 *jiahao* or 芬 *fen* for 淑芬 *shufen*. Diminutives can also be formed through duplication, like 豪豪 *haohao* for 家豪 *jiahao* or 芬芬 *fenfen* for 淑芬 *shufen*. Adding the nominal prefix 小- *xiao-* or 阿- *a-* to a shorter form of the given name is another way to form diminutives, as in 小豪 *xiaohao* or 阿豪 *ahao* for 家豪 *jiahao* and 小芬 *xiaofen* 阿芬 *afen* for 淑芬 *shufen*. Similar to the case in English, albeit less common in Mandarin Chinese, some may prefer to go by these diminutive forms of address in

their daily lives. In such cases, these nicknames may lose their ability to index closeness and familiarity as effectively as a more exclusive nickname would. Otherwise, when these diminutive forms are used, they typically signify a closer and more exclusive relationship between the speakers.

In romantic partnerships, couples may use name-related nicknames to create a couple-centered footing. When these nicknames are used by an intimate circle of family and friends, or only between romantic partners, they indicate a sense of exclusivity. Only those closest to the addressed can use these terms without being inappropriate or impolite. Moreover, if the name-related nicknames were originally used by one's parents and caregivers as terms of endearment to address the person when they were a child, the continued usage of these name-related nicknames by a romantic partner in adulthood may also suggest a doting and nurturing attitude toward the person. Similar to the effect of using affectionate nicknames, the parent-child family origin might be a source employed by romantic partners to build a safe space for their partner to act like a child again and enjoy being pampered and viewed as one's target of adoration.

In the following example between my husband and me, name-related nicknames are used reciprocally to form a couple-centered footing and support the daily maintenance of couple solidarity. The following exchanges happened after I woke up and went to find him in a different room. He greeted me with my name-related nickname in a manner that was similar to his interaction with his baby nieces.

**Example 7: It's a Yen**

1 K: ((baby talk-caregiver)) It's↑ a↓ **Yen**↑(.) Hi↑ **Yen**↑ **Yen**↑

2 A: ((baby talk-child)) Hi↑ **Yah**↑**ya**↑

3 K: ((baby talk-caregiver)) What's up↑ **Yen**↑?

4 A: ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) No↓::thing↑:. (3.0) ((normal register)) Are you hungry?

5 K: ((normal register)) Yes.

6 A: ((normal register)) I'll go make you something then.

7 K: ((normal register)) Ok.

In this interaction, my husband addressed me by my name-related nicknames, which are exclusive to our family members. His greeting was uttered in a "singsong" intonation pattern and was higher in pitch and slower in rate, similar to the traits of baby talk. The use of name-related nicknames and his doting tone helped launch a couple-centered footing where I was regarded as the target of his affection and given the safe space to be nurtured like a child.

As mentioned before, Yen and Yen Yen are name-related nicknames only reserved for members of my family. My parents were the ones that gave me these nicknames when I was a baby. However, as I got older and had a younger brother, my parents stopped using these name-related nicknames and started calling me *姊(姊)* 'older sister.' When my husband learned about this while we were dating, he decided to be the one to "bring back" my name-related nicknames to address me. As discussed previously, we also address each other by spousal titles and affectionate nicknames in our daily interactions. The use of my name-related nicknames, as opposed to the meaning of other types of terms of endearment we used with each other, has a special association with a particular period of time when I was nurtured and given undivided attention by my caregivers.

My reciprocated use of his name-related nicknames also carries special meaning. Yahya is, in fact, a name-related nickname I gave my husband when I supported him through his legal name change. When we decided on this nickname together, we also

noted how Yahya would sound like the perfect match for Yen Yen. Consequently, Yahya is a nickname that marked an important transition for him as an individual and for us as a couple.

Since my husband underwent several name changes, most of his family members still refer to him by his previous name. His baby nieces and nephews are the ones who got to know him only as Yahya. They are also the few family members who would address him as such. The above exchange had a root in our joint babysitting experience with his nieces. When his then-toddler nieces came to visit, they would come into our room and greet him by saying, "It's a Yahya. Hi Yahya!" Then he would respond with "Hi, baby." We both found this childish exchange adorable and started doing this with each other in our daily lives as a playful 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967).

The excerpt showed that we continued to speak to each other in baby talks, each taking a caregiver and a childlike role for four turns (More on the different dynamics in the use of baby talk is discussed in Section 4.5). Then, after a long pause, I switched to my normal adult-speaking voice and asked him if he was hungry, to which he also shifted back to his normal speaking voice to carry on the rest of the conversation with me (Turn 4). The long pause and the changes in our voices marked a shift from a more couple-centered footing for relational enhancement to a more "neutral" footing or 'individual-centered footing' for daily tasks and interactions.

In the above excerpt, the reciprocated use of each other's name-related nicknames supported a couple-centered footing as the nicknames chosen had exclusive and special meanings for us as a couple and individuals. They also recreated a memorable shared caregiving moment we had together with our loved ones. For couples that have verbal exchanges like these in their daily interaction, such

interactions could potentially become ritualistic ways for romantic partners to playfully create couple-centered footing and strengthen intimacy.

Jerry and Lynn are another couple that adopted name-related nicknames with each other quite frequently. According to the couple, they tried to come up with nicknames for each other after they started dating. Jerry told me in their interview, "Using full names to refer to each other is a little strange. It's like doing a roll call or taking attendance. We simply want to have something that is not difficult to say to show that we are close. Since we couldn't think of other better nicknames to use, we each picked a word from our names."

Unlike my husband and I, who use a combination of spousal titles, affectionate nicknames, and name-related nicknames as terms of endearment to refer to each other, Jerry and Lynn adopted name-related nicknames as the main terms of endearment in their interactions, sometimes replacing first-person and second-person pronouns. When these nicknames are used as terms of endearment, they regularly serve the functions of relational enhancement, emotion management, and mitigations for request and disapproval. However, it should also be noted that while name-related nicknames are the most frequently used terms of endearment for Jerry and Lynn to address each other, they are still used in limited context than the more neutral first and second-person pronouns. This perhaps reaffirmed further that the use of name-related nicknames, as opposed to the functions of neutral pronouns, indexes the closeness and familiarity of the couple.

The following example shows the use of name-related nicknames in expressing affection and creating connection. In this exchange, Jerry asked Lynn to teach him how to do tasks on a shopping app to gain discount points.

**Example 8: J and L**

1 J: 任務完↑成↑ 然後咧? 蝦幣好少喔(.)這是什麼夾夾樂?

Misson complete! And then what? So few Shopee points. What is this claw machine game?

2 L: 有給已經很不錯了好不好?

It's good enough they're giving something ok?

3 J: ((kissing sound)) 妳有沒有愛我啊? (1.0) ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) **L**↑[10]我要夾囉:↑那個是什麼? 那個是什麼?

((kissing sound)) Do you love me? ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) **L**, I am going to grab it now! What's that? What's that?

4 L: 看 **J** 按什麼.

Depends on what **J** presses.

5 J: 要夾到什麼? 星星嗎?

What am I going to grab? Stars?

6 L: 隨便(.)它每個都垃圾啦.

Whatever, all of them are trash.

7 J: .hhhh 呵呵 £**L** 說它每個都垃圾£.

Hehe **L** said all of them are trash.

8 L: hh £對啊£

Yea.

In the middle of doing tasks on the shopping app, Jerry gave Lynn a kiss and asked her if she loved him (Turn 3). He then used her name-related nickname to engage her and tell her that he was about to play the game in a baby-talk register. In

[10] For the sake of anonymity, I used the capitalized letters J and L to signify the one-word name-related nicknames that Jerry and Lynn picked out from their Chinese legal names.

the next turn, Lynn responded by using his name-related nickname (Turn 4). Though Lynn didn't verbally answer Jerry's question about whether she loved him or not, the reciprocal use of his name-related nickname supported the co-creation of the couple-centered footing initiated by Jerry. As shown in the following turns, the two continued to talk about the task in a light-hearted manner. After Lynn said that the gifts the app gave for free were "trash," Jerry repeated her words using her name-related nickname (Turns 6 & 7). Then the two share a laugh together.

The reciprocal use of name-related nicknames in this example showed that the couple co-created a couple-centered footing in which affection and solidarity were conveyed with or without the verbalization of love. At the beginning of their relationship, they picked these name-related nicknames as terms of endearment and have been using them exclusively with each other. As these terms reflect their coupledom and their commitment to the relationship, they may evoke a loving and tender feeling they have for each other, showing how name-related nicknames as terms of endearment can be employed as a strategy for relational maintenance.

Subsequent examples showed how the couple used name-related nicknames to help manage negative emotions. When it comes to daily interactions between romantic partners, couples might experience sadness, fear, anger, and hurt for various reasons. Name-related nicknames can be effective in initiating a couple-centered footing that helps remedy or improve emotionally charged interactions.

As Jerry and Lynn were preparing dinner together, Lynn asked to drink the bottled sparkling water Jerry had bought. However, instead of giving Lynn a new bottle, Jerry gave her one that had been opened before. This was when the two got into a disagreement and started to sound irritated.

**Example 9: J is mean!**

1 L: 來點喝的吧.

(Let's) get something to drink.

2 J: 妳要喝什麼?

What do you want to drink?

3 L: 你的氣泡水.

Your sparkling water.

4 J: 我的氣泡水是::?

My sparkling water is?

5 L: >為什麼<?這你((loud))喝剩的.

Why? This is your ((loud)) leftover (drink).

6 J: 嘖(.) ((baby talk-caregiver)) 先↑把↓它喝↑::完:啦:::它喝又沒有問題啊:: 妳開一罐妳又喝不完(.)妳每次>都這樣<.

Tsk, ((baby talk-caregiver)) Drink this first. It's no problem to drink it. You open a (new) bottle but you are not able to finish it. You do this every time.

7 L: ((loud)) 啊你那罐你等一下就喝完了(.)你就自己喝我那罐新的啊.

((loud)) You can finish your bottle very soon. Then you can drink my new bottle.

8 J: °才不會有這種事情° (4.8) 唉 hhh(.)>借過<.

There won't be such a thing (4.8) Ugh, make way.

9 L: ((baby talk-child))((loud))((nasal)) 哎↓吻↑！**J**↑很↓[兇↑::::::]

((baby talk-child)) ((loud))((nasal)) Aiyo. **J** is mean.

10 J: [£我是叫妳借過£(.)£又沒說什麼£].

I'm telling you to make way, (I) didn't say anything.

11 L: ((baby talk-child))((loud))((nasal)) **J**↑真的好↓[兇↑::::::]

((baby talk-child))((loud))((nasal)) **J** is really so mean.

12 J: [£我是叫妳借過而已 *((Taiwanese)) 是咧*[11]-£?] ((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) 好啦.

I'm telling you to make way, that's all. *((Taiwanese)) What are (you)-?* ((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) Fine.

After Jerry handed Lynn an opened bottle of sparkling water, her response had an obvious change in tone compared to her previous turns where she sounded calmer and more neutral (Turn 5). In this turn, she spoke louder and faster as she contested, showing her disapproval of Jerry's action. Jerry attempted to convince her by providing an explanation as to why he chose to give her an opened bottle (Turn 6). However, his explanation was not only a disagreement to her objection, but it could also be a criticism of her behavior (i.e., always opening a new bottle but couldn't finish). Though his response was uttered in the softer tone of baby talk, it did not help persuade Lynn or soften the mood. Lynn continued to contest loudly and told Jerry to finish his old bottle and her new bottle (Turn 7). This was when Jerry's tone also shifted from baby talk to a more serious tone in Turn 8. His utterance was faster, quieter, and had a more monotone style of intonation. After a nearly 5-second pause, he sighed and asked Lynn to make way for him. The sigh and the shift of topic could be an indication that he wanted to disengage himself from the disagreements due to frustration or irritation.

Perhaps noticing the irritation in her partner's reaction, Lynn suddenly shifted to a baby talk style of speech and used Jerry's name-related nickname before saying that he was mean (Turn 9). By changing her tone to baby talk and using Jerry's name-related nickname, she initiated a couple-centered footing where she showed her

[11] All the transcriptions of Taiwanese characters are based on the *Dictionary of Frequently-Used Taiwan Minnan* compiled by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan.

vulnerability and intention to shift away from the disagreement and prioritize their harmony. This strategy appeared effective as Jerry laughed and softened his tone in the next turn (Turn 10). Yet, his response could still be interpreted as a bit defensive and more individual-centered as he did not agree with Lynn's statement or give other verbal cues to co-construct the couple-centered footing with Lynn. Lynn then repeated her statement with an intensifier *真的* 'really' while using the same baby-talk register and Jerry's name-related nickname to once again invite Jerry to join her in shifting the footing from more of an individual-centered footing in which one is more focused on being right and getting their way to a couple-centered footing (Turn 11). This made Jerry laugh again as he made light of his behavior by using words such as *而已* 'that's all' and a shortened version of the Taiwanese expression *是咧 si--leh* 'What are (you)?' (Turn 12).

The complete expression for the expression *是咧 si--leh* 'What are (you)?' is *你是咧哭 li-si--leh-kao* 'what are you whining about' or *你是咧講啥 li-si--leh-kong-siannh* 'what are you talking about?' Both of these were used as a response to someone whining or complaining about something. While these expressions can be used to show aggression in conflicts, they are often used by friends and intimates when bantering with each other, especially in the shortened form. It should also be noted that Jerry is not a native Taiwanese speaker like Lynn is. According to Jerry, he picked up this expression from Lynn after the two started dating. They usually use this with each other in a playful and teasing manner. As a result, when Jerry used this expression that he learned from his previous interactions with Lynn and finally showed agreement by saying *好啦* 'fine' in a baby-talk register, the disagreement reached a point of resolution as they both gave sufficient verbal cues to shift from more of an individual-centered footing to a couple-centered one. The two went on their conversation as usual after Turn 12.

This example showed how name-related nicknames can help initiate a couple-centered footing during a disagreement. When a partner appears to show signs of negative emotions in conversation, adopting terms of endearment could mitigate potential relational harm by inviting a partner to drop their original opposing stances and prioritizing couple solidarity.

The next excerpt demonstrated how name-related nicknames can also be used to offer compassion and comfort to a romantic partner. Jerry and Lynn were having instant noodles from *Haidilao*, a brand famous for its spicy hot pot, for dinner at home. Lynn was not used to the spiciness of the food, so she was coughing and sniffling throughout dinnertime. The exchanges below happened right after Lynn had another serious episode of coughing and sniffling.

**Example 10: L is really smacked by the spice!**

1 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) **L** 真↑的被辣扁了耶.

((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) **L** is really smacked by the spice.

2 L: ((coughing sound)) ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal))~啊:::~

((coughing sound)) ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) Ah.

3 J: 看妳一直在 ((imitate coughing sound))

I see you keep ((imitate coughing sound))

4 L: ((coughing sound)) ~辣壞掉了~

((coughing sound)) The spiciness broke me.

5 J: ((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) **L** 被↑辣↑扁↓了.

((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) **L** is smacked by the spice.

6 L: 去你媽海底撈.

Damn your mom *Haidilao*

7 J: 它是好吃的啊(.)但我是覺得它太鹹而已(.)然後 **L** 是覺得它太辣了.

It's delicious, but I think it's too salty that's all. And **L** thinks it's too spicy.

8 L: 對啊.

Yup.

After Lynn showed clear signs of physical discomfort, Jerry addressed Lynn using her name-related nickname and stated his awareness of her discomfort in a baby talk style of speech (Turn 1). In the next turn, Lynn responded by imitating an infant's cry or whine (Turn 2). This exchange is pretty similar to an adult caregiver 'ventriloquizing' (Tannen, 2003) and speaking for a baby to show compassion as well as help the baby express its feelings. Jerry's statement helped create a couple-centered footing where Lynn's negative physical and emotional states were empathized and prioritized. The baby talk style of speech further positioned Jerry as the nurturing adult offering comfort to Lynn, a more vulnerable and childlike target of affection.

In the third turn, Jerry stated his observation of Lynn's discomfort in a more neutral tone. Lynn also responded in a more neutral tone and agreed with him by offering an evaluation of her current physical state (Turn 4). This is when Jerry once again used a caregiver style of baby talk along with Lynn's name-related nickname to express his concern and care for her well-being (Turn 5). In the following turn, Lynn cursed[12] the brand that made the spicy noodles (Turn 6). Though Jerry appeared to speak for the brand by stating that it was tasty in the next turn, he gave a complaint of his own about its saltiness and reported Lynn's view on its spiciness (Turn 7). His incorporation of both of their negative reviews on the product and his acknowledgment and awareness of his partner's discomfort throughout the exchanges

[12] Swearing or cursing is another verbal strategy a romantic partner may use to create and establish a couple-centered footing. More on this will be discussed in Section 4.3.

might play an important role in providing support to a distressed partner and maintaining relational harmony.

According to a psychology study on the behaviors of seeking and giving support between couples in an anxiety-provoking situation (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), becoming mutual sources of comfort and support was suggested as key to building long-lasting and satisfying relationships. In the current research, I propose that initiating and co-constructing a couple-centered footing in situations where one or both partners are experiencing physical or mental discomfort can help maintain relational closeness and enhance intimacy. This is especially important during situations where there are not too many actions one can take to help change the situation. In these cases, using verbal cues to offer support can be effective in comforting each other and sustaining harmony. As seen in the example, other than offering Lynn water, which Jerry did before the above exchanges, there wasn't much he could do to ease Lynn's discomfort. Using Lynn's name-related nickname and a baby talk style of speech to express his care and empathy and initiate a couple-centered footing, Jerry can provide the necessary comfort and affection for the couple to connect relationally during upsetting times.

In the following two examples, name-related nicknames as terms of endearment are used to mitigate potentially relational-harming situations and create opportunities to enhance relational closeness. Example 11 took place at a claw machine arcade. Lynn could not grab the bottle of Royal Black Tea from the claw machine. So, she made the following request for Jerry's help.

**Example 11: J you help me**

1 L: **J** 你幫我夾一個紅茶花傳出來啦::～ ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal))°它↑小↓雞↑掰↑° (…)

**J** you help me grab a bottle of Royal Black Tea. ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) It's a little cunt. (…)

2 J: (…) 紅茶花傳(.)這個很難捏(.)我剛感覺它很難捏.

(…) Royal Black Tea. This is difficult to pinch. I found it difficult to pinch earlier.

3 L: ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) ~啊↑::~

((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) Ah.

4 J: ((insert coin sound)) 不能甩欸.

((insert coin sound)) (You) can't swing (the claw)

5 L: 很鬆吧(.)啊↑: 啊↑: 欸↑:: 有(.)嘻嘻

It's loose, right? Ah, ah, ei, got it. Heehee.

Lynn requested Jerry to grab her a bottle of Royal Black Tea using baby talk and his name-related nickname (Turn 1). The use of baby talk and name-related nicknames could initiate a couple-centered footing that highlights her vulnerability and their coupledom. Lynn's cursing at the claw machine or the bottle could further demonstrate her irritation and provide a justification for her request. As mentioned before, mutually seeking and offering support during times of distress is to be expected in a healthy relationship. By using Jerry's name-related nickname to phrase this request in a couple-centered footing, the potential relational harm caused by the request might be mitigated.

Jerry responded to the request by stating how difficult it was to grab the bottle with the claw machine (Turn 2). Based on what happened next, this could be seen as a disclaimer instead of a rejection of Lynn's request. That is, if he failed to fulfill the request somehow, it was not because of unwillingness but inability. In accepting and refusing requests between intimates, it is less preferred to reject due to unwillingness

as it violates the expectation for one to fulfill their relational obligation (Johnson, Roloff, & Riffee, 2004). As a result, the couple's responses illustrated a co-construction of a couple-centered footing that matches relational expectations of prioritizing couple solidarity and the needs of a distressed partner. In this dynamic, the distressed partner requested support and positioned themselves as the more vulnerable, and the other responded with a willingness to take action to resolve the issue.

Example 12 came from another dinnertime conversation between Jerry and Lynn. As they were eating, they realized Lynn might have added too much salt when cooking.

**Example 12: L added too much salt**

1 J: **L** 加了太多鹽了.

**L** added too much salt.

2 L: 怎麼辦?

What to do?

3 J: 嗯? 沒怎麼辦啊(.)那麼多鹽只能吃啊.

Mm? There's nothing to do. So much salt (we) can only eat it.

4 L: £到底是加了多少啊? 太鹹了吧£. 呵呵

How much was added? That's too salty. Hehe.

5 J: £除了鹽巴的味道我根本吃不到蛋的味道£ hhh.

((laugh)) Other than the taste of salt, I can't even taste the egg at all.

6 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 嗯↑:::

((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Mmm.

(…)

Jerry gave a complaint, “L added too much salt” in Turn 1. While a complaint could be relational-harming in some contexts, the use of Lynn’s name-related nickname might help alleviate the harm. The name-related nickname supported the establishment of a couple-centered footing to highlight their coupledom and the commitment to shoulder the burden together as a team. Consequently, Lynn did not take offense at Jerry’s complaint. She responded by asking him what to do, perhaps to see if they could find a remedy together (Turn 2). Though Jerry did not offer a way to help rectify the mistake, he indicated his willingness to finish the food (Turn 3). This was when Lynn joined in on the complaining stance and started criticizing the saltiness of the food (Turn 4). Her laughter at the end of the utterance could help shift the tone of the conversation to a more playful one and make light of the situation. In the following turn, Jerry supported her complaint by sharing laughs with Lynn and built on her statement about how salty the food was (Turn 5). Lynn then responded with a whine similar to the ones made by babies when irritated or annoyed in Turn 6. After these exchanges, the two continued to complain and laugh about the saltiness of the food and eventually finished the dish together.

This example illustrated how a couple can shift a relational-harming situation to one where camaraderie is foregrounded, and the relationship is strengthened by drawing on proper linguistic resources to build a couple-centered footing. In this excerpt, it was not the case of a more individual-centered complaint that focused on blaming the other person for messing up and leaving them to deal with the problem alone. Instead, the utterances were established as the more couple-centered complaint that highlighted the willingness to stand by each other’s side even if they were both affected by a mistake.

In this section, I illustrate with examples from my data how name-related nicknames as terms of endearment exclusive to romantic partners may support the

establishment of a couple-centered footing. Though couples may vary in the meaning-making processes of these names due to different relational histories, these terms of endearment generally foster a sense of affection and intimacy even when couples are in disagreement or distress.

*4.1.4 Pejorative Nicknames*

Pejorative nicknames are terms of endearment that may sound like a tease or a criticism of the target of affection. The current research considered nicknames with obviously negative connotations pejorative nicknames. Some examples in English may include booger, chubby, goofy, grumpy, poopy, and silly. In Mandarin Chinese, people may use *小笨蛋* 'silly,' *小傻瓜* 'goofy,' *小迷糊* 'ditzy,' *小壞蛋* 'little devil,' *小胖子* 'chubby,' and *臭寶貝* 'stinky baby.' Similar to the functions of other terms of endearment, pejorative nicknames have the potential to express affection and care for the addressed. When used between intimates, the pejoration implied by these nicknames can mark familiarity and playfulness. Generally speaking, it is more socially acceptable for intimates to assign pejorative nicknames to each other without being evaluated as being rude or unkind. Nonetheless, using pejorative nicknames as terms of endearment may be risky as they express affection and familiarity at the expense of transgressing the social norm of avoiding threats to one's face. In a way, it can also be considered as one of the more "unconventional" cues for relational enhancement. If the usages are not perceived as affectionate and endearing, they may potentially result in rejection and disagreement, especially if the addressed partner feels offended.

Compared to the other types of terms of endearment discussed so far, pejorative nicknames are the ones with the least occurrences in our data. Only two examples

were found and both came from couples' reports in the interviews. Whether pejorative nicknames are used comparatively less in romantic relationships requires the investigation of further research. However, what the data in the current study showed is that this type of nickname can support the expression of affection and create opportunities to build rapport.

When asked what is something they would say to express their love for each other, Joy and Kessie stated that they would play a game regarding terms of endearment.

**Example 13: Stinky Baby**

1 J: (…) 有事沒事就會玩一下 (…) 因為那是一個遊戲(.)就是我們可能會說(.)我- (…) (We) play this at times (…) Because it's a game. We would say, I-

2 K: 哈哈哈

Hahaha

3 J: 最喜歡=

most like=

4 K: =香香寶貝.

=scented baby.

5 J: 然後我就會說是**臭寶貝**.

Then I would say it's **stinky baby**.

6 K: 哈哈哈 ((slap Joy's lap))

Hahaha. ((slap Joy's lap))

In this example, Kessie's laughter in the second turn indicated her recognition of the game mentioned by Joy in the first turn. As Joy was demonstrating how the game usually goes (Turn 3), Kessie immediately picked up her part (Turn 4) and joined in

on their affectionate 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967). While Kessie addressed herself as *香香寶貝* 'scented baby,' Joy would correct her and call her *臭臭寶貝* 'stinky baby' (Turn 5). It was evident that Kessie didn't take offense at this pejorative nickname. Instead, she laughed and slapped Joy's lap. From their enactment of this interactional ritual, the pejorative nickname is seen as a way to initiate a couple-centered footing in which the couple can tease and play with each other to express affection and reinforce closeness. However, even when one has good intentions in using pejorative nicknames to address a partner, they might not always be received well.

When asked the same question about what they would say to express their love for each other, Jasper and Calvin gave a different answer about using pejorative nicknames as terms of endearment.

**Example 14: Little fatty, damn fatty**

1 J: 我會用詆毀他的方式(.)例如叫他**小胖子**啊(.)**死胖子**之類的(.)哈哈哈£好嗨喔£. 我就比較常用這種(.)親密的暱稱啊.

I would use a criticizing way, such as calling him **little fatty**, **damn fatty** et cetera. Hahaha so exciting. I would often use these kinds of terms of affection.

2 A: 那 Calvin 會感覺這樣是愛嗎?

Does Calvin think this is love?

3 C: 不會啊 .

No.

4 A: 不會.

No.

5 J: £看到變態£哈哈哈哈

(Like) running into a pervert hahahaha.

6 C: 哈哈哈哈哈

Hahahahaha.

7 J: 對啦(.)我記得我是用奇怪的(.)親密的稱呼是表達[我的愛-]

Yup, I remember I would use some weird, affectionate address terms to express my love-

8 C: [可是我覺得:] (…) 我不會因為他講了這樣子的(.)稱呼或什麼而知道說, 我知道他愛我(.)而是(.)我們兩個的互動(.)還跟以前一樣(.)所以我-我可以感受得到.

But I think, (…) I won't because he use these kinds of, address terms or what not to know that I know that he loves me. Rather, our interactions are still the same as before, so I-I can feel it.

9 J: 喔.

Oh.

Jasper and Calvin did not have the same interpretations for the use of pejorative nicknames in their relationship. Though Jasper intended to use the pejorative nicknames as a playful way to express his affection and closeness with Calvin (Turn 1 & 7), Calvin did not view them as particularly endearing (Turn 3). Instead, Calvin considered the quality of their daily interaction an indicator of Jasper's affection for him (Turn 8). It should also be noted that during their 20 Questions Game or the interview, Jasper commented multiple times on Calvin's eating habits, weight, and appearance. When those comments were made, Calvin either contested or did not actively try to help carry the topic forward.

This example demonstrated the inherent risk of using pejorative nicknames as terms of endearment in close relationships. When using pejorative nicknames leads to

banter or verbal play between romantic partners, it can support relational-enhancement. However, if the pejorative nicknames are construed as insensitive or hurtful, the adoption of these terms of address can be harmful to couple's solidarity. The differences in interpretations of pejorative nicknames as terms of endearment or not could be due to the varying relational histories, personalities, communication styles, or relationship qualities of each couple.

The previous couple, Joy and Kessie, used and interpreted pejorative nicknames based on past affectionate and playful interactions. Through 'intertextual uses' (Gordon, 2009) in loving contexts, such pejorative nicknames have become a part of their couple-lect. When these nicknames are used, they help establish a couple-centered footing that supports the expression of affection and strengthens closeness.

As for Jasper and Calvin, their uses and interpretations of pejorative nicknames came from contexts where one party teases the other about their behavior or appearance. Although it's unclear whether Calvin was offended, his relatively unenthusiastic response indicated that these pejorative nickname usages had not become part of their couple-lect. Consequently, both individuals might take more of an individual-centered footing in interpreting and reacting to the adoption of pejorative nicknames.

In this section, I discussed how pejorative nicknames have the potential to initiate a couple-centered footing where romantic partners can play with each other and create fun and affectionate moments. On the other hand, pejorative nicknames, with their relational-harming nature, can also lead to an individual-centered footing interpretation if one feels offended by them. Different couples may make varying meanings in contexts based on their relational histories, personalities, communication styles, relationship qualities, and interaction goals. In later sections, I discuss how less "conventional" strategies or verbal transgressions, such as swearing, sex-related talk,

and baby talk, may draw resources from multiple conceptual spheres to ensure relational-enhancing interpretation.

## 4.2 Conversational Humor

Conversational humor can be seen as a blanket term that covers various forms of interactional humor, such as banter, tease, comical hypothetical, witticism, sarcasm, irony, and more. Though many researchers took a narrower approach to conversational humor, focusing on specific speech acts of joke-telling or pun-making (see Chiaro, 1992; Norrick, 1993b), others contended that the study of conversational humor should adopt a broader perspective to encompass various forms of humorous talk in interaction (see Coates, 2007; Dynel, 2009). Based on the definition of Dynel (2009), conversational humor includes the diverse expressions that emerge naturally during a conversation for the purpose of entertainment, either adding to the content of the conversation or shifting to a more playful frame to express other meanings. The current research also adopted a broader understanding of the term when studying the verbal humor between romantic partners. While certain acts of humor, such as telling a joke, making a pun, and being sarcastic, can also be found in the daily interactions of couples, the collaborative effort to construct playful talk and shared laughter stood out as one of the main ways for couples to create and maintain intimacy.

The importance of "playing together" is noted by some couples to be the key to keeping the romance alive. For instance, during Jade and Taylor's interview, the couple mentioned being funny, acting silly, and having enjoyable interactions as the way they kept the sparks alive in the relationship.

**Example 15: Be funny, act silly**

1 T: 就是要一直保持著對妳的熱情(.)就要很熱情的(.)就是(.)可能就(.)我覺得**要搞笑**耶(1.3)就是**耍白癡**(.)呵呵呵

It is to keep being passionate with you. Be very passionate. Maybe I think is to **be funny**(1.3) like **acting silly**. Hehehe.

2 J: 呵呵呵

Hehehe.

3 T: 我覺得只要**耍白痴**(.)好像就覺得逗妳開心(.)就我就覺得兩人互動都還蠻(.)愉快的(.)對啊.

I feel like as long as I can **act silly**, it seems to make you happy. And I would think the interaction between us is quite enjoyable. Yup.

4 J: 嗯. ((nod))

Mmm. ((nod))

As shown in the excerpt, the couple agreed that humor and silliness were their ways of expressing love for each other. In the data of the research, there were many instances where couples would play with each other and co-create enjoyable moments by adopting conversational humor. Similar to the use of terms of endearment, I argue that the use of conversational humor could serve as linguistic cues to shift into a couple-centered footing. The initiation and the co-construction of conversational humor can draw resources from the conceptual sphere of the playground and contribute to the maintenance of relational harmony between romantic couples.

In Dynel's review (2009, p. 1284), she contends that she can only propose a list of common categories studied by linguists rather than providing 'clear-cut taxonomy.' According to Dynel, the attempt to develop a definite taxonomy between different verbal humor types would be a 'quixotic attempt' for the following two reasons. First,

the categories often overlap and certain phenomena can be analyzed under different labels depending on the criteria. Secondly, the list of verbal humor types is theoretically open to expansion as researchers continue introducing new concepts and terms to describe the phenomena they encounter.

In line with Dynel's (2009) argument about the difficulty of covering all the humor categories, the goal of the current study was not to provide a comprehensive list of the humor types used by couples in their daily conversations. Instead, the focus is on illustrating how the use of conversational humor can serve as linguistic cues to help establish a couple-centered footing in couple's discourse. However, the subsequent sections are still organized based on three sub-categories of conversational humor – banter, comical hypothetical, and teasing. The purpose of doing so is to discuss how the couples in my data used these types of verbal humor, drawing upon different linguistic and relational resources, to establish a couple-centered footing and perform communicative functions in various contexts. It should be noted that these categories may overlap or merge based on different criteria or scholarly focuses.

### *4.2.1 Banter*

According to Norrick's definition (1993a, p. 29), banter is a "rapid exchange of humorous lines oriented toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk." In this view, banter could be considered an 'interactional bonding game' (Dynel, 2008) between speakers as they engaged in playful retorts similar to that of a ping-pong game. On the other hand, researchers also discussed banter as a kind of 'mock impoliteness' (Culpeper, 2011; Leech, 1983). This definition focuses on the aggressive forms of banter that help build solidarity. By

saying something ‘obviously untrue’ or ‘obviously impolite’ (Leech, 1983), speakers could reflect and foster social intimacy.

The current research adopted Norrick’s (1993a) broader approach to banter, defining it as any humorous exchanges centered around a common theme. This allowed for a more inclusive analysis as both supportive and aggressive forms of banter can be considered. The goal is to explore how banters could be used to establish a couple-centered footing and enhance relational harmony. In my data, many instances of banter were identified. Couples often draw comedic resources from their shared knowledge and intertextual experiences to form the banter. Examples showed that couples tend to engage in banter in contexts involving disagreement or negative emotions. By introducing humor into potentially relational-harming situations, romantic partners can invite each other to shift to a couple-centered footing in which relational maintenance and enhancement are prioritized.

Oftentimes, banter is initiated when a partner utters a humorous line in disagreeing or emotionally distressing contexts. The other partner would respond by laughing or adding their own statements to co-construct the humor. Banter forms as the couple rapidly utter humorous lines oriented toward the same theme in the following turns for mutual entertainment. If this is the case, the joint creation of banter would serve mitigating and relational-enhancing purposes, shifting the disagreeing or emotionally upsetting discussion to a more couple-centered and playful interaction between the romantic partners. However, the initiation of banter may not always receive the necessary uptake to establish it. The lack of laughter, humorous retort, and other couple-centered cues may result in the hearer still taking an individual-centered footing despite the speaker’s attempt to shift to a couple-centered one.

In the analyses of the examples presented in this section, I demonstrate how banter can be used in potentially relational-harming contexts to alleviate face threats and manage negative emotions. However, this is not to say that these are the only contexts where banter may serve relational-enhancing purposes. As banter is aimed at providing mutual enjoyment, it can establish a couple-centered footing and support daily relational maintenance in various kinds of couple's daily interactions.

Example 16 came from Chloe and Ray's Desert Island Survival Game. A noticeable contrast between discussing survival needs in a serious manner and approaching it in a more light-hearted and playful way could be detected in their discussion. Chloe and Ray began the task by reviewing their lists item by item, stating their concerns, and providing reasons for their choices. They expressed varying views on seven items and agreed on five items with a comparatively neutral tone and little laughter until the following exchange when they disagreed about choosing a gun and six bullets. Chloe wanted to pick the item, but Ray thought it was unnecessary for their survival.

**Example 16: Two tigers, will run fast?**

1 R: (…) 槍跟子彈啊(.)我們如果帶了這個(.)我們就必須要少帶一個東西 .

(…) gun and bullets, if we bring these, we must bring one less thing.

2 C: 喔.

Oh.

3 R: 我覺得如果有多餘的(.)可以帶它可是我覺得它絕對不是必要的.

I think if we have more space, we can bring them, but I think they are definitely not a must.

4 C: 喔.

Oh.

5 R: 因為你用完 6 顆子彈之後(.)如果你只殺死了**兩隻老虎-**

Because after you used up 6 bullets, if you only killed two tigers-

6 C: 呵呵.

Hehe.

7 R: £那第三[隻老虎怎麼辦£?]

Then what about the third tiger?

8 C: [呵呵呵£**會跑得快**£]呵呵呵

Hehehe, will run fast, hehehe

9 R: £這不會£呵呵呵 (.) ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips))**妳就跑得很:快:喔::呵呵**

This won't hehehe, ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) you will run fast. Hehe

10 C: 呵呵呵

hehehe

11 R: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) £**妳就跑很:快:喔::** £

((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) You will run fast~

The example showed that the occurrence of humor shifted the disagreement into a more playful and relational-enhancing exchange. As the couple had been expressing contrasting views in a relatively serious manner and had taken more of an individual-centered footing when doing so, the emergence of banter, shared laughter, and baby talk contributed to creating a couple-centered footing. This helped mitigate the disagreement and allowed the romantic partners to maintain intimacy despite expressing differing opinions.

Ray explained his rationale for not picking the item in Turns 1 and 3, while Chloe responded minimally (Turns 2 & 4). However, when Chloe heard "*兩隻老虎*

'two tigers'" in Ray's Turn 5, she started laughing. Though it was unclear whether Ray intentionally adopted the keyword "*兩隻老虎* 'two tigers,'" it led the conversation in a humorous direction. The song *兩隻老虎* 'two tigers' is a well-known nursery rhyme among Taiwan Mandarin speakers. It is the Mandarin Chinese version of the famous French nursery rhyme, *Frère Jacques*, also known in English as 'Brother John.' The lyrics to the Mandarin Chinese version of the nursery rhyme are: "*兩隻老虎，兩隻老虎，跑得快，跑得快，一隻沒有眼睛，一隻沒有尾巴，真奇怪，真奇怪* 'Two tigers, two tigers. Run fast, run fast. One has no eyes. One has no tail. So weird, so weird.'"

Chloe's response in Turn 8 showed that resources were drawn from the couple's shared cultural background and familiarity with the nursery rhyme to create the comedic effect and initiate the couple-centered footing. Ray further constructed and supported the couple-centered footing in the next turn when he responded with laughter and rephrased the comedic element or the "punchline" in baby talk. The baby talk used could be occasioned by the nursery rhyme and/or the couple-centered footing. Ray's switch from a more neutral tone to baby talk indicated the joint effort to shift a more serious discussion to a more relational-enhancing one. The banter that co-constructed the couple-centered footing could anchor the conversation in the prioritization of relational harmony, sometimes to the extent that the need to be "correct" or gain compliance can be (temporarily) reduced or eliminated. Though the latter part of the couple's conversation still consisted of disagreements, actively transitioning from an individual-centered footing to a couple-centered footing in disagreeing contexts may enable couples to navigate potentially relational-harming situations while preserving intimacy (More on the effects of shifting between footings are discussed in Chapter 5).

Example 17 illustrated another couple's use of banter to shift between an individual-centered footing and a couple-centered footing during a disagreement. Though expressing opposing views, the couple still co-constructed the banter and shared laughter. When asked what their partner is like in their eyes, Calvin described Jasper as behaving like a kid but capable of mature thinking. Upon my request for specific examples, Jasper initiated the following banter.

**Example 17: Go home and suck fingers**

1 A: 嗯嗯(.)有-有沒有什麼比較像小孩子的例子?

Mmmm. Is-is there any examples of (him acting) like a kid?

2 J: **回家就吃手指啊(.)哈哈哈哈哈 ((slap Calvin's lap))**

**Go home and suck fingers. Hahahaha ((slap Calvin's lap))**

3 C: £**睡覺要有人幫你蓋棉被**£.

**Needs someone to tuck you in when you sleep.**

4 J: £**對啊我會踢被子啊**£**哈哈哈(.)**£**像小孩子吧**£?

**Right. I will kick the cover away, like a kid, right?**

5 C: 有(.)[比方說-]

Yes, [for example]

6 J: [呵呵呵]

[Hehehe]

7 C: 呃:比方說東西用完就會放在那邊 (…)

Uhh, for example he would leave things out after using (…)

(…)

12 J: (…)好啦我同意你的說法啦(.)£但我做事都有原因的£(.)£好不好?£

(…) alright I agree with what you said. But everything I do is for a reason, ok?

13 C: 我沒有說沒有原因啊:(.)小孩子做事也都有原因啊:

I didn't say there were no reasons. Kids do things for a reason, too.

14 J: 哪有? 小孩子有時候沒有原因(.)£**欸我現在沒有吃手指好不好**? £呵呵呵呵呵

That's not true. Kids sometimes do things without a reason. **Eh I am not sucking my fingers right now, ok?** Hehehehehe.

15 C: 呵呵呵

Hehehe.

Jasper initiated the banter in Turn 2 by naming a stereotypical behavior of a toddler, sucking fingers, as a response to my question about specific examples of his childlike behaviors. Though this could be occasioned by Calvin's earlier answer, it was evident from the context that such a literal interpretation of "childish" behavior was not what Calvin meant. Jasper's exaggerated tone, loud laughter, and slightly absurd answer made it apparent that he was joking. In the next turn, Calvin co-constructed the banter with Jasper by sharing laughter and adding another stereotypical behavior of a young child (Turn 3). Jasper continued the banter by laughing and confirming Calvin's response in the next turn (Turn 4). The joint effort in banter helped establish a couple-centered footing and share a playful moment.

In Turns 5 and 7, Calvin switched to a more neutral tone as he answered my question and provided specific examples of behaviors he evaluated as "childish." The examples included how Jasper would leave snacks out after eating and open a new bag before finishing the old one; another example was how Jasper would not squeeze out all the remaining toothpaste before using a new tube. After Calvin provided these examples, Jasper defended his behaviors, suggesting his disagreement with Calvin's assessment. This led to a discussion over their differing views from Turns 9 to 11.

Though Jasper stated that he agreed with what Calvin said, it appeared to be an agreement of the descriptions of the actions rather than the evaluation (Turn 12). Turns 13 to 14 revealed Jasper and Calvin's opposing stances: Jasper considered his actions reasonable and not childish, whereas Calvin believed children also act with purpose yet are still childish. Their disagreement from Turns 5 to 13 showed the couple taking an individual-centered footing in these exchanges as they focused more on defending their views rather than prioritizing consensus and relational harmony.

In Turn 14, though Jasper started his utterance still disagreeing with Calvin's view, he drew resources on the earlier banter and pointed out that he wasn't sucking his fingers right now. This occasioned a shared laughter between Jasper and Calvin, allowing the conversation to shift to a couple-centered footing. The example showed that banter could alleviate tension in disagreements and problem-solving. By initiating banter in minor conflicts to invite shared laughter or joint creation of verbal play, couples can shift from an individual-centered footing to a couple-centered footing. This would help the couple engage in a more harmonious and relational-enhancing communication rather than emphasizing differences and escalating the situation.

Other than bantering in disagreeing and problem-solving contexts, couples in my data also initiated banter when managing emotions and building rapport. The following excerpt came from the dinnertime recording of Jerry and Lynn. The length of the recording was about 45 minutes. About 25 minutes into the recording, Jerry and Lynn discussed how their pet cat had started sitting by the window and looking at stray cats more frequently. As a result, the couple talked about making sure the windows were closed to prevent their pet cat from escaping the room. The couple then moved on to other topics for another 15 minutes before talking about buying new cat litter and their finances. In terms of finances, Lynn's funds were running low that

month. As a result, she had been borrowing money from Jerry to cover her expenses, including the purchase of a new bag of cat litter.

**Example 18: Your cat pooped your money away**

(…)

1 L: 還欠 J 3052.

Still owe J 3,052.

2 J: 現在變 3252 (12.0) 那怎麼辦?要不是妳現在那隻貓太會大-大便了(.)蛤?(.)蛤 ?(.) **妳要怪就回去怪妳那隻貓太會大-太會大便了** (3.0)((babytalk-child))((nasal)) **她把妳錢給大沒了.**

It's now 3,252 (12.0) What can (you) do? If it weren't because your cat pooped too much. Huh? Huh? **If you want to blame something, go blame your cat for pooping too much. (3.0)** ((babytalk-child))((nasal)) **She pooped your money away**.

3 L: ((baby talk-child)) ~嗯::: ↑~

((baby talk-child)) Mmm.

4 J: **((baby talk-child))((nasal))大沒了.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Pooped away.**

5 L: **嘖**(.)**她還是去(hh)流浪好了=**

**Tsk. She should just go astray.**

6 J: **她(hh)還是去流浪[好了].**

**She should just go astray.**

7 L: **[賓]士貓趕快把她帶走(.)那個窗戶不用關啦(.)她要出去就讓她走**

The tuxedo cat should just hurry up and take her away. That window doesn't need to be closed. If she wants to go, let her go.

8 J: £**就這樣了吧**£

**That's it.**

9 L: **好慘.**

**So sad.**

Jerry and Lynn are a part-time cohabitating couple. As identified in their spontaneous recordings, the couple often discussed money-related topics, such as their daily purchases, investments, debts, and earnings. Since Jerry was the one with a higher monthly salary and better spending habits, Jerry often had to help cover Lynn's expenses or lend her money toward the end of the month. When this happened, Lynn usually sounded sad and annoyed with the status of her low funds.

The transcript began with Lynn talking about the money she owed Jerry that month (Turn 1). Her use of Jerry's name-related nickname supported a couple-centered footing and mitigated the relational harm involved in the talk about debt. There was a long pause when Jerry reminded Lynn that the amount had increased due to her intended purchase of the cat litter (Turn 2). Perhaps interpreting Lynn's silence as a sign of her mood change, Jerry initiated the banter by teasing about the cat pooping her money away.

The banter would not be established if it were not supported by Lynn's response in the next turn. As mentioned earlier, banter is an exchange of humorous statements under a common theme for the purpose of entertainment (Norrick, 1993a). Lynn's whine in baby talk (Turn 3) could be analyzed as a playful and couple-centered response to Jerry's joke about the cat pooping her money away. The response carried the banter forward and helped sustain the couple-centered footing as it indicated her minor annoyance and invited further emotional support from her partner. In the following turn, Jerry repeated part of his previous teasing statement, also using baby talk (Turn 4). Then Lynn continued the banter by sarcastically saying the cat should

go astray. Comparing to their previous conversation about closing the window to prevent the cat from escaping the room, the apparent shift in stance expressed here suggested the playfulness in these exchanges. Jerry further supported the banter by laughing and repeating Lynn's sarcastic statement. In Turn 7, Lynn continued to build on the sarcasm. She mentioned that the tuxedo cat, a stray cat the couple was feeding, should just take their pet cat away. She even went as far as saying that the window didn't need to be closed so that the cat could leave on its own will. Jerry once again supported her sarcasm by agreeing with her and laughing at her sarcastic comments in the next turn (Turn 8). Finally, Lynn gave an evaluation *好慘* 'so sad' to end the banter (Turn 9) before the two left to buy cat litter.

This excerpt illustrated that banter can help establish a couple-centered footing and manage emotion when discussing relational-harming topics, such as indebtedness. In this example, terms of endearment and baby talk used in the banter also contributed to the couple-centered footing. Taking a couple-centered footing would support the couple in prioritizing their relational harmony and closeness. Moreover, the theme of banter presented in this example was based on the couple's shared experiences and 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009). Similar to an inside joke, this type of humor also encourages the couple's sense of coupledom as commonality and in-group membership are required to co-construct and appreciate the banter.

Example 19 is another banter created based on a couple's shared experiences and intertextuality. However, this example differed from the previous one in that it showcased how the couple can intentionally and jokingly disagree with each other for entertainment and relational purposes. As discussed before, banter could be analyzed as a kind of 'mock impoliteness' (Culpeper, 2011; Leech, 1983). The 'obviously untrue' and 'obviously impolite' (Leech, 1983) nature of the exchanges marks the closeness between speakers and supports relational intimacy.

The example showcasing banter in the form of "mock disagreement" came from a bedtime recording between my husband and me. As mentioned earlier, our sleep schedules were not often aligned. In this example, I was in a particularly happy mood about the opportunity to share a bed together that night. The following conversation took place when we were in bed with the bedroom light still on.

**Example 19: You think I should take a nap before I go brush my teeth**

1 A: You think? I have a question for you.

2 K: What?

3 A: **You think(.)I should(.)take a nap before I go brush my teeth?**

4 K: You know babe(.)it's not often when I say this.

5 A: Uh huh.

6 K: **£I'm getting real tired of your shit£.**

7 A: **.hhhh £What↑ shit£?**

8 K: **£Just stop asking me that que(h)stion£.**

9 A: **£Why↑£?**

10 K: **£'cause it's not going to be an every-night thing£.**

11 A: **£I'm not asking you [this every night£].**

12 K: **[£I don't care£](.) £I just want the light off£=.**

13 A: **=£And you didn't even give me no answers£.**

14 K: **£'c(h)ause I'm tired of it£.**

15 A: **£You never gave me an answer£.**

16 K: **£It's old£(.) £It's like-it's like one of them racist jokes£(.) £It's has played out now£.**

17 A: **£But I just- I need your suggestion£.**

18 K: **No.**

19 A: **£I need your input£-**

20 K: **Hehe £no£=.**

21 A: **=£On this situation£.**

22 K: £**What's gonna t(h)urn the light off quicker**£**?**

23 A: **Hehehe**

24 K: **£Whatever solu(h)tion£(.) Whichever one of those options allows me to [turn the light off quicker that's the one I want you to choose£(.)£There£. Hehe £There is my suggestion£.]**

25 A: **[Hehehehehe](.)Hahahaha**

26 K: **£You happy now£?=**

27 A: **=Yes. Hehehehe.** (…)

This example would not make much sense without the intertextual knowledge of our interactions on previous nights. As my bedtime was generally earlier than that of my husband, he would leave the room and turn the light off on his way out so I could sleep. One night, I was particularly tired and wanted to go to bed. Since I hadn't brushed my teeth, I asked my husband to leave the light on before he left. However, when he came back to the room later, he realized I had fallen asleep before brushing my teeth. He teased me about this incident in the morning, and we shared a good laugh. This was the origin story of how I "accidentally" took a nap before brushing my teeth. To this day, he still claims I never intended to go brush my teeth and should have just let him turn off the light. Since the incident, I occasionally used the question, "Should I take a nap before I go brush my teeth?" to jokingly stop my husband from turning the light off before he left the room. He would then tease me back by saying, "stop playing" and "hurry up and just go." The teeth-brushing question had become a recurring inside joke for us.

In this transcript, we were both in bed when I asked him the teeth-brushing question (Turn 1 & 3). His response in Turn 4 set up his mock impoliteness in Turn 6. The use of the affectionate nickname "babe," a cue for couple-centered footing, and the laughter in Turn 6 signaled the utterance as a part of the co-construction occasioned by the recurring inside joke. The reciprocal use of swear words in Turn 6 and 7 marked our closeness and reinforced the couple-centered footing (More on swearing is discussed in Section 4.3). The mock disagreement continued from Turns 8 to 21 as we took seemingly opposing stances. The mock disagreement drew resources from our intertextual knowledge about the recurring inside joke and the conceptual sphere of the playground. In Turn 16, my husband even brought in the concept of "racist jokes" to describe the "cliché" status of the teeth-brushing joke. This also echoed our relational status as an interracial couple as well as our personal pet peeves of clichéd racist jokes. In Turns 22 and 24, my husband finally provided an answer to the teeth-brushing question. This led to a lot of shared laughter. Finally, the banter came to an end when he asked me if I was happy now that he gave his suggestion, to which I agreed and laughed (Turns 26 & 27).

The exaggerated tone and the constant shared laughter throughout the excerpt indicated the playfulness and the humor in the mock disagreement, indexing the exchanges a banter for relational enhancement. As a result, though the utterances appeared to be disagreeing, they co-constructed the banter for mutual entertainment and supported a couple-centered footing in which relational intimacy was prioritized. It should be noted that since the banter was in the form of a playful argument, it might be risky and challenging for couples who were not familiar with each other's communication style. If interpreted as serious instead of playful, the disagreeing and conflicting stances would be considered as contributing to an individual-centered footing. For this reason, the co-construction and mutual enjoyment in such banter or

verbal play can mark familiarity and closeness. It can also support the maintenance and enhancement of relational closeness.

This section discussed how banter is used by couples to construct a couple-centered footing and perform relational work. In relational-harming contexts such as disagreeing and money-owing, banter can be brought into the conversation to shift to the couple-centered footing in which relational harmony is foregrounded. Drawing on shared knowledge and experiences, couples can utilize 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) to create inside jokes and reinforce their sense of coupledom when co-constructing the banter in various daily conversational settings.

### *4.2.2 Comical Hypothetical*

Proposed by Winchatz and Kozin (2008), the comical hypothetical is a conversational phenomenon that resembles story-telling in form and joke-telling in function. According to their definition, the comical hypothetical is a conversational phenomenon generally "created in an impromptu fashion by one or several speakers who discursively create hypothetical or, in some cases, highly improbable scenarios" (p. 383). Oftentimes, a comical hypothetical occurs within an ongoing conversation, where a speaker uses the current conversation topic or its component to create an imaginary scenario. Once a speaker initiates a comical hypothetical, other speakers may respond with minimal cues or actively co-construct the imaginary world with the initiator. The completion of a comical hypothetical is not predetermined. Nevertheless, it is generally laughter that marks the ending of the comical hypothetical. Due to its describable sequential structure (Hymes, 1974), the comical hypothetical was argued by the authors to be a speech event recognizable and isolatable for analysis.

Winchatz and Kozin (2008) based their observations of comical hypotheticals on various corpora, including data from ethnographic fieldwork of legal practice and spontaneous recordings from social situations in the US. They noted that the comical hypothetical can be identified in everyday and formal settings. In the present study, couples would also adopt the comical hypothetical to achieve relational-enhancing goals and navigate through disagreements. I propose that initiating comical hypotheticals can help establish a couple-centered footing for romantic partners to discuss and negotiate issues in a more playful and less confrontational manner. The couple can strengthen relational closeness as they discursively co-construct an imaginary world for play.

The data further showed that the comical hypotheticals couples created were not only highly improbable but also absurd and extreme, verging on impropriety. Winchatz and Kozin (2008) referred to this trait as 'absurd extreme,' an intrinsic component of the comical hypothetical. Based on their argument, they believed that this is similar to the climax of a story. When constructing a comical hypothetical, there is almost always a point of ridiculousness and "cartoon-like" absurdity to catch the listener's attention. However, the couples' data in the current research showed that the absurd extreme does not necessarily have to be the high point that captures the listener's interest, but a possibility for romantic partners to introduce 'improper talk' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) in the creation of an imaginary world.

Based on couples' use of comical hypotheticals, I contend that the absurd extreme functions as a marker of closeness between intimates. The scenarios created by the couples may not be as acceptable or appropriate for speakers of other social relations. I also suggest that this trait distinguishes a comical hypothetical from a "factual" hypothetical scenario. As I shall demonstrate later, not all imaginary situations were co-constructed to serve the same communicative goals. For the

comical hypothetical, shifting into a couple-centered footing through joint construction of the hypothetical and shared laughter appeared to be the main purpose of the couples' conversation. As for the co-construction of a "factual" hypothetical scenario, the main goal is to reach a solution in an imaginary context.

In the current study, the second communicative task in the interview, the Desert Island Survival Game, required the couple to discuss an imaginary situation. Due to the research design, the couple would naturally construct narratives about hypothetical situations. As the prompt for the game only provided the basic information necessary for the discussion, all the couples created additional scenarios and conditions of their own when discussing their reasons for choosing certain items. In other words, the couples verbally co-created hypothetical situations to some extent when they engaged in this problem-solving task. Nonetheless, not all of these joint constructions of hypothetical situations should be considered comical hypotheticals. For instance, the following transcript showed the couple, Carley and Zara, co-constructing imaginary scenarios they might run into on the desert island so that they could decide whether they wanted to bring changes of clothing for their survival.

**Example 20: If your pants get wet**

1 Z: Changes of clothing?

2 C: I mean::

3 Z: 'Cause if your pants get wet=

4 C: =Yeah.

5 Z: You can't-

6 C: Yeah(.)Does clothing include shoes? That would be good too(.)We're gonna say yes hh hehe.

7 Z: HeH.

8 C: £We’re gonna say yes£(.)Hehehe.

9 Z: Hehehe(.)‘cause if your shoes get wet(.)you’re kind of fucked.

10 C: Except this is the Caribbean.

11 Z: What do you mean?

12 C: They’ve been kind of warm there(.)like all year-all year round.

13 Z: Yeah but(.)you can get like(.)infections(.)Like if your feet are wet=

14 C: =Oh yeah=

15 Z: =For too long?

16 C: Oof oof ok.

17 Z: Yea.

18 C: Ok.

During their discussion, the couple added more and more hypothetical elements (i.e., “If you’re your pants get wet,” “Does clothing include shoes…We’re gonna say yes,” “If your shoes get wet,” and “You can get infections”) that were not mentioned in the prompt to facilitate their decision-making process. Nevertheless, unlike the examples discussed later, the hypothetical elements they created were fact-based and highly probable scenarios in their given context. The hypothetical components were added to the conversation to discuss and solve the current task. While co-construction and alignment in this hypothetical scenario could be signs of solidarity, the main focus was still to solve the task at hand.

Example 21 came from Lisa and Nora. The comical hypothetical was initiated right after they were done with their Desert Island Survival Game. Consequently, the couple initiated the hypothetical scenario not for the sake of problem-solving but to achieve relational goals through co-constructing an imaginary play world and sharing a laugh.

**Example 21: I'd just sacrifice myself so you don't die of starvation**

1 L: I think our list is-is(.) perfect.

2 N: Ha ha [£ok£.]

3 L: [I think] we're going to survive.

4 N: Ok. You know what I think is funny is that you asked me the survival question all the time and **I already tell you that I'd just sacrifice my(h)self: hahahahaha.**

5 L: **£Yea that's why I thought I was just going to live alone on this island£. So I need the shovel to bury: hehe[hehe.]**

6 N: **[Heehee] such a jerk.**

7 L: **But-but you're gonna-you would probably just like want me to like(.)end your misery or something hehe.**

8 N: **I [want you to help.]**

9 L: [**I hope you wouldn't.] He[hehehe]**

10 N: **[Hahaha]ha so you↑ don't↑ die of starvation.**

11 L: **Hehe(.)£So cannibalism£.**

12 N: **So <u>you</u> don't <u>die</u>↑**

13 L: **You get diseases from cannibalism you know that?**

14 N: **No I did not=**

15 L: =**Yea, you can(.)Something in the brain.**

16 N: **Yea, you can't eat brains or like inner tubes(.) I don't- Do [you guys have-]**

17 L: [**You might have cow disease.]**

18 N: **°I guess°.**

19 L: **Do I get what?**

20 N: **Like you can't eat umm::**

21 L: **((coughing sounds)) I heard the tongue's hehehe delicacy.**

22 N: **The cow tongue isn't bad [but you can't eat like-]**

23 L: [**What about-]**

24 N: **Like in shrimp they take out the intestine but you can eat it(.)But I think there's other animals=**

25 L: =**I'm not eating your intestines=**

26 N: =**I know but I'm [just telling you that don't-]**

27 L: [**Pulling all of your guts] and organs out=**

28 N: **=As you should (1.4) I would hope that you would=**

29 L: **=The bladder and the intestines are- Tsk(.)I'm gonna use it for bait(.) to get a big shark(.)I might tow shark with that.**

30 N: **Ok ok then. Um.**

31 L: **Yeah? [You're the one that literally offered your body.]**

32 N: [**This-This scenario-] this scenario went- I didn't think- I didn't think about it that hard.**

33 L: **Well I'm gonna tell you if we were stranded on an island(.)I'm not gonna just give up and just let you eat me.**

34 N: **I know.**

35 L: **If we get in a fight, we can go on separate sides of the island(.) hehe £for a few days and then come back£ [hehehe.]**

36 N: [**Hehehe]he I think we'll be fine.**

37 L: **Hehehe**

As shown in the transcript, the couple initiated the comical hypothetical using the same scenario from the Desert Island Survival Game. The hypothetical scenario, unlike the one created in the aforementioned example by Carley and Zara, was not

created for the purpose of solving the given task. Though they revisited a previously disagreeing item, the shovel, the topic was not raised for renegotiation. Instead, it could be considered more as a tease that supported Nora's statement of self-sacrificing (Turns 4 – 6). From the extended co-construction of the comical hypothetical and much shared laughter between the couple, it could be seen that this part of the conversation was for mutual amusement and relational enhancement.

The comical hypothetical constructed by the couple consisted of a few traits that facilitated a couple-centered footing and supported their relational enhancement. First, 'absurd extreme' (Winchatz & Kozin, 2008) was evident in this comical hypothetical as it included talks about sacrificing oneself, cannibalism, and towing a shark with a partner's organs. Generally speaking, such topics were not considered socially acceptable or appropriate for people in everyday contexts. For such 'improper talk' to be carried out for an extended period of time, it indexed the conversation as an "intimate interaction" (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). The couple had to be comfortable and familiar with each other to hold this type of conversation. In addition, jointly constructing such verbal impropriety while sharing laughter can also help strengthen the feeling of closeness and camaraderie. In other words, under a couple-centered footing, typical interactional norms don't necessarily apply. As intimates, romantic partners can be relaxed and amused when discussing things that might be socially inappropriate, adopting resources from the conceptual spheres of the playground and the safe space.

Second, the comical hypothetical demonstrated the couple's intimate knowledge of each other and their relational history. Nora mentioned in Turn 4 how they often discussed about survival questions and the idea of sacrificing herself. Lisa built on her response and initiated a tease in Turn 5. This exchange indicated the couple's joint knowledge of their relational history. Turn 7 also showed Lisa's close understanding

of Nora's personality as she stated that Nora would perhaps want help ending her misery. Lisa's speculation was confirmed by Nora in the next turn when she agreed with her statement. The familiarity with each other and the relationship trajectory supported the conversation, allowing the couple to build on each other's shared knowledge.

Lastly, the couple expressed affection and concern for each other in the comical hypothetical. In this imagined scenario, Nora expressed her willingness to offer her body to support the survival of Lisa, whereas Lisa held the position of not giving up easily. Despite the difference in their stances, their contrasting views did not necessarily jeopardize their closeness. If anything, both implied hope for the other person to live. It could be seen that when shifted to a couple-centered footing, expressing affection and care for each other would be prioritized. Oftentimes, the point is not to argue about whose stance is better or more correct but to create a moment of connection and affection, echoing the expectations inherent in the conceptual sphere of the love zone. In this comical hypothetical, all these traits contributed to the reinforcement of Lisa and Nora's couple-centered footing and provided them with an imaginary play world to enhance their relational closeness.

The next excerpt is another spontaneous dinnertime recording from Jerry and Lynn. The two were talking about Jerry's previous rental experiences. Jerry was complaining about one of the apartments he had rented previously. This was when Lynn initiated the comical hypothetical.

**Example 22: Was that apartment haunted?**

1 J: 那個對我來講已經很好了因為(.)我更之前那個也是五千(.)它超爛的.

That was already pretty nice for me because the one I had previous to that one was also 5,000. It sucks bad.

2 L: °超爛的°.

Sucks bad.

3 J: 晚上會有怪聲啊(.)然後:那個(.)浴室的燈修好隔天就壞了.

There are weird noises at night. And then after the bathroom light was fixed, it would be broken again the next day.

4 L: **那間是不是鬧鬼啊?**

**Was that (apartment) haunted?**

5 J: ***((Taiwanese)) 毋知*(.)我也不知道.**

***((Taiwanese)) I don't know*(.)I don't know, either.**

6 L: **他覺得你打擾到它啦.** (3.0)

**It felt like you were disturbing it.**

7 J: **媽的(.)它才-它才打擾到我咧.**

**Damn it. It was-it was the one disturbing me!**

8 L: **它先住的啊=**

**It was there first.**

9 J: **=它先住的?那他有付我房租嗎?**

**It was there first? Did it pay me rent?**

10 L: **它先住的欸?你是後面才住的啊 .**

**It was there first eh? You were there later.**

11 J: **那所以咧?它有付房租嗎?沒有啊.**

**So? Did it pay rent? No.**

12 L: **它付給以前的房東啊.**

**It paid to the previous landlord.**

13 J: **誰?**

**Who?**

14 L: **我怎麼知道你以前的房東是誰?** (4.0)

**How would I know who your previous landlord was?**

15 J: 那我不管啊(.)現在是現在是我租啊:那你要付我房租吧(.)[它住-]

**I don't care! I was the one renting. Then it should pay me rent. It stayed-**

16 L: [它沒]在管的啦 .

**It didn't care about all that.**

17 J: 它住-住我的房子(.)用我的水(.)用我的電(.)然後還不付房租.

**It stayed at my house, used my water, used my electricity, and didn't pay rent.**

18 L: 它哪有用你的水跟電? *((Taiwanese))哭枵喔* (3.0) 它還幫你省電(.)直接幫你燈泡給滅了=

**How did it use your water and electricity? *((Taiwanese)) What are you whining about?* (3.0) It helped you save electricity. Went ahead and killed your light bulb for you.**

19 J: =£幹£=

**Fuck.**

20 L: =呵呵

**Hehe**

21 J: 而且住進去的隔天(.)我牆壁上的櫃子就掉下來了(.)>還把我櫃子弄壞<=

**And the next day after I moved in, the cabinet on the wall fell down. (It) also broke my cabinet.**

22 L: =呵呵(3.0)它不爽(2.0)它要嘛就是死在那裡>不然就是:<它還住在那邊收拾.

**Hehe. (3.0) It was unhappy. (2.0) It either died there or was still staying there tidying (things).**

23 J: **媽的:那還好意思收我五千塊 hhh**

**Damn it, then (the landlord) still has the audacity to charge me 5,000. hhh**

24 L: **它有可能房東不知道.**

**Maybe the landlord doesn't know about it.**

25 J: 而且那房間超小(.)那房間只有三坪.

And that room was super small. That room was only three (Taiwanese) pings[13].

26 L: 嗯:

Mm.

27 J: 一張單人床. (…)

One single bed. (…)

This excerpt demonstrated how the comical hypothetical can be used to support relational enhancement in spontaneous conversation. The couple's previous exchanges until Turn 4 in the excerpt were based on personal experiences and actual events. It wasn't until Jerry mentioned about weird noises at night and the broken light that the imaginary element of the apartment being haunted was introduced by Lynn in the form of a question. After Jerry answered her question, Lynn continued to construct the comical hypothetical by suggesting that Jerry was the one disturbing the entity haunting the apartment. The exchanges from then on appeared to show Jerry and Lynn holding different stances about the ownership of tenancy. Though the couple seemed to disagree, their utterances contributed to the co-construction of the imaginary world proposed by Lynn. As the rightful tenancy would belong to Jerry from a realistic and legal standpoint, arguing about whether the entity should pay rent

[13] One Taiwanese ping is about 3.306 square meters or 35.59 square feet.

could be seen as absurd. Thus, the trait of 'absurd extreme' (Winchatz & Kozin, 2008) in the comical hypothetical allowed for a more playful interpretation of the argument. In other words, rather than a serious argument about whose view was more accurate, the exchange could be framed as a playful bicker. This was perhaps the main reason why the argument could continue from Turn 6 to 18 without obvious signs of emotional escalation, and also how the mock disagreement could be resolved with shared laughs in Turns 19 – 20 and Turns 22 – 23. The shared laughter marked the closing of the comical hypothetical as the couple went back to having the conversation in a more factual manner from Turn 25.

The comical hypothetical constructed here had no apparent connection to solving a specific task at hand. Its introduction might be to shift the conversation into a couple-centered one to serve emotion management and relational-enhancing purposes. In the context of Jerry describing the unfavorable condition of the apartment, Lynn's hypothetical scenario could be interpreted as a means to affirm his complaint and offer a humorous explanation to make light of the situation. In other words, when a partner complains or shows signs of distress, it can be helpful to invite them to shift to a couple-centered footing where the couple can find comfort in jointly creating a playful moment. As mentioned before, the absurd extreme nature of the comical hypothetical in this example gave the couple an imaginary playground to engage in playful bickering for fun. The fact that the comical hypothetical went on for an extended period of time and ended in shared laughter might suggest that it served a relational-enhancing purpose after Jerry's complaint.

In this section, I discussed how romantic partners can use comical hypotheticals to strengthen relational closeness. By co-constructing a highly improbable scenario and building an extended narrative in this imaginary play world, couples can achieve relational goals. These hypothetical scenarios index intimacy and familiarity between

the couple and shift the conversation into a couple-centered footing. Though comical hypotheticals can potentially support problem-solving contexts, their main function might be more relational in nature.

### *4.2.3 Teasing*

Researchers often conceptualize teasing as a linguistic phenomenon involving the dichotomy of being ostensibly aggressive but playful (Dynel, 2008; Haugh 2016; Haugh, 2017). As defined by Drew (1987, p. 219), teasing is the "mocking but playful jibes against someone." Though running the risks of being taken as criticizing and face-threatening, teasing initiation provides an opportunity for the hearer to affiliate with the speaker. This also makes teasing a relational-enhancing strategies that are more similar in nature as verbal transgressions. In Haugh and Pillet-Shore's (2017) study on teasing between acquaintances, teasing can invite intimacy in initial interactions. The hearer can build rapport with the speaker when responding with laughter, agreement, and elaboration of the tease. However, not all teases are construed as being non-serious and positive. Whether the teaser may claim 'non-serious intent' by saying "just kidding" and "only joking), a tease is still open to the evaluation of its participants (Haugh, 2016). For instance, teasing is evaluated in regards to the interpersonal impact it may have on its participants, ranging from 'bonding' (e.g., affectionate, friendly), to 'nipping' (e.g., challenging, confronting), through to 'biting' (e.g., aggressive, antagonistic, hostile) (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997).

In the present study, intimates are found to use teasing as a relational maintenance strategy that helps establish a couple-centered footing. Teasing a partner in front of other people can mark the closeness of the couple. As a couple, when

teasing is initiated to foster a couple-centered footing where the couple's well-being and relational harmony are prioritized, the tease tends to be interpreted positively. As shown in my data, the teased partner did not mind being the target of the joke to help their partner entertain friends and guests. To some extent, this could be seen as the couple's joint effort in co-constructing a play frame to amuse all parties involved. In another example, teasing was also adopted to help lighten the mood and highlight the couple's relationship achievement. By initiating and receiving the tease without taking offense, the couple can demonstrate their relational strength and reinforce the sense of coupledom.

When teasing is adopted in a private setting between romantic partners, the playful nature of a tease also contributes to establishing a couple-centered footing. As mentioned by Haugh (2017), though teasing is now found to be "ubiquitous" and widely used in a variety of interactional settings, teasing is often associated with childhood playtime. Based on the review of Keltner and colleagues (2001), one of the earliest forms of teasing can be found between parents and young children's playtime. As children continue to grow, teasing is also seen to be used in playful interactions on the playgrounds or in classrooms. Among adolescents, teasing is used playfully and flirtatiously to show interest to potential romantic interest.

In the present study, I intend to demonstrate how romantic partners continue to use teasing as a relational maintenance strategy to encourage intimacy and build rapport. Specifically, I propose that teasing as a kind of conversational humor can foster a couple-centered footing under which couples can verbally play together, drawing concepts from the conceptual sphere of the playground. When a couple-centered footing is constructed through teasing, couples can display their relational strength and deep knowledge about their personality and relational history. In addition, depending on the content of the tease, teasing can be reminiscent of the flirtatious

encounter during courtship as well as the enjoyment of childhood playtime. As a result, through a mutual appreciation of the teases, couples can keep the sparks alive in the relationship and strengthen the closeness and trust by being each other's best playmates.

Example 23 came from Joy and Kessie's interviews. The couple's responses showed that teasing could be seen as a sign of a close relationship. When asked the question, "Compared to other couples you know, what is the sort of dynamics you guys have as a couple?" Joy and Kessie answered, "*感情很好的* 'relationship intimate and strong.'" The couple elaborated by saying that they rarely fight; if they do, it would never be about trivial matters as they observe in other couples. They also stated that other romantic partners might say hurtful things to each other regarding weight gain, unappealing physical attributes, limited intelligence, or breakup intent. Unlike other couples, Joy and Kessie would not say anything inconsiderate to their partner's feelings, especially when teasing in front of other people.

**Example 23: Tease her to entertain everyone**

1 J: **(…) 然後有時候就是我會虧她(.)我在朋友面前會虧她(.)可是我回來我會跟她說就是::她會不會:不舒服?**

**(…) And sometimes I would tease her. I would tease her in front of friends. But when I came back, I would ask her if she felt uncomfortable.**

2 K: 嗯:

Mmm

3 J: 她就是都[還好.]

She was ok with it.

4 K: **[都是]可以接受的範圍就不會是:讓我覺得被冒犯或者是(.)[嗯:]**

**It's all within an acceptable range. It wouldn't make me feel offended or, mm.**

5 J: [對]因為有時候£我是覺得£呵呵£就是:我就是人來瘋£=

Right. Because sometimes I think it's acting crazy in the presence of guests.

6 K: **=£我也沒什麼好虧的啊(.)不是嗎£?[呵呵呵]**

And I have nothing to be teased about, right? Hehehe ((laugh))

7 J: **[£欸真的嗎£?][呵呵呵呵]**

**Eh really? Hehehehe.**

8 K: [呵呵呵呵.]

Hehehehe

9 A: [哈哈哈.]

Hahaha

10 J: 好(.)**就是有時候我就人來瘋啊(.)氣氛來的時候有時候就是:別人有可能會生氣女朋友不會啊(.)所以有時候就會:她就會是:笑點[哈哈哈**£Sorry£呵呵呵呵]

Well, **sometimes I am just acting crazy in the presence of guests, when the mood strikes, sometimes. Others might get angry, but not the girlfriend. So sometimes she would become the butt of the joke. Hahaha.**

Sorry. Hehehehe.

11 K: [**呵呵呵呵呵呵](.)娛↑樂大家的(.)<u>貢獻</u>我自己娛樂大家欸.**

**Hehehe (I) entertain everyone, sacrificing myself, entertaining everyone eh.**

12 J: °對對對 *((Taiwanese)) 嘿啊.*°

Yea yea yea, *((Taiwanese)) right*.

The transcript showed that teasing signaled the closeness between Joy and Kessie. Given the potential relational harm and face threat involved in teasing in front of an audience, Joy made sure to check with Kessie about her reaction to the public teasing (Turn 1). Both Joy and Kessie indicated that Joy's teases were generally acceptable and inoffensive (Turns 3 & 4). When Joy was about to explain why she would tease Kessie in front of others (Turn 5), Kessie stated that there wasn't much about her that could be teased. (Turn 6). This led to her own laughter and a tease from Joy in the next turn. The two then shared a laugh (Turns 7 & 8).

Kessie's statement in Turn 6 might be humorous to the couple because of their shared knowledge about Kessie's personality. Based on the narratives the couple gave in earlier parts of the interview, Kessie was quite well-known among their friend group as the "clueless" one. Her close friends and family would often refer to her as 天兵 'heavenly soldier' to describe her "silly" or "inexperienced" demeanor in certain situations. The use of 天兵 'heavenly soldier' to describe someone as "clueless" originated from the military. The term is used to tease the inexperienced soldiers by comparing their behavior to the heavenly soldiers, who are expected to act differently from soldiers on Earth. The couple even gave a few specific examples of Kessie's "clueless" or 天兵 'heavenly soldier' ways of being in the interview. As a result, it is possible that when Kessie said there was nothing much to tease her about, it could have been a self-teasing or sarcastic comment made for entertainment purposes.

After the shared laughter, Joy went back to explaining why she would tease Kessie in front of an audience in Turn 10. Her statement showed that she found teasing her partner more acceptable than teasing others. According to Joy, other people might get upset about being teased in public, but her partner would not mind being the target of a joke. Kessie further supported this in the next turn when she confirmed her role as the source of entertainment for people (Turn 11).

The couple's statement revealed that teasing marked the closeness between romantic partners, especially when in public. The partner's willingness to play along and not take offense when teased by a partner in public suggests the strength and intimacy of the couple's relationship. Unlike banter, where rapid retorts may be present as if engaging in reciprocal teasing, teasing is more one-sided. That is to say, only one person is getting laughed at in a tease. The relational-harming and face-threatening act would require the couple to be in a strong and secure relationship in order for a partner to genuinely accept the tease and further contribute to the tease by laughing along or engaging in further self-teasing in public. In addition, the couple would also have to have deep knowledge about each other to create the "acceptable" tease. As mentioned in Joy and Kessie's interview, some couples might end up saying hurtful things without realizing that their partner did not feel comfortable getting teased about certain subjects. In short, teasing a romantic partner without being offensive would require mutual knowledge about each other's personality, communication style, and intertextual experiences.

The following example also came from Joy and Kessie. When Kessie was sharing their dating story, she initiated the following tease. It should be noted that the teasing was a natural occurrence rather than an elicited one. The following exchanges happened before the couple mentioned teasing each other in Example 23.

**Example 24: She "pretended" to be sick and crashed at my place**

1 J: (…) 因為我每一個女朋友都會:很黏我.

(…) because each one of my girlfriends is very clingy to me.

2 A: 嗯=

Mm.

3 J: =然後我每次都會說(.) 嘖(.)我不喜歡女朋友很黏我(.)但是我每一個女朋友都會很黏我(.)對(.)然後:然後:**她也是很快就是:就是:假裝感冒啊** [hehe.]

And I always say, “Tsk, I don’t like girlfriends being very clingy to me.” But every one of my girlfriends is very clingy to me. Yup and and **she also very quickly pretended (she) was sick** hehe.

4 K: **((loud)) [£哪有£?] £就真的感冒好不好£?=**

**((loud)) That’s not it. (I) really was sick, ok?**

5 J: **=£然後就賴在我家不走啊£[呵呵呵呵]**

**And crashed at my place and wouldn’t leave. Hehehehe.**

6 A: [哈哈哈]

Hahaha.

7 K: **[£最好啦£]哈哈哈哈**

**That better be it. Hahaha.**

8 J: 然後後來就:就是從我們原本兩個都租房子(.)然後她就跑來住我家=

And then later- We went from both renting our own places to her coming to stay at my place.

9 K: =嗯嗯嗯=

Mmmmmm.

10 J: =然後後來就變成我們要省錢(.)就有想說她也要準備買房子=

And then later it became that we wanted to save money. And (I) thought she also was preparing to buy a house.

11 K: =嗯=

Mm.

12 J: =所以就我去住她家(.)然後後來我們就一起買了這邊這樣.

So I went to stay at her place. And then later we both bought here like that.

13 K: 嗯.

Mm.

This excerpt demonstrated how teasing between romantic partners can serve entertainment and relational purposes for all the parties involved in the conversation. As discussed before, Joy would tease Kessie in front of an audience to foster playful and fun interactions. When recounting their dating story, Joy attributed Kessie's then sickness as something she "pretended" to do to justify staying over (Turns 3 & 5). Though Kessie appeared to disagree with Joy's evaluation, her laughter indicated her amusement and playfulness in her disagreement (Turns 4 & 7). Another sign of Kessie not being offended by the tease can also be seen in the following turns. Rather than continuing her objection or sharing her side of the story, she supported Joy's narrative by closely offering minimal cues at every turn (Turns 8 – 13).

From the couple's interview response and the teasing example presented, it can be seen that the couple used teasing to initiate a couple-centered footing in which the couple showcased deep trust and relational knowledge when entertaining themselves as well as others. Other than serving entertainment purposes, the tease in the dating story also offered the opportunity for Kessie to interject and/or show affiliation through laughter. That is, in the midst of Joy's extended narrative, the tease helped perform relational work by creating a chance for Kessie to share the floor and co-construct the narrative. As a result, their playful interaction not only provided entertainment to the conversation but also strengthened a sense of coupledom.

Another example of romantic partners' teasing came from Emily and Harry's interview. The couple had an on-and-off relationship for a few years before they got married. When talking about their breakups, Emily's tone was quite serious. She even got visibly and audibly emotional (e.g., sobbing, nose-blowing, shaky voice, and fragmented speech) quite a few times throughout the interview. As she was

commenting on the reason why they got back together the last time, Harry initiated the tease.

**Example 25: For me, you ate grass twice**

1 E: 他真的是讓我非常放不下(.)因為其實我是不吃回頭草的人(.)我的個性是-我是不吃回頭草的人(.)[一但分手-]

He really is someone that I have a hard time letting go. Because I am in fact not the type of person, who would return to eat grass that I have already passed by. My personality is- I'm the type of person who would not return to eat grass that I have already passed by. Once broken up-

2 H: [**為了我吃兩次欸] [呵呵哈]哈哈哈.**

**For me you ate twice. Hehehahahaha.**

3 A: [呵呵呵]

Hehehe

4 E: 一但分手-一但分手我不回去的=

Once broken up-once broken up, I would not go back.

5 H: =**為了我吃兩次喔(.)怎樣?草好吃嗎?**

**For me you ate twice. How was it? Was the grass tasty?**

6 E: ((slap Harry's lap)) 可是之後一直跟他復合就代表說我其實[真的放不下.]

((slap Harry's lap)) But I kept getting back together with him. That means I really couldn't let go (of him).

7 H: [真的放不下啦 (.)]真的放不下.

Really couldn't let go. Really couldn't let go.

Similar to Example 24, the tease was issued in front of an audience in this context. As the tease offered entertainment and provided a chance for the hearers to

show affiliation, it helped establish a more playful interaction and build rapport among all parties involved in the conversation. In this case, the tease could have a role in managing the seriousness of Emily's emotional narrative. In addition, it could also reinforce a sense of coupledom as the tease was based on an important achievement in the couple's dating story.

Though Emily did not seem to give a direct verbal response to Harry's tease, her narrative still supported his humorous comment. The comedic source of the tease came from the Chinese proverb, *好馬不吃回頭草* 'A good horse will never return to graze on grass that it has already passed by.' Emily described herself as someone who wouldn't "return to eat the grass she has passed by" (Turn 1). When used in the context of romantic relationships, the expression declares one's determination to move forward from a past relationship. The fact that the couple got back together twice set their relationship apart from all their past relationships. Emily's narrative and Harry's tease were essentially highlighting the same thing – the connection and the strength of their relationship were so unique that principles could be broken for each other, twice. The couple's co-construction put emphasis on their strong bond and offered a positive evaluation of their relationship.

In brief, the tease in this excerpt provided entertainment to the conversation and helped manage the emotion involved in recounting the breakups. Furthermore, the tease also co-constructed Emily's narrative and fostered a couple-centered footing in which the couple's commitment to each other was jointly emphasized as a great achievement.

Other than using teases in front of an audience, couples were also found to tease each other in private. The next transcript was from Barnie and Paul's 20 Questions Game. As mentioned before, couples had to finish this task without the researcher's

presence. After Barnie asked Paul, “What turns me on sexually?” Paul’s teasing response led to a playful and perhaps flirtatious moment between the two.

**Example 26: Oh God what doesn’t?**

1 B: What turns me on sexually?

2 P: **Oh God what doesn’t?** [Hehehehe]

3 B: [Hahahaha]

4 P: Mm:: kissing(.)You get very aroused every time I kiss you (…)

The tease in this context facilitated a couple-centered footing where a sense of intimacy was strengthened through the demonstration of shared knowledge and the mutual appreciation of the humor. In addition, this interaction was flirtatious and sexual in nature, drawing the extra elements of attraction and affection from the conceptual sphere of the love zone. Paul’s tease was based on the couple’s private interaction and relational history. Though the sexual context was initiated by the question card rather than the couple themselves, the choice to tease Paul’s sexual preference still indicated the intimacy and closeness of the couple (More on sex-related talk as a strategy to establish a couple-centered footing is presented in Section 4.4). While sex-related topics and teasing are inherently risky and face-threatening, the shared laughter suggested that Barnie was not offended by the tease. The lack of objection might also imply that the tease was not unfounded. After the couple shared a laugh, Paul continued answering the question in a more serious manner and providing many details to show his understanding of his partner. This round of questioning ended with Barnie agreeing with Paul’s answer and giving him points. In short, the example demonstrated that teasing between romantic partners in private can

serve relational-enhancing purposes and allow the couple to share a playful and flirtatious moment while performing (daily) tasks.

Example 27 also came from the 20 Questions Game of a couple in my data. Sharon and Theo used teasing and laughter to navigate potentially relational-harming exchanges.

**Example 27: You've gained weight**

1 T: 請說出兩個我的願望或抱負.

Please name two of my hopes or aspirations.

2 S: 改變世界=

Change the world.

3 T: =哈哈哈哈£*((Taiwanese)) 哭枴*喔不是這一個啦£哈哈£但-但是底層邏輯是一樣啦£(.) ((loud)) >£妳不能說改變世界£< (.)£每一個願望或抱負都是改[變世界£.]

Hahahaha *((Taiwanese)) What are you whining about?* It's not this one, but the underlying logic is the same. ((loud)) You can't just say change the world. Every hope or aspiration is to change the world.

4 S: [我沒有想要][改變世界].

I didn't want to change the world.

5 T: [£每一個抱負]都是改變世界£.

Every aspiration is to change the world.

6 S: °喔好吧(.)那你-你-你(.)兩個嗎?°

Oh alright. Then you-you-you. Two?

7 T: 兩個(.)願望或抱負(.)改變世界(.)具體來說-也不算具體啦就是:[想改變什麼?]

Two. Hopes or aspirations. Change the world. To put it more specifically.

Not necessarily specific. It's what (I) want to change.

8 S: [你現在有]具體的答案?=

You have a specific answer?

9 T: =有啊有啊有啊.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

10 S: 兩:個:喔?.hhhh

Two? .hhhh

11 T: £絕↑對要有的啊:=£

(I) absolutely have to have (them).

12 S: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) £=蛤↑:::£

((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Huh.

13 T: °**都不看我文章啊° ((loud)) 哈哈哈哈哈:**

**(You) don't read my articles. ((loud)) Hahahahaha.**

14 S: °我好像沒有-真的沒有認真一字一句看°(.) ((breathy voice)) £對不起£hhh

I seem to not have. (I) Really didn't read it word by word. ((breathy voice)) Sorry. hhh.

15 T:**£妳要用↑心感受(.) 什麼認真一字一句看£?** 兩個願望或抱負.

You have to feel it with your heart. What's reading it word by word? Two hopes or aspirations.

16 S: ((baby talk-child))((nasal))((patting Theo's arm)) °那你會不會難過°?

((baby talk-child))((nasal))((patting Theo's arm)) Then are you sad?

17 T: >不會<不會.

Nope. Nope.

18 S: **((squeezing T's arm)) £你變胖了£**=

**((squeezing T's arm)) You've gained weight.**

19 T: =£*((Taiwanese)) 哭枴喔*£(.)快點:.

*((Taiwanese)) What are you whining about?* Hurry up.

20 S: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) £我(h)-我-我在想:£ (2.0)

((baby talk-child))((nasal)) I-I- I'm thinking. (2.0)

21 T: °我是不是沒有跟妳講過°?

Is it that I never told you before?

22 S: 我: (6.0) °不知道.°

I (6.0) don't know.

23 T: ((loud)) 真的喔? 所以其實-所以其實妳也不知道我在忙什麼?

((loud)) Really? So you actually don't know what I'm busy with?

24 S: 對.

Yes.

25 T: 喔: ↓: ↑: ↓

Oh.

26 S: 就是我不知道你為什麼:忙.

It's that I don't know why you're busy.

27 T: 喔::>那-那我快速講<(.) 反正就是(…)

Oh. Then-then I'll quickly go over them. Anyway it's (…)

After Theo initiated this round of questioning with, "What are two of my aspirations, hopes, and wishes?" Sharon gave a generic answer, "Change the world" (Turn 1 & 2). Despite the answer not being "wrong," Theo was not satisfied with this response (Turn 3). He prompted Sharon to answer the question more specifically (Turn 7). As mentioned before, couples were given full authority to decide how they wanted to interpret or answer the questions. The person asking the question also had

the right to determine the correctness of their partner's answers. These conditions gave Theo more power to define the meaning of the question and instruct Sharon to answer based on his criteria. In Turns 6, 8, and 10, Sharon asked a couple of confirming questions, perhaps to seek more information and guidance from Theo. These responses also appeared to be ways to postpone the actual answering, as she typically answered pretty quickly and straightforwardly when confident about the answers. Until this point, the couple's exchanges indicated more of an individual-centered footing as varying ideas and interpretations of the questions and answers were expressed without using couple-centered cues.

In Turn 12, Sharon whined in a baby-talk register, suggesting a shift from the individual-centered footing to a more couple-centered one. The use of baby talk here supported the initiation of a couple-centered footing as it offered the verbal safe space for one to take on the role of the vulnerable and adorable child in need of the support and understanding of the mature adult in the relationship. In addition to the previous cues of her hesitance in answering the question, the use of baby talk perhaps occasioned Theo's tease in Turn 13.

Theo's tease demonstrated the dichotomous nature of teasing. While it could be considered as a criticism for Sharon not knowing the answer, the loud laughter indicated his playfulness and offered a chance for affiliation. The tease here helped sustain the couple-centered footing in two ways. Sharon's use of baby talk in the previous turn positioned her as the vulnerable child. The light criticism of the tease could be a mature adult's response to gently reprimand her for not knowing the correct answer as she should. The tease might then be viewed as co-constructing the couple-centered footing initiated by Sharon's baby talk use. Moreover, the tease also maintained the couple-centered footing with its bonding capacity. Offering the hearer an opportunity to display solidarity through laughter, agreement, or further

construction of the tease (Haugh & Pillet-Shore, 2017) allowed the conversation to remain on a couple-centered footing where relational harmony was encouraged. In Turn 14, Sharon agreed with the tease and offered an apology.

In Turn 15, Theo gave another teasing comment with an obvious complaining and disagreeing undertone before redirecting the conversation to his hopes or aspirations. The tease could be a playful way to indicate disappointment, mitigating the relational harm involved in his disagreement. Thus, the tease continued the couple-centered footing and offered the opportunity for one to express their emotions in a playful and non-confrontational way. Sharon showed concern for Theo in the next turn by asking him in baby talk if he was sad about her not "feeling his article with her heart" (Turn 16). This response also supported the couple-centered footing as she positioned herself as the vulnerable child tending to a partner's mood changes and well-being. In addition, the response implied some level of agreement with Theo's teasing comment. Rather than rejecting the tease or defending herself, she checked with Theo about his emotional reaction to her actions, implicitly admitting her lack of attention to his work. Despite Theo indicating that he wasn't sad (Turn 17), Sharon teased him about gaining weight to perhaps invite further affiliation (Turn 18).

During the interview, the couple mentioned each other's weight a few times. The topic of weight appeared to be an inside joke that they would often use to create playful and affectionate moments with each other. For instance, when the couple were telling their dating story, they shared a laugh over Theo's comment, "*我們這樣交往的時候，是彼此體重的巔峰，所以真的是真愛，哈哈哈哈* 'When we were dating like that, it was the peak of both our weights. So it's really true love. Hahahaha.'" The intertextual experiences of the couple might contribute to the interpretation of the tease and mitigate the relational harm involved. As a result, Theo responded in a laughing voice with some swear words before prompting Sharon to try answering

again (Turn 19). The use of swear words, as a kind of 'improper talk' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987), could signal closeness and foster intimacy when used between couples. Sharon was laughing when she once again postponed the actual answering of the question in baby talk (Turn 20).

After Sharon's statement, there was a 2-second pause until Theo finally let her off the hook by asking if he hadn't told her about his hopes and aspirations before (Turn 21). Though it was unclear whether Sharon meant she didn't know if he had told her or didn't know what his hopes and aspirations were, her response still indicated that she did not have the knowledge required to answer the question more specifically (Turn 22). After confirming that Sharon did not have the necessary information to answer the question, Theo took the initiative to share the knowledge with her (Turns 23 – 27).

The transcript showed how teasing, shared laughter, and other linguistic strategies can foster a couple-centered footing and maintain intimacy in potentially relational-harming contexts. As a couple, romantic partners are expected to have deep and detailed knowledge of each other's characteristics, preferences, past experiences, goals, values, etc. In addition, it is ideal for romantic partners to value what is important to their significant other. When a partner fails to demonstrate critical knowledge about their partner, it could lead to disappointment or even argument. The excerpt showed how relational-enhancing strategies such as teasing can establish a couple-centered footing and facilitate smoother navigation through the potentially relational-harming situation. The dichotomous nature of the tease offered romantic partners a chance to express criticism and complaint while maintaining playfulness and rapport.

Similar to the other types of conversational humor, teasing between couples can serve as a relational-enhancing strategy to facilitate a couple-centered footing.

Couples engaged in teasing jointly create a playful interaction in the midst of ongoing conversation or task. When conversing with a third party, teasing a partner can help provide entertainment to the group. The tease also offers the couple a chance to demonstrate their relational strength and coupledom as they co-create the humor without taking offense. When used in private, teasing as a kind of play between romantic partners can reinforce relational bonds and mitigate relational harm in performing tasks or resolving differences. It should also be noted that while playful teasing can serve relational-enhancing and entertaining purposes, it is still open to the evaluation of the participants. For instance, teasing about a partner's weight gain or other physical attributes can be construed as hurtful or mean even when claiming 'non-serious intent' (Haugh, 2016). It may take repetition and 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) for a couple to make meaning of certain teasing topics so that such teases become readily recognizable as playful and affectionate.

## 4.3 Swearing

Swearing is generally viewed as the use of words that "have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable, or unacceptable in any given social context" (Fägersten, 2012, p. 3). Despite serving multiple communicative functions in everyday language use, swearing is typically evaluated as taboo and offensive in most cultures. Thus, swearing is analyzed as one of the verbal transgressions in the current research.

In Pinker's typology (2007), there are at least five ways of swearing: 'descriptive/dysphemistic' (e.g., Did he really shit his pants?), 'idiomatic' (e.g., in deep shit, lose one's shit), 'abusive' (e.g., shit face, eat shit), 'emphatic' (e.g., This music is the shit!) and 'cathartic' (e.g., Shit!!). 'Descriptive/Dysphemistic swearing,'

as the opposite of euphemism, expresses the speaker's negative evaluation of the matter and encourages others to react in the same disapproving way. 'Idiomatic swearing' is used to arouse interest, show off, or indicate the conversation and relationship between the speakers as casual and close. 'Abusive swearing' is directed at a target in a derogatory manner for offense or intimidation, potentially causing emotional or psychological harm. 'Emphatic swearing' puts emphasis on a matter or situation to create a stronger and more assertive statement. Lastly, 'cathartic swearing' serves as a psychological relief to a painful or problematic situation. It can signal that one is going through negative emotional experiences and invite compassion and support.

Pluszczyk (2015) also listed five functions of swearing: an outlet for negative emotions, a means to insult or offend others, an emphatic talk to strengthen an utterance, a phatic talk to build solidarity (Daly et al., 2004), and a way to create humor and entertainment (Dynel, 2012). The varying functions that swearing serves make it apparent that this strategy may cause offense as well as promote solidarity. For this reason, using swear words to initiate a couple-centered footing between romantic partners carries inherent risks.

As pointed out by studies on profanity (e.g., Haugh, Kádár, & Reiter, 2022; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015), many factors can influence how offensive and rude swearing is perceived. First, the function of swearing can contribute to our perceptions of them. As mentioned before, some of the functions include venting negative emotions, emphasizing a viewpoint, insulting others, marking group membership, or being funny (e.g., Pinker, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015). Generally speaking, using swear words to mark in-group status or create a humorous effect is considered more acceptable than insulting others.

Second, the target of the swearing can impact the level of its offensiveness. Is the swearing directed towards one's partner or a third party? Listeners tend to find swear words less offensive when they are used to express frustration toward an event or thing than a person. For example, romantic partners may find the use of curse words more acceptable and relational-enhancing when used reciprocally to complain about an irritating situation. However, the same curse words may be offensive and relational-harming when complaining about a partner's action.

Moreover, the context in which the curse words are uttered would affect its evaluation. Curse words used in formal settings such as a church, classroom, or courtroom are more frowned upon than those spoken in the private sphere, such as one's home. Jerry and Lynn mentioned in their interview how they would not use some of the "more offensive" swear words, like *操你媽* 'fuck your mom,' at family gatherings or in a serious argument with each other. While still using them in their daily interactions, the couple acknowledged the inappropriateness and the relational-harming effect of using swear words in certain contexts.

Additionally, the types of taboo words and the emotions they may trigger can result in different evaluations of their offensiveness. According to Pinker (2007), there are five types of taboo terms: the 'supernatural' (e.g., go to hell, God damn it), 'bodily effluvia and organs' (e.g., shit, asshole, ass), 'disease, death and weakness' (e.g., retard, crippled), 'sexuality' (e.g., fuck, cunt, dick), and 'disfavored people and groups' (e.g., nigger, chink, whore). Each of these types has the potential to trigger negative emotions. For example, the supernatural may evoke fear connected to religion and superstitions. Curse words related to bodily effluvia and organs often trigger a feeling of disgust. Using taboo words about disease and death may result in a sense of dread. Sexual curse words may bring forth feelings of revulsion and depravity. Offensive terms of disfavored people and groups may provoke hatred and

contempt. People of different sociocultural backgrounds may find some taboo words more offensive than others. For instance, people with firm religious beliefs might find the supernatural taboos more offensive than others.

Lastly, the relational status of the speakers can also determine the offensiveness of the swearing. Are the speakers emotionally and socially close or distant? Friends, family, and romantic partners are usually emotionally and socially closer than acquaintances, business associates, and strangers. All things being equal, it is less inappropriate to curse in front of someone who has a closer emotional and social bond. All these factors can contribute to the reception and interpretation of profanity. It should be noted that these are also subject to culture-specific norms. Different language-speaking communities may have different ideas about the appropriateness of swearing and the functions it serves. Individual experiences can also lead to different construal for swearing.

In this section, I demonstrate how swearing, as a form of verbal transgression, can serve relational-enhancing purposes in couples' conversations and mark the shift to a couple-centered footing. To include certain swearing types or terms into a couple's repertoires of relational-enhancing strategies, their meanings would have to be negotiated and co-constructed through repeated use. A couple's positive intertextual and relational experiences with swearing are important in transforming a potentially risky and relational-harming term into one that fosters intimacy and a sense of coupledom.

Example 28 came from a spontaneous recording of Jerry and Lynn. After dinner, the couple opened boxes of online orders together. When a purchase did not meet Jerry's expectations, he made a complaint along with a swear word in a laughing tone.

**Example 28: Fuck fuck fuck fuck**

1 J: £欸這麼少喔£(.)£**幹**£.

Eh this is so little. **Fuck.**

2 L: **幹.**

**Fuck.**

3 J: **幹.**

**Fuck.**

4 L: **幹.**

**Fuck.**

5 J: **白癡**喔:這 B 膠也太少了吧. (…)

**Idiot.** This B glue is so little. (…)

In this example, the swear word *幹* 'fuck' was used reciprocally by the couple. Realizing the bottle of B glue was smaller than expected, Jerry uttered the swear word to vent about this slightly irritating situation. While the word could be an expression of his frustration and annoyance, his laughing tone softened the level of aggression and suggested the incident as a minor inconvenience. Lynn repeated the same swear word and imitated Jerry's tone in the next turn. Then, the two had another exchange of the word in the following turns. After that, Jerry complained about the purchase with *白痴* 'idiot,' another word that could potentially be evaluated as swearing. The two continued to talk about the purchase until, eventually, Jerry made peace with what he received in the package.

The exchanges of swear words in this example demonstrated how such verbal transgression can help establish a couple-centered footing and support relational-enhancing goals. First, swear words, as a kind of 'improper talk' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) indexed the intimate, relaxed, and unguarded state of its speakers.

Drawing resources from the conceptual sphere of the safe space in the couple-centered footing, the couple can be comfortable transgressing social norms and expressing their feelings freely, especially when the negative feelings are not triggered by each other. The occurrences of swear words marked the closeness of the couple in this example.

Moreover, the repeated use of the swear word can serve as a kind of verbal play between intimates. As one partner playfully expressed frustration using a swear word, the other partner joined in, creating a verbal exchange akin to a game of catch – where the word 幹 "fuck" was uttered and received. This playful response can be a way to offer emotional support and acknowledgment when a partner is mildly upset. If this verbal play is repeatedly used in other similar contexts, the exchange can become a kind of 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967) for the couple to manage emotions and strengthen the sense of coupledom in daily interactions. Hence, the conceptual sphere of the playground in the couple-centered footing was also invoked to achieve relational and emotional goals.

The next transcript came from Brandon and Cindy, who had been together for 10 years at the time of the interview. When asked if they remembered the first time they said "I love you" to each other, the couple gave a fairly detailed account of how it happened. Since most long-term couples in the research had forgotten details about their earlier interaction or could only provide less descriptive versions of their "I love you" story, Brandon and Cindy's story stood out for how much they remembered about this event and how emotional they got when telling the story. The swear words "shit" and "holy shit' were used as they recounted the moment they recognized their feelings for each other.

**Example 29: I love you, too. Shit!**

1 C: (…) But then you were like(.) hehe £like threw↑ out the earbud£ hehehehe £and like£ (.) hehehehe £jogged↑ in front of me£ hehe (.) £and you were like£(.) £I↑ LOVE YOU like£ rea(hhh)lly like yell under a street lamp(.) And I was like OH↑ hehe like (.) I'm laughing at you because you were like- not like drunk(.) But you were just kind of like that- like singing in the rain, £kind of like AHH£(.) Hehe I was like laughing a little(.) So I was like-like I LOVE YOU TOO like **SHIT** like definitely (.) for sure. Um: and you were just like HAHA like £jubilant£. Yeah it was great(.) I remember being like- this is like a moment(.) that I will always remember.

2 B: ((Wipe his own tears))

3 C: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Dude↑ you↑ gon'↑ get↑ me↑ cry↑ HAHAHAHA £turn into a cry↑£ ((Wipe her own tears))(3.0)((normal tone)) Is that it?=

4 B: =Yea [yea.]

5 C: [Is] there anything else to add?=

6 B: =Na that's good [Hahahaha]

7 C: [Hahahahaha]

8 B: Yea(.)well I just- yea(.) No I remember just being like(.) Ohh like this- like I- I- I- can't(.) Like I was just really: I was really happy I think you know(.) Like seeing all my friends(.) Like I've seen my friends which made me [really happy].

9 C: [It was a good day↑]. [Fun trip↑ too: yea.]

10 B: [Had a good day] and I was just really excited(.) and really was like wow: like- I like- like I think- I could like wow: I really like this girl. It's crazy like actually like(.) it was real. It was real **holly shit**. Like you know all that hehe

11 C: hehe

The swear words used here served an emphatic function of strengthening their expressions of love. In the couple's narrative of their first "I love you" story, the word "shit" and "holly shit" were used when they recognized their feelings for each other. Whether the swear word was actually used in the context of their then confession was not the main concern of the current study. The emotional intensity involved in the couple's account was what made this example unique. Sharing this story allowed the couple to revisit an unforgettable memory in their relationship. It should be noted that Brandon teared up as Cindy was sharing the story. When Cindy noticed Brandon wiping his tears after her narrative ended, Cindy switched to baby talk and said, "Dude you gon' get me cry HAHAHAHA turn into a cry" while wiping her own tears (Turn 3). The fact that the two recounted the story with strong emotions, indicated by both their words and actions, suggested the couple's affection and closeness for each other. Therefore, the swear words used here served more than just an emphatic function but also supported the solidarity between the couple. By using the swear word "shit" and "holy shit" to emphasize the intensity when they realized their love for each other, the two shared an affectionate moment together where their coupledom could be reinforced. In addition, similar to the previous example, the couple's reciprocal use of swear words co-constructed a couple-centered footing and contributed to relational enhancement through indexing closeness and managing emotions in interaction. In this case, the swearing drew conceptual resources from the safe space and the love zone to support the couple's intimacy.

Example 30 was from a spontaneous recording between my husband and me. I was in bed while my husband was looking at his phone screen and sitting on the floor next to the bed. While moving my leg, I accidentally hit my foot against the nightstand twice as I was trying to avoid accidentally kicking my husband. The conversation took place after the second time I hit my foot.

**Example 30: God damn corner**

1 A: ((sound of foot hitting nightstand)) OWWW!

2 K: ((looking at phone)) Why do you keep jacking yourself up?

3 A: Because I'm trying not to kick you in the face so I kept moving my leg to this side and hitting this **GOD DAMN** corner.

4 K: ((looking at Anita)) ((touching or "booping" Anita's nose)) ((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) You shouldn't keep jacking yourself up(.) It's not good for your health.

5 A: £Interesting£ hehe

This example showed that when swear words were used as an outlet for negative emotions in close relationships, it can help create an opportunity for bonding and shift the interaction into a couple-centered one. The sound of me hitting my foot and the exclamation "oww" signaled my pain and frustration (Turn 1). My husband's response, though indicating his awareness of my upset, sounded more like a tease rather than a direct comfort (Turn 2). Perhaps unsatisfied with his reaction, I explained the reason why I hit my foot twice was to protect him and vented my frustration further with the cathartic swearing (Turn 3). The utterance in Turn 3 adopted resources from the conceptual spheres of the safe space and the love zone. The swearing indicated how safe I felt about committing the verbal transgression in front of my partner, as well as underscored the lengths to which I was willing to prioritize his needs over mine, expressing my deep care and love for my partner.

Upon hearing my response, he turned to face me and "booped"[14] my nose. Then, in a nurturing and doting tone, like a caregiver, he told me that I shouldn't keep

[14] To boop one's nose means to playfully and gently tap the tip of one's nose as if pressing a button. Generally speaking, this is an affectionate gesture done to targets of adoration, such as children or pets.

hurting myself because it's not good for my health. What he did with the affectionate gesture and his loving expressions of concern in Turn 4 appeared effective in providing comfort as I finally laughed in the next turn.

This example demonstrated how swearing in context can access the conceptual spheres of the safe space and love zone in the couple-centered footing to fulfill a couple's emotional and relational needs. It also illustrated how using swear words to express negative emotions in close relationships can signal the need for emotional support. When the signal was recognized and answered with care, the swear words facilitated the couple's co-construction of a couple-centered footing. This is because the use of such verbal transgression showcases the safety of expressing one's feelings in the presence of a partner as well as serves as a reminder to prioritize the emotional well-being of each other.

The instances of swear words explored so far, while deemed profane and socially inappropriate in certain contexts, were still relatively mild and commonly used in everyday discourse. The following transcript illustrates how more offensive swear words, such as *操你媽* 'fuck your mom,' expresses a highly intense emotion that can end a topic and reset the conversation. There had been several precedents in Taiwan where using this swearing led to fines and even imprisonment. This swear word, when used in public to insult another, can be judged as an offense against one's reputation and credit[15]. This type of use poses greater risks and challenges a couple's relational strength and ability to navigate through such an exchange.

[15] The charge was based on the Ministry of Justice's announcement of Article 309, Chapter 27 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of China.

**Example 31: Fuck your mom!**

1 J: 台南明天也休息欸.

Tainan also has a day off tomorrow eh.

2 L: ((loud)) 對啊(.)>剛不是跟你講了?<

((loud)) Yea. Didn't I tell you this earlier?

3 J: 呵呵呵.

Hehehe.

4 L: °沒有在聽我講話**機掰**°=

(You were) not listening to what I said, **cunt.**

5 J: ((loud)) =有啦我在聽啦我有聽到[啦.

I was. I was listening. I heard you. ((loud))

6 L: **((sound of slapping Jerry's back)) ((loud)) [操你媽]** (104.0)

**((sound of slapping Jerry's back)) ((loud)) Fuck your mom!** (104.0)

7 L: 哇 (14.0) 你看那個好酷喔. (1.5)

Wow. (14.0) Look. That's cool! (1.5)

8 J: 蛤? (10.0)

Huh? (10.0)

9 L: 你看這好酷喔 (7.0) 宣傳做成這樣. (6.0)

Look how cool this is! (7.0) The promo is done like this. (6.0)

10 J: 這什麼? (…)

What's this? (…)

The above transcript came from the spontaneous dinnertime recording of Jerry and Lynn. When having dinner at home, the couple had the TV on with the news playing in the background. After Jerry learned about the typhoon day-off information from the news, he shared it with Lynn (Turn 1). Lynn's response in the next turn

suggested that she had already informed him about the news earlier. Perhaps interpreting Lynn's rhetorical question as a mitigated form of a complaint or criticism, Jerry responded with a laugh to soften the mood. However, Lynn continued complaining and criticizing Jerry for not paying attention to what she said in the next turn, even adding the swear word *雞掰* 'cunt' to show her frustration or disapproval. Upon hearing this, Jerry asserted loudly that he was paying attention. In the next turn, Lynn sounded triggered by his response and answered with a highly offensive expression *操你媽* 'fuck your mom' and a sound of a loud slap on his back. This might be occasioned by Jerry's assertion, as his statement seemed contradictory to his earlier behavior. In addition, his assertion could be interpreted as a defense against Lynn's accusation in Turn 4. If Lynn perceived it as such, his response in Turn 5 could also be a dismissal of her stance. It should be noted that Lynn's speech gradually increased in volume and peaked when she uttered the highly offensive expression, indicating her growing irritation. After the use of the offensive swear words, there was a long pause of almost two minutes. Then, in Turn 7, Lynn attempted to gain Jerry's attention by switching topics. Though his response seemed a bit delayed than usual, he answered her invitation and looked at the promotional video. The two continued their discussion about the video, and their interaction returned to a relatively neutral state.

Example 31 showed that more offensive swear words might lead to a breakdown in conversation and require repair measures to restore a normal conversational flow. According to Clark (1996), people talk with each other interactively as they make plans, do business, gossip, and achieve other goals. These communicative activities are joint activities that require coordination between speakers. When such coordination fails, the interaction and conversation break down. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974, p. 701) proposed in their seminal work on the organization of turn-

taking in conversation that "repair mechanisms exist for dealing with turn-taking errors and violations." In the example presented above, the couple's conversation experienced a breakdown right after the use of the more offensive swear words. The turn-taking was repaired after Lynn shifted to a new topic and actively engaged Jerry in the conversation again.

In the transcript, there were two uses of swear words. The first one was the less offensive *雞掰* 'cunt.' This expression could be an initiation of couple-centered footing as the couple often used this expression for relational-enhancing purposes in their daily interaction. Yet, instead of co-constructing the couple-centered footing, Jerry's response could suggest more of an individual-centered footing as he prioritized defending his case. Though his assertion in Turn 5 seemed to be in line with what Lynn wanted him to do (i.e., pay attention to what she said), stating that he did when he seemed like he didn't could be perceived as being dismissive. The more offensive swear words *操你媽,* 'fuck your mom,' could be a sign of Lynn's intense emotional state and her trust to commit such verbal impropriety in front of Jerry.

The fact that this exchange did not lead to further escalation after the offensive swearing suggested that the couple had developed a means to deal with such an exchange. Jerry's refrainment from further defending himself and instead allowing time for emotions to settle perhaps led to Lynn's initiation of a new topic to repair the interaction after calming down. When Lynn started talking to Jerry again, her tone was much softer and more neutral than when she was upset. It was almost as if the couple interpreted the swearing as a sign to pause and reset so that the interaction could return to normal when picked up again.

According to the couple, more offensive swear words, such as those that refer to one's mother (e.g., *操你媽* 'fuck your mom' in Mandarin Chinese or *幹你娘* 'fuck your mom' in Taiwanese), are used by Lynn to express intense annoyance or shock

only in front of Jerry. The couple stated that Lynn had never used those swear words around other people and they even considered the idea funny and irrelevant. Jerry's response was, "*怎麼可能在別人面前這樣講？當然只有跟我的時候才會啊* 'How could (she) say this in front of others? Of course, it's only (used) when with me.'" Initially, Jerry found it surprising that Lynn would adopt such swear words in front of him. His words were, "*沒想到這麼小一點的女生，也會罵這麼髒的* '(I) didn't expect such a small girl to curse with such profanity.'" However, as those words were not uttered to express upset toward Jerry or his behavior at the beginning of their relationship, he didn't consider them unacceptable. Over the course of their relationship, Jerry gradually recognized the offensive swearing as a sign of Lynn's deep trust. As stated by Jerry, though the offensive expression was occasionally directed toward him or his actions nowadays, it was never used when Lynn was truly mad at him for something serious. In other words, through the repeated usages of offensive swearing in their interaction, Jerry recognized it as a marker of Lynn's heightened annoyance or shock and an indication of her trust in expressing her emotions freely in front of him. This aligns with the ideas from the conceptual sphere of the safe space in the couple-centered footing. As the romantic partners grow closer to each other, they may feel more secure about freely expressing their thoughts and emotions.

The example demonstrated how the evaluation of more offensive swear words as a marker of relational closeness might take time to settle. Such a type of swearing might require the couple to negotiate and reshape the meaning in multiple contexts before it could be recognized and understood as serving relational-enhancing purposes. In short, without repetition and the renegotiation of meaning through 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009), swear words can still cause offense between romantic partners. Consequently, using verbal transgression as a strategy to create couple-centered

footing and facilitate couple solidarity might not always be effective. In order to guarantee success, couples would have to formulate the swearing as a part of their couple-lect through repetition so that the effort to initiate couple-centered footing in conversation can be accurately acknowledged and supported.

In this section, examples were given to discuss how swearing as a type of 'improper talk' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) can be used to establish a couple-centered footing, drawing resources from the conceptual spheres of the safe space, the love zone, and the playground. The swear words are shown to invite and offer emotional support, strengthen loving expressions, and reset conversations. As there are inherent risks in using swear words to mark and reinforce closeness, its usage as an effective initiation of couple-centered footing requires repetition, negotiation, and co-construction in couples' daily interactions.

## 4.4 Sex-related Talk

Sex-related talk is defined in the present study as any mentioning of sexual topics in conversations. This may include talks about sexual preferences, sexual deviances, sexual health, sexual humor, dirty talk, sex initiation, etc. These talks, as a kind of verbal transgression, are generally considered inappropriate and even offensive in non-private realms. This is especially the case since the #MeToo movement in 2017 helped increase awareness of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in the workplace. Conversations about sex in public and mixed-gender settings are frowned upon and tend to be avoided unless they serve educational purposes or are conducted anonymously.

Despite being private and taboo, linguistics studies still locate data on sex-related talks among single-sex groups (e.g., Pichler, 2007; Tolman, 2005; Vaynman,

Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020; Wight, 1994) or online forums (e.g., Cohn & Richters, 2013; Kendall, 2000; Masanet & Buckingham, 2015; Myketiak, 2020). Locker room talk among men, for instance, was analyzed as a type of storytelling that fostered male bonding and intimacy through recounting erotic experiences with women (Vaynman, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2020). Sex talk among adolescent girls could perform gender and sexual identity work (Pichler, 2007).

Another line of study that explores sex-related talks comes from the fields of sex and psychology research. Past studies on sexual communication generally agreed that reciprocal talks about sex between romantic couples contribute to healthier relationships and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Brown & Weigel, 2018; Drouinet et al., 2013; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Hess & Coffelt, 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015; Noland, 2010). Nevertheless, studies from such disciplines often relied on questionnaires or other types of self-reported data. Little is learned about how couples incorporate sex-related talks into their daily conversation as a means to maintain and enhance intimacy.

The current study, using elicited conversations, interviews, and spontaneous self-recordings as research data, offered an opportunity to examine how sex-related talk is used by couples to establish a couple-centered footing and cultivate relational harmony. While the intended goal was to capture a wide range of sex-related talks, the most common kinds of sex-related talk identified in my data were sexual preferences and sexual humor. This perhaps reflected the influence of the research design and indicated that talks about sexual deviance, sexual health, and dirty talk are considered even more taboo or private in nature by the couples in my study. Therefore, they rarely occurred in the data. This by no means suggests that those types of sex-related talks do not have a place in couples' conversations. More studies would have to be

conducted with different research designs to reveal couples' use of other types of sex-related talks.

When couples in my research conducted sex-related talks, it was typically initiated by the questions in the communicative tasks and/or interview. For instance, the question "What turns me on sexually" in the 20 Questions Game naturally invited sex talks between romantic partners. However, it was worth noting that some couples chose to answer in implicit and non-sexual ways, if not skipping the question altogether. For example, a couple agreed that "anything comfort-related" is the answer. Another couple said that simply saying something next to their partner's ear would do the trick. To be in a state of relaxation was commented on by another couple as the answer. These responses, though answering the question, were less sexually descriptive than ones that listed out specific acts of arousal. Another type of sex-related talk was the sexual humor that arose in spontaneous recordings. The occurrences were generally occasioned by an event or the context, mostly to create humorous and playful moments with each other.

The following examples provided analyses of how couples used sexual preferences and sexual humor to initiate a couple-centered footing and support relational enhancement. When committing such verbal transgressions as a couple, romantic partners can foster a deeper sense of intimacy. By recounting private information about their partner's sexual preferences in ways that are appropriate and acceptable in the context, couples can demonstrate their exclusive knowledge about each other. Moreover, sharing a laugh over sexual humor draws resources from the couple's relational and cultural knowledge, further strengthening a sense of coupledom.

Example 32 came from an interview with a lesbian couple, Robin and Sasha. When asked about any quirks they may have, Robin mentioned that Sasha enjoyed

admiring big breasts and pretty women (Turn 1 & 7). Sasha confirmed this and supported Robin's statement (Turn 2, 4, 6, & 8). When inquired about their thoughts about Sasha's behavior, Robin said they were "Ok" with it and playfully evaluated Sasha as being a "dang pervert" (Turn 14 & 16). This assessment did not upset Sasha; in fact, she echoed Robin's remark and shared a laugh in response (Turn 17). When asked if they would share information with each other when seeing a pretty woman, they reenacted how such an exchange would unfold (Turn 20 – 26).

**Example 32: You like to look at big boobs**

1 R: 有啊有啊妳有怪癖啦(.)**看大奶=**

Yes, yes. You have a quirk. **Look at big boobs**.

2 S: =喔對(.)£**我喜歡大奶人£.**

Oh yea, **I like big boobs**.

3 R: ((loud)) 哈哈哈哈哈

((loud)) Hahahahahaha.

4 S: £**我就喜歡看大胸部**(.)對£ 呵呵[£這還好吧£?]

**I just like to look at big boobs**. Yea, Hehe this is not that big of a deal?

5 R: ((loud)) [哈哈哈哈哈] £這個是很怪啊£.

((loud)) [Hahahaha.] This is really quirky.

6 S: 就是↑對啊↑(.)我就會(.)對一個女生如果吸引到-不是吸引:就是我會覺得說(.)**喔(.)這麼大這樣=**

It's yea. If I would be attracted by a girl-not attracted. I would be like, **Oh. So big like this.**

7 R: =她很愛看美女.

She likes to look at pretty women.

8 S: 對(.)我就很喜歡看美女.

Yea, I really like looking at pretty women.

9 A: 喔: ok.

Oh, ok.

10 R: 蠻怪的

Pretty quirky.

11 S: 嗯:: ↑: ↓

Mm.~

12 R: 嗯

Mm.

13 A: 那這個她看美女跟看大奶(.)這個你 ok?

Then this, her looking at pretty women and big boobs, this you are ok with?

14 R: Ok 啊我就覺得=

Ok. I would feel=

15 S: =£可能£=

Maybe.

16 R: =£我就**死變態**£=

I would (be like) "**dang pervert.**"

17 S: =£他覺得我很**變態**£ [哈哈哈哈]

They would think I'm **perverted**. Hahahaha.

18 R: [哈哈哈哈]

Hahahaha.

19 A: £那妳可以跟他分享嗎£?如果有.

Then can you share with them? If there is (one).

20 R: [£會啊會啊**欸那個奶很大欸£.]**

Yes. Yes. "**Eh that (one) has big boobs.**"

21 S: [£會啊我就欸欸 12 點鐘 12 點鐘£.]=

Yes. I will be like, “eh eh12 o’clock 12 o’clock.”

22 R:=£然後我就會說£(.)£欸妳的菜-那是妳的菜£(.)我就會說-

Then I would say, “Eh your cup of tea. That’s your cup of tea.” I would say-

23 S: £他[就會幫我找£]

They would help me find.

24 R: [£要不要幫妳介紹£]

“Want (me) to introduce you?”

25 S: £他就會幫我找£[哈哈哈哈哈]

They would help me find. Hahahahaha.

26 R: [£要不要幫妳介紹£][哈哈哈哈]

“Want (me) to introduce you?” Hahahah.

27 S: [呵呵呵]

Hehehe.

In this example, the couple openly discussed behavior that they jokingly assessed as sexually perverted. Since the original interview question was “What are some of your partner’s quirks?” the couple did not have to mention anything sexual. Most couples chose to talk about quirks related to personal hygiene (e.g., cutting fingernails every day, not showering daily, sticking all the used double eyelid tapes on the bathroom mirror) or habits (e.g., touching and rearranging things in the bedroom before sleeping, rubbing feet together when irritated or nervous, making noises when in a quiet environment). The fact that Robin and Sasha chose to describe a quirk that was related to sexual preference made their answer stand out from the other couples.

In their reenactment, the couple demonstrated how they could explicitly and playfully talk about Sasha’s sexual preference. Their seamless co-construction in describing the scenario suggested their familiarity with this topic. This perhaps

indicated that such an exchange was on its way to becoming a playful 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967) between Robin and Sasha. Knowing Sasha's sexual preference, Robin acted like a wingman and actively sought out targets for Sasha to admire. Although the reenactment ended with Robin making a joke about introducing Sasha, the couple later confirmed that it was just a playful remark. They claimed only to have the courage to look but never dared to make advances.

Robin and Sasha's reenactment showed that talking about Sasha's sexual preference could help initiate a couple-centered footing and create an intimate and playful exchange. As a lesbian couple, admiring a sexually attractive target and assisting a partner to seek out sexually attractive targets could both be considered a taboo or a form of perversion. By participating in such a "perverted" activity and committing verbal transgression together, the couple initiated a couple-centered footing that supported the expression of sexual preferences and desires. As mentioned before, such sex-related talk may be considered inappropriate in most non-private settings. Their relatively playful and open attitude indicated that the couple shared the closeness necessary to hold this type of conversation. Furthermore, drawing on a partner's sexual attraction to others as a source for play suggested that the couple is secure in their relationship. For other couples, talks about a sexually attractive person, if perceived as implying real or potential attraction between the partner and an imaginary rival, can pose threats to the relationship and lead to romantic jealousy. For Robin and Sasha, such talk was mutually enjoyable and served relational-enhancing purposes. The example also demonstrated how such talk may draw resources from the conceptual spheres of the safe space and the playground in the couple-centered footing to strengthen intimacy.

The next example came from the 20 Questions Game of a gay couple, Calvin and Jasper. Jasper drew the question, "What turns me on sexually?" to ask Calvin. This

couple, unlike Robin and Sasha, had different opinions about the ways to phrase a partner's sexual preference. This led to the shifts between taking a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in the couple's conversation.

**Example 33: Nipples and sexually caressing**

1 J: Oh my god: £什麼東西能夠激起(h)我的性慾£?

Oh my god. What is something that can turn me on sexually?

2 C: 什麼東西?£**奶頭啊**£嘻嘻嘻嘻嘻

Something? **Nipples**. Heeheeheeheehee.

3 J: 什麼能夠激起我的性慾?什麼能夠?

What can turn me on sexually? What can?

4 C: 什麼能夠激起你的性慾？

What can turn you on sexually?

5 J: 對 maybe 是 action or:? 呵呵呵

Yes. Maybe an action or? Hehehe

6 C: 什麼能夠激起我的性慾?

What can turn me on sexually?

7 J: 對..you know 可能什麼?

Yes.. you know. Maybe what?

8 C: 我沒有覺得你是這麼視覺的動物(.)我覺得是(2.0)**我覺得是:算(.)愛撫(.)就是觸摸某些身體的部位.**

I don't think you are such a visual animal. **I think it's (2.0) I think it's sexual caressing. To touch certain parts of the body.**

9 J: °**是不是演出來的答案°?** (1.3) 哈哈£生氣£好啦給你.

**Is it from an answer acted (in a scene)?** (1.3) Haha (you're) angry. Ok. (I'll) give it to you.

10 C: 瞬-瞬間£危機危機危機£[呵呵呵呵]

In-Instant crisis crisis crisis. Hehehehe.

11 J: **[我喜歡肢體接觸](.)我喜歡身體接觸你可以這樣講就好了(.)呵呵愛(h)撫?£這種大庭廣眾你也講出這種字£ 呵呵呵呵(.)旁邊有人=**

**I like physical contact. I like physical contact. You can just say that. Sexually caressing? In this kind of public space with people around you can still say such words? ((laugh)) Hehehehe. There's someone next to us=**

12 C: =有差嗎?=

Does it make any difference?

13 J: =£**愛撫**£呵呵呵呵

**Sexually caressing**. Hehehehe.

The couple was surprised and perhaps amused when they got the question. They both laughed, and Jasper even added an "oh my god" comment before reading the question out loud (Turn 1). At first, Calvin answered a body part that was considered relatively taboo to say in non-private realms (Turn 2). Perhaps considering Calvin's response incorrect, Jasper further defined what he thought the question meant and guided Calvin to provide an action-related answer (Turns 3, 5 & 7). This was when Calvin stated *愛撫* 'sexual caressing' as the answer (Turn 8). Upon hearing this, Jasper jokingly asked if the answer was from an act that Calvin had seen before, hinting that Calvin based his answer on a porn scene (Turn 9). This could be considered a tease targeted toward Calvin. As Calvin did not respond to the tease immediately, Jasper tried to laugh it off and gave Calvin the points. In the next turn, Calvin responded by saying, *瞬間危機* 'Instant crisis' (Turn 10). This might be a joking assessment of Jasper's tease leading to a crisis in their relationship. Jasper then

went back to commenting on the answer and suggested that Calvin could have simply said "*肢體接觸* 'physical contact'" instead of "*愛撫* 'sexual caressing'" (Turn 11). His statement implied that he considered "sexually caressing" as something more explicit and less appropriate to say as they were in a public place with people around. Calvin's response in the next turn did not seem to agree with Jasper's suggestion and assessment. Finally, Jasper repeated the words "sexually caressing" with laughter.

The example illustrated the dynamic interplay between couple-centered and individual-centered footing in couple's daily interaction. Calvin adopted a couple-centered footing when showcasing his knowledge about Jasper's sexual preference in a direct and sexually explicit manner (Turn 2). As Jasper's partner, Calvin was comfortable committing verbal transgression and talking about private and intimate information in front of Jasper. However, Jasper did not provide apparent cues of agreement to support Calvin's couple-centered response. While Jasper's clarification of the question could be seen as guiding Calvin toward the correct answer, it also suggested more of an individual-centered footing in his personal understanding and expectations (Turn 3 & 5). This led to Calvin making another effort to provide an answer that fit Jasper's interpretation of the question. His response, with reasoning based on their relational history and sexually explicit wording, could be seen as another attempt to initiate a couple-centered footing (Turn 8).

As discussed before, while teasing between romantic partners can help facilitate a couple-centered footing, it can also become relational-harming if interpreted as intentionally unkind and offensive. Jasper's tease in Turn 9 could imply that Calvin's answer was not based on a true understanding of Jasper but on Calvin's knowledge of porn scenes. If perceived as such, the tease would be in direct competition with the conceptualizations within a couple-centered footing – lack of understanding about one's partner versus deep knowledge about one's partner. What was worth noting

here was Jasper's awareness of the potential his tease might upset Calvin. When Calvin did not respond to the tease immediately, Jasper tried to repair the potential relational harm by laughing, jokingly attributing Calvin's silence as a sign of being angry, and offering a token of kindness by giving Calvin the point. Though not without risks, Jasper's response in Turn 9 could serve relational-enhancing purposes as it helped shift the interaction to a more playful one and showcased consideration for his partner's emotional reaction, drawing resources from the conceptual spheres of the playground and the safe space. In Turn 10, Calvin's response playfully supported Jasper's previous turn and gave a joking evaluation of the "crisis" occasioned by the tease. This could be seen as a co-construction of the couple-centered footing initiated in Turn 9.

In Turn 11, Jasper shifted to more of an individual-centered footing again as he lightly criticized Calvin for using the term "sexually caressing" in public and suggested a term he considered more appropriate for the occasion. Here, I should add that although the interview with the particular couple was conducted at a coffee shop, it was before closing time, with only one other table of customers left on the same floor. The other table was too far away for us to hear the customers' conversation and vice versa. Whether Jasper's response was due to the actual setting of the interview or his awareness of the answers being recorded for research was unclear. Nevertheless, it affirmed that couples would generally be more comfortable having sex-related talk in a private and intimate setting. Calvin's rhetorical question, "Does it make any difference?" suggested his disagreement with Jasper's statement and supported more of an individual-centered footing. The exchange ended with Jasper repeating the words he deemed inappropriate to use in public and laughing.

Calvin and Jasper's exchanges showed that sex-related talk has the potential to foster a couple-centered footing and support relational enhancement. However,

similar to other verbal transgressions discussed in this chapter, inherent risks may be involved when establishing a couple-centered footing using such strategies. The couple's relational history, communication pattern, personality, relationship quality, and context can all play a role in the uptake of sex-related talk. Revealing intimate information or teasing about a partner's sexual preferences, though potentially supporting relational harmony in a more personal setting, can result in a partner's embarrassment in public. Such open and explicit disclosures may prompt the partner to take more of an individual-centered footing in response to their partner's bluntness to save face.

Another type of sex-related talk adopted more commonly in my data is sexual humor. In couples' daily interactions, sexual humor was also found to establish a couple-centered footing and facilitate relational harmony. As sexual humor is generally considered inappropriate between non-intimates, their reciprocal occurrences mark the closeness and familiarity between romantic partners. Once again, in line with Dynel's (2009) argument about the difficulty of providing a definite taxonomy to humor types, the goal of the current research was not to list all types of sexual humor couples may adopt in their daily interaction. Instead, through analyzing couples' conversational data, the research discussed how sexual humor, as a type of sex-related talk, helps romantic partners perform relational work.

The first example of sexual humor came from the spontaneous recordings of my husband and me. I had been working on my laptop for hours in the room when my husband came in singing the chorus of the song "Shout" from Tears for Fears, an English pop-rock band.

**Example 34: I can't hear you with my dick in your mouth**

1 K: ((singing)) Shout (.) shout let it all out(.) These are the things: I can do without(.) So come on(.) I'm talking to you(.) Come on (3.0) Shout(.) shout let it all out(.) I can't: hear you with **my dick [in your mouth**(.) So come on(.) I'm talking to you(.) Come on.]

2 A: [HEHEHEHEHEHEHEHE]

3 K: £I knew that would make you laugh£.

4 A: Hehehehe £you're silly£.

The example demonstrated how sexual humor can be used in a couple's daily interaction to foster a couple-centered footing and maintain intimacy. The sexually explicit adaptation of the lyrics created an incongruity similar to that of a punchline. As a result, my attention was shifted from work, and I started laughing loudly. My husband's response in the next turn indicated that the humor was intentional. This statement also showcased his deep understanding of my personality as he was able to predict my response and create the humor I could appreciate.

The sexual humor, being verbally transgressive in nature, drew resources from the conceptual sphere of the safe space and the playground to establish a couple-centered footing. In the conceptual sphere of the safe space in the couple-centered footing, sexually descriptive content can be freely discussed without fearing judgment. Moreover, the conceptual sphere of the playground provides the resources for mutual enjoyment between the couple to cater to each other's relational and emotional needs. Perhaps recognizing how long and hard I had been working, my husband initiated the couple-centered footing with sexual humor to create a playful and intimate moment between us. The loud laughter indicated my recognition of the joke and supported the establishment of the couple-centered footing.

Example 35 also came from an exchange between my husband and me. He was helping me zip up a piece of clothing. As he was putting the insertion pin into the retainer box before zipping up the zipper, he asked if the pin was all the way in the box.

**Example 35: That's what she said**

1 K: Is it all the way in there yet?

2 A: £**That's what she said£. hhh**

3 K: £**Well not to me↑£(.) You know what I'm saying hehe[hehe]**

4 A: [Hehe](.) £**Yup sure↑ do↑£**

5 K: That's a good one though(.) Got it.

6 A: There you go.

Similar to the previous example, the sexual humor presented in this transcript helped construct a couple-centered footing in which a couple could talk about sex-related topics freely and verbally co-create relational-enhancing moments. The sexual humor in this transcript drew its comedic source from the joke "That's what she said," a trope made popular by US comedy in the mid-1970s. When a statement can be construed as sexual innuendoes, the double entendre "That's what she said" is added to make the joke.

In the transcript presented above, the joke was occasioned by the question, "Is it all the way in there yet?" in Turn 1. While the more obvious meaning was about the zipper, the question could also be interpreted as a sexual innuendo. My use of the trope in the next turn added sexual meaning to his utterance and initiated a couple-centered footing in the exchange (Turn 2). This verbal transgression was co-constructed in the next turn by my husband (Turn 3). His response suggested his

recognition of the trope. Personal and intimate information was further added to jointly construct the joke and the couple-centered footing. My agreement in the next turn showed my understanding of our relational history and provided support to his previous statement. The sexual joke ended with his positive evaluation in Turn 5. And the topic was shifted back to talking about the completion of the zipper task.

The example showed how couples can verbally turn a daily task into a playful and intimate event. The use of sexual humor allowed couples to shift to a couple-centered footing to talk about shared sexual knowledge while sharing a laugh, invoking resources from the conceptual spheres of the safe space and the playground. In doing so, a sense of intimacy and coupledom can be maintained and enhanced.

The following example came from the spontaneous recording of Jerry and Lynn. This transcript was the later part of Example 28 discussed previously about the couple's reciprocal swearing. After Jerry accepted the size of the B glue, he moved on to opening other packages. In this package, he found the gold paint he bought. So he stated, "*喔！我的顏色來了，色金* 'Oh! My color is here. Color gold.'" However, in Taiwan Mandarin, retroflex sibilant *sh-* [ʂ] is often merged with dental sibilant *s-* [s] through deretroflexion (e.g., Chiu et al., 2019; Lee-Kim & Chou, 2022). Additionally, the syllable-final nasals *-ing* [iŋ] and *-eng* [əŋ] are commonly merged into *-in* [in] and *-eng* [ən], respectively (e.g., Fon et al., 2011; Hsu & Tse, 2007). As a result, *色金 se-jin* 'color gold' can easily be pronounced and heard as the homophones *射精 she-jing* 'ejaculate' or *社經 she-jing* 'socioeconomic,' whereas *顏色 yan-se* 'color' can be pronounced and heard as *顏射 yan-she* 'facial (ejaculation)' in Taiwan Mandarin. While the transcription presented the most obvious meaning of the puns based on the context, the meanings of the other homophones can also be interpreted in the interaction.

**Example 36: Color gold, ejaculate, and socioeconomic status**

(…)

11 J: 哇↑超小的欸:真少:>好吧<(.)>算了<(.)試試看吧(.)那應該是可以啦(.)買了:量↑杯(.)量杯還有那個一些::這罐是什麼?喔↑我的顏色來了(.)**色金.**

Wow? So small eh. So little. Fine. Whatever. (I'll) give it a try. I should be ok. I bought a measuring cup. Measuring cup and some- What is this bottle? Oh. My color is here. ***Se-jin*** **'color-gold'.**

12 L: ((loud)) **射精?=**

((loud)) ***She-jing*** **'ejaculate'?**

13 J: =對啊(.)**色金=**

**Yes.** ***Se-jin*** **'color-gold'.**

14 L: =**射精? 好久沒有射精了=**

***She-jing*** **'ejaculate'? It's been a long time since (we last)** ***she-jing*** **'ejaculate'.**

15 J: =**哪裡來的時間? 顏色的色啊.**

**Where is the time? The** ***se*** **'color' from** ***yan-se*** **'color'.**

16 L: **色金啊.**

***Se-jin*** **'color gold'.**

17 J: 來看下一箱.

(Let's) look at the next box.

18 L: °**色金啊°.**

***Se-jin*** **'color gold'.**

19 J: °啊我美工刀勒?這裡°.

Where is my boxcutter? Here.

20 L: **J 的社經地位.**

**J's** ***She-jing*** **'ejaculate/socioeconomic' status.**

21 J: °**社經地位啊**° (1.5) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 這 L 剛說很重的那一箱.

***She-jing* 'ejaculate/socioeconomic' status.** (1.5) ((baby talk-caregiver)) ((nasal)) This is the box that L said was heavy.

22 L: 在重幾點的?

What is it so heavy for?

Here, the couple adopted homophonic puns to engage in sex-related talk. The puns were made obvious due to the effect of phonological mergers in Taiwan Mandarin. In Attardo's (2018, p. 91) study on puns and humorous wordplay, he defined a pun as a "textual occurrence in which a sequence of sounds must be interpreted with a reference to a second sequence of sounds, which may, but need not, be identical to the first sequence, for the full meaning of the text to be accessed." The term *色金 se-jin* 'color gold' led to the humorous interpretations of *射精 she-jing* 'ejaculate' and *社經 she-jing* 'socioeconomic' in this context.

Whether Jerry intentionally used the term *色金 se-jin* 'color gold' to create ambiguity and potential for sexual humor was unclear (Turn 11). However, a less marked way to refer to the color gold in Taiwan Mandarin would be *金色 jin-se* 'color gold.' Even his explanation *顏色 yan-se* 'color' in Turn 15 could have a sexual interpretation due to the effect of phonological mergers. Regardless of Jerry's intention, the exchanges between the couple co-constructed the sexual humor and the couple-centered footing. As sexually explicit terms like *射精 she-jing* 'ejaculate' and *顏射 yan-she* 'facial (ejaculation)' would be inappropriate and avoided between non-intimates, such interpretations were made possible and available due to the close relationship of the couple. In turns 14 and 15, the private dyadic information revealed also indicated the shared relational history between the romantic partners. Though

Jerry seemed to begin shifting the topic to opening another box (Turn 17), he still repeated the final homophonic pun "*社經地位 she-jing* 'ejaculate/socioeconomic' status" to support Lynn's humor (Turn 21). In addition, he adopted Lynn's name-related nickname reciprocally in a baby-talk register when changing the topic, allowing the couple-centered footing to be maintained even though there was a topic switch.

In Jerry and Lynn's recordings, sexual homophonic puns were used several times to create playful exchanges and perform relational work in their daily interactions. The following is another example of such usage.

**Example 37: Get angry, reproductive organ, and promotion gadget**

1 J: (…) 應該要來測試一下這個氣泵有沒有正常(3.0)它這個要是沒有辦法給我正常工作(.)我就要**生氣氣**了

(…) (I) should test whether this pump is working normally. (3.0) If it doesn't work normally, I will ***sheng-qi-qi*** **'get angry'**.

2 L: **生殖器?**

***Sheng-zhi-qi*** **'reproductive organ'**

3 J: **森七七啦(.)生殖器**(.)£多拉 A 夢喔£? hhh

*Sen-qi-qi* 'get angry.' *Sheng-zhi-qi* **'reproductive organ/promotion gadget'.** Doraemon? hhh

4 L: **((cartoon-character sounding)) [升:↑職:↑器:↑]**

**((cartoon-character sounding)) [*Sheng-zhi-qi* 'reproductive organ/promotion gadget']**

5 J: **((cartoon-character sounding)) [升:↑職:↑器:↑]**(.)多拉 A 夢:你要不要升職喔:? 升吧.

**((cartoon-character sounding)) [*Sheng-zhi-qi* 'reproductive organ/promotion gadget']** Doraemon, do you want to be promoted? Promote.

This example demonstrated another use of a sexual homophonic pun in establishing a couple-centered footing and serving relational goals. The transcript began with Jerry talking about a hypothetical scenario in which he would 生氣氣 *sheng-qi-qi* 'get angry.' The duplication of the less marked term 生氣 *sheng-qi* 'get angry' came from a popular internet usage 森七七 *sen-qi-qi* 'get angry.' Generally speaking, the term 森七七 *sen-qi-qi* 'get angry' is used to playfully tease someone for being angry, implying that the anger is unwarranted or childish. When the term is used to refer to one's own emotional state, it is considered a cutesy way to express annoyance or upset toward something minor. The duplication and the [ʂ-s] merger of the term resemble the qualities of baby talk. As mentioned before, a romantic couple's use of baby talk could serve relational-enhancing purposes such as attention or rapport-seeking. The occurrence of this term in Turn 1 could then be viewed as an initiation of a couple-centered footing. Jerry's indication of his possible annoyance with a term similar to those used in baby talk could suggest a need for emotional support from his partner.

Lynn's response in Turn 2 could be a result of mishearing what Jerry said and/or her inclusion of sexual humor to lighten the mood to help manage negative emotions. What is worth noting here is that the mishearing of the term as something sexual and/or the initiation of sexual humor indicated the close relationship between the speakers. For non-intimates, even if a term were misheard, the hearer would not be so quick to repeat a sexual interpretation of the misheard word. If anything, they would

ask the speaker to repeat what was said. Moreover, one would generally not initiate sexual humor when offering emotional support to a non-intimate.

In Turn 3, Jerry clarified what he said but also mentioned the anime Doraemon, which allowed the joke to continue in the following turns. Doraemon is the main character in a Japanese manga and anime series. The character is an earless robotic cat from the future with a four-dimensional pouch in which he stores gadgets and inventions. Whenever there is a problem, Doraemon will take out a gadget or tool from his pouch to aid the situation. However, the *升職器 sheng-zhi-qi* 'reproductive organ/promotion gadget' mentioned in the transcript is not a real gadget from the anime. It is a parody item created by using homophonic puns in Mandarin Chinese. While online jokes and memes contributed to the parody item's popularity, it remained relatively niche, known primarily among Mandarin Chinese-speaking fans of Doraemon and meme enthusiasts. In recent years, some career coaches or gurus also used the term in online articles and career guidance books to pique the reader's interest. However, the term is far from being a trope like the "That's what she said" jokes discussed in Example 35.

As the Doraemon series was one of Lynn's favorite anime series, Lynn was the one who found the homophonic pun online before introducing it to Jerry. The couple then shared this joke as a kind of inside joke, one that was understood and appreciated due to Lynn's love of Doraemon and Jerry's support of her preference. Additionally, the sexual homophonic puns also made the joke appropriate for their intimate relationship. Therefore, when the term "Doraemon" was mentioned, the couple imitated Doraemon's voice and simultaneously said *升 職 器 sheng-zhi-qi* 'reproductive organ/promotion gadget' (Turn 4 & 5). The couple's co-construction of the joke could be seen as a sign that the sexual humor helped shift the interaction into a more playful and light-hearted one. In doing so, Jerry's potential anger was

managed by the joint creation of a sex-related inside joke as the couple continued to enjoy their evening together in the rest of the recording without any signs of upset.

The example revealed how sexual homophonic puns or inside jokes can invoke the conceptual sphere of the playground and safe space to co-construct a couple-centered footing and manage emotion. When there were indications of possible upsets, responding with sexual humor can maintain a couple-centered footing and foster a sense of closeness and playfulness. The use of the inside joke also created an opportunity for the couple to draw resources on shared knowledge and 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) to strengthen coupledom.

In this section, examples of couples' sex-related talk were discussed and analyzed to show how sex-related talk can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing and support relational enhancement. When romantic partners engage in sex-related talks with each other, they may co-construct a couple-centered footing in which the two can freely express their private thoughts and feelings about sexual topics. In other words, the couple-centered footing allows for a verbal and conceptual safe space for taboo topics to be discussed and supported, creating intimate and relational-enhancing moments in the relationship. Nevertheless, similar to the risks inherent in other verbal transgressions, sex-related talk may not always guarantee positive relational outcomes. When initiated in the "wrong" context, sex-related talk can still be considered inappropriate or offensive by a romantic partner. Through repetition and the accumulation of intertextual usages, couples may develop sex-related talk as a part of their couple-lect and make use of the conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing to maintain relational closeness and build rapport.

## 4.5 Baby Talk

The term *撒嬌 sajiao* refers to the verbal and nonverbal practices of being cute and childish. It is generally used to describe the behaviors of "infantilizing oneself as a person in need of love and attention" (Yueh, 2017, p. 10). For instance, one can use a high-pitched childlike voice to sound cute and evoke positive emotions when talking to parents or a romantic partner. One can also gently rub one's head on a loved one's shoulder or chest like a cat to invite affection. Such behaviors are often associated with being adorable, vulnerable, innocent, impulsive, emotional, and feminine. Due to its association with these qualities, *撒嬌 sajiao* is typically considered an act more acceptable for children and women. Nevertheless, men in my data are also seen to *撒嬌 sajiao* with their partners in private.

In the current study, the term and the related concepts of *撒嬌 sajiao* were mentioned quite a few times in the interviews of Taiwanese couples. One of the couples, Jerry and Lynn, stated that they expressed their love and affection for each other through *撒嬌 sajiao*. Another heterosexual couple, Chloe and Ray, discussed in their interview that knowing how to *撒嬌 sajiao* was one of the attractive qualities in a male partner. Chloe listed several qualities that attracted her to Ray. These included his ability to *撒嬌 sajiao*, act cute and clingy, and be reliable, considerate, and emotionally intelligent. She referred to these as the "*小奶狗* 'little puppy'" qualities that she found desirable and attractive in Ray. Although men are typically not encouraged to *撒嬌 sajiao*, the couples' responses suggested that *撒嬌 sajiao* might be an attractive and desirable act or quality for romantic partners of both genders. However, one may still raise questions about the extent to which *撒嬌 sajiao* can be treated as an attractive quality for romantic partners in non-Taiwanese culture.

Specifically, do American couples also *撒嬌 sajiao* or act childishly in front of each other to invite and express affection?

Unlike Mandarin-speaking cultures where the term *撒嬌 sajiao* is readily available and widely discussed in the culture, English does not have an exact equivalent term for the same concept. Nevertheless, similar acts of performing cuteness and vulnerability to invite affection can still be seen in the daily interactions of young children with their caregivers. Another main context where *撒嬌 sajiao* can be observed in American culture is the interactions between love interests. Bombar and Littig's (1996) psychology study on the use of the baby-talk register in adult relationships showed that 80 out of the 126 college respondents reported using baby talk with their romantic partners.

Through my interactions with the couples in my study, I also observed American couples engaging in *撒嬌 sajiao* through different practices. For instance, during the couple's interview, Kevin lay down and rested his head on Laura's lap, pulling one of Laura's arms around him into a cuddle where he was in the position of being held. After he did this, Laura gently stroked his hair as if comforting a young child. In Example 29, Cindy and Brandon got emotional when sharing their first "I love you" story. When realizing her partner was crying, Cindy spoke in a baby-talk register to express affection and help manage emotions. In another example presented in the later part of this section, my American husband initiated exchanges similar to those between a child and caregiver when I was about to leave to run some errands. In addition, the many usages of terms of endearment, particularly the affectionate nicknames (e.g., baby, boo boo, honey, sweetie) in my data, also showed how American couples are no strangers to "infantilizing" each other to express fondness and adoration.

Based on these observations in my study, I argued that *撒嬌 sajiao* is an act that can be seen in any couple with the intention of expressing and inviting love, affection, and tenderness. The differences between cultures with equivalent terms for this concept and ones without are the importance and meaning people may attach to such behaviors. Yueh (2017) mentioned similar findings in her study on *撒嬌 sajiao* in Taiwan. According to her observations and discussions with her informant, she stated that *撒嬌 sajiao* is not only found in East Asian cultures but can also be seen in relationships in the United States. The differences lie in that similar kinds of practices may not carry the same cultural meaning and significance in the United States as they do in Taiwan.

While there is no satisfactory term to capture the essence of *撒嬌 sajiao* in English, there are qualities that may point to similar things. One can speak about a man having a "boyish charm" or a woman knowing how to "play coy" or "act cute and girly" as attractive and desirable in the dating world. These qualities require one to behave or perform in ways that make them appear more youthful, adorable, and innocent than their actual age. As a result, if *撒嬌 sajiao* is viewed as a means to appear more "childlike" to help express affection, deepen bonds, and attract romantic interest, it should have a role in intimate relationships in English-speaking culture as well.

Although *撒嬌 sajiao* can help gain affection and positive evaluation, using it is not without its risks. Even people like children and women, who are generally more positively evaluated for their *撒嬌 sajiao*-related practices, are still subjected to conducting this way in appropriate contexts. For example, a child being vulnerable and crying to gain the attention of their caregiver at home might be cute and understandable. On public transportation or during a wedding ceremony, the same behavior from a child may not be perceived as adorable or acceptable as it is in the

private sphere. As for women, adopting a baby-talk register and acting cute when speaking to a romantic partner may be feminine and attractive, but using the same type of speech and demeanor when hosting a meeting at work might be viewed as unprofessional and manipulative. For men, the appropriate context to conduct *撒嬌 sajiao*-related practices is even more limiting than for children and women. This is perhaps due to the associated concept of vulnerability and femininity with *撒嬌 sajiao*. Even in romantic settings where *撒嬌 sajiao* can express and invite affection, men often fear being judged as weak and unmasculine by their partner. It takes deep relational knowledge, mutual trust, and shared intertextual experiences for a couple to register baby talk as a part of their couple-lect and recognize its use as positive and relational-enhancing for both partners.

Other than context, authenticity is another key factor determining the evaluation of *撒嬌 sajiao*. People's evaluation of practices related to *撒嬌 sajiao* is highly influenced by whether one is "genuinely being cute" or "intentionally acting cute." If one appears to "pretend" to be cute, their actions may be construed as calculating and deceitful. On the other hand, if an individual exhibits childlike behavior due to their sense of comfort and security with a loved one, such actions may be perceived as endearing and genuine. However, judging the authenticity of one's "cuteness" is a rather complicated task.

After the 'third wave of variation studies' (Eckert, 2012), researchers generally agreed that verbal or nonverbal practices indexing certain social personae or identities are often flexible and context-dependent (e.g., Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2010; Eckert, 2014; Johnstone, 2014). Viewing identity as inherently relational, Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 605) stated that the claims to be authentic are always partial, "…produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other." As a result, risks are still involved when one adopts *撒嬌 sajiao*-

related practices around their romantic partner, as the two might have different ideas about what practices are more "authentic" and "genuine" than others in certain contexts. Due to the potential negative evaluations of *撒嬌 sajiao*, I analyzed the verbal practices of *撒嬌 sajiao* as a kind of verbal transgression in my research. Specifically, I examined the linguistic practices of *撒嬌 sajiao* as a baby-talk register performed between romantic partners to express and invite affection.

Baby talk is a type of register most commonly used to refer to a caregiver's speech directed to a child or infant. It is also called caretaker speech, child-directed speech, parentese, or motherese. This register is characterized by a "singsong" or melodious intonation pattern as opposed to a monotone style of adults' daily speech. It also has a higher and broader pitch, slower speech rate, simplified and nasalized pronunciations, and shorter utterances. Other common features include the use of diminutives (e.g., adding a terminal /i/ sound at the end of a word in English or attaching *小 xiao* 'little' as a prefix in Mandarin Chinese), duplications (e.g., mama and dada in English or *貓貓 maomao* 'kitty' and *狗狗 gogo* 'doggie' in Mandarin Chinese), and sentence-final particles in Mandarin Chinese (e.g., *了 le, 啊 a, 哦 ou, 嗎 ma*) (See Farris (1995) and Yueh (2017) for more examples of linguistic features related to *撒嬌 sajiao*). Generally speaking, the linguistic features of baby talk contribute to a more simplified and clear register for communication with younger children. Not only is this register more effective in getting an infant's attention, but it is also believed to play a role in a child's language acquisition, cognitive development, emotional bonding, and socialization (see Solomon, 2012). However, baby talk is not limited to caregiver-child communication. Studies also found adults use baby talk in conversations with pets (Mitchell, 2001) or romantic partners to express intimacy and affection (Bombar & Littig, 1996; Yueh, 2017).

In the current research, baby talk is analyzed as a switch from the more "everyday" style of speech to a more "childlike" register in conversation. When analyzing the data, the speaker's predominant style of speech when communicating with their partner and others is established as the "regular" or "default" way of speaking for a particular speaker. When there's an apparent shift from regular speech to one taking on linguistic features associated with verbal practices of *撒嬌 sajiao* (Farris, 1995; Yueh, 2017), I analyzed it as the use of the baby talk register. These features include paralinguistic changes in intonation patterns, pitch range, speech rate, and nasality. (See Table 1 for a list of features that indicate a shift to baby talk identified in my data). They also include morpho-phonological changes, such as the use of diminutives, duplications, prolonged vowels, simplified consonant clusters, and other forms of modifications often used by and with children. Syntactically, the utterances in baby talk may be shorter and more simplified in structure. In line with findings of past studies (Farris, 2000; Yueh, 2013), frequent uses of sentence-final particles in Mandarin Chinese spoken in Taiwan can be detected as another feature associated with *撒嬌 sajiao* behaviors. In my research, I also found that couples may shift to baby talk by engaging in conversations similar to "caregiver-child" and "child-child" exchanges as opposed to speaking to each other as two adults. Other features include speaking with protruded lips or a smile and whining.

**Table 1. Comparison of linguistic features in regular speech and baby talk**

| Linguistic Features | Regular Speech | Baby Talk |
|---|---|---|
| **Intonation patterns** | Monotone | Melodious; "sing-song" manner |
| **Pitch range** | Narrower; lower-pitched | Broader; higher-pitched |
| **Speech rate** | Faster | Slower |
| **Nasality** | Less nasal | More nasal |
| **Diminutive** | Used when it's the unmarked form in the language | Used even when it's the marked form in the language |
| **Duplication** | Used when it's the unmarked form in the language | Used even when it's the marked form in the language |
| **Vowel** | Normal Length | Lengthened |
| **Consonants** | Regular Pronunciation | Simplified |
| **Sentence Structure** | Normal complexity | Simplified |
| **Sentence-Final Particles in Mandarin Chinese** | Used when necessary | Frequent uses |
| **Contextual Exchanges** | Adult-adult exchanges | Caregiver-child & Child-child exchanges |

Reciprocal use of baby talk, as a type of verbal transgression, marked the closeness of its speakers. As shown in my data, baby talk between romantic couples appears to have two patterns: the caregiver-child dynamic and the child-child dynamic. The two dynamics reflected two kinds of transgressive role-playing between romantic

partners, drawing resources from the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the playground, and the safe space in the couple-centered footing. The caregiver-child dynamic usually consists of one partner taking on the role of the nurturing and understanding adult caregiver and the other partner acting as the adorable and vulnerable child. When romantic partners play these roles in the use of baby talk, they typically embody the set of characteristics expected of these roles (See Table 2). The nurturing caregiver is often the more understanding, mature, and trustworthy person willing to provide love and care for the adorable child. They are expected to be responsive and receptive. They are also the strong, rational, and independent person that knows when and how to act properly.

**Table 2. Expected characteristics of the nurturing caregiver and the adorable child**

| Nurturing Caregiver | Adorable Child |
|---|---|
| Understanding | Self-centered |
| Responsive/Receptive | Uninhibitedly Expressive |
| Mature | Innocent/Inexperienced |
| Independent | Needy |
| Trustworthy | Capricious/Unpredictable |
| Strong | Vulnerable |
| Rational | Emotional |
| Proper | Naughty/Mischievous |

On the other hand, the adorable child is the more self-centered and innocent one in this dynamic. They express themselves uninhibitedly and expect their needs to be valued and met. They are emotional, unpredictable, and mischievous at times. They are also vulnerable and in need of the attention and support of a caregiver. The opposing qualities of these roles offer the couple a chance to express and invite affection, attention, and care. When acting like an adorable and vulnerable child, potentially face-threatening and relational-harming acts such as requesting love, help, support, and attention, as well as expressing upsets, complaints, and objections, would generally be more accepted and appreciated. Couples in the data were more likely to use baby talk when making requests, disagreeing, and apologizing. In these contexts, if the other partner assumes the role of the caregiver and responds accordingly, the co-constructed caregiver-child dynamic can contribute to the establishment of a couple-centered footing.

The caregiver-child dynamic prioritizes the needs and wants of the adorable child, which is in line with the focus of the couple-centered footing. This dynamic supports the co-construction of a couple-centered footing by shaping and drawing resources from all three of the conceptual spheres. Under the couple-centered footing, romantic partners are expected to value each other's well-being and needs. Reciprocal use of baby talk in the caregiver-child dynamic fostered the kind of relational-enhancing interactions typical in the conceptual sphere of love zone in the couple-centered footing. Next, the reciprocal use of baby talk can contribute to the construction of the safe space. The joint use of baby talk, a kind of verbal transgression, requires and strengthens the relational closeness of its speakers. As mentioned before, engaging in baby talk is inherently risky for any adult, especially for men. Such usage is often frowned upon and interpreted negatively as manipulative, condescending, or insincere in many social and interpersonal contexts. For one to feel

comfortable enough to verbally "act like a child" and be treated as such without fearing judgment suggested deep trust and bond between the speakers. Lastly, if the caregiver-child dynamic is considered a type of roleplay between romantic partners, the co-constructed act of such verbal play can also foster a playground in the couple-centered footing. As maintaining relational harmony is at the core of a couple-centered footing, actively engaging in roleplay can provide mutual enjoyment and support relational enhancement.

The second kind of pattern emerging from the couple's reciprocal use of baby talk in my data is the child-child dynamic. When romantic partners engage in a child-child dynamic, both of them take the role of the adorable child. The couple tends to co-create verbal play and be mischievous together, acting like two children co-constructing a verbal playground with no adult present. This is perhaps the reason why this dynamic seemed to occur the most during conversational humor, particularly banter and teasing. Such a dynamic can also be seen in a mock disagreement where the couple pretended to argue with each other for entertainment. Similar to playful bickering between children, the couple can express thoughts uninhibitedly as well as jointly create playful moments using reciprocal baby talk.

The child-child dynamic also supports the co-construction of a couple-centered footing in similar ways that the caregiver-child dynamic does. The playfulness in the child-child dynamic strengthens camaraderie and contributes to the establishment of a playground in the couple-centered footing. Moreover, committing the verbal transgression of using baby talk labels the couple's interaction as intimate and encourages relational enhancement, making use of the conceptualizations in the safe space. Finally, mutual engagement in the child-child roleplay for joint entertainment invites relational harmony and commitment, shaping the conceptual sphere of the love zone.

The following example came from Chloe and Ray's 20 Questions Game before the interview. The transcript demonstrated how baby talk can be used to *撒嬌 sajiao* and co-construct a couple-centered footing. The couple was observed to adopt reciprocal baby talk throughout this round of questioning. It should be noted that Ray mostly used the baby talk register in response to Chloe's baby talk use in private. Compared to when the researcher was around, his voice was higher in pitch, slower in pace, and had a more "singsong" intonation when speaking to Chloe privately. As mentioned before, Chloe listed acting cute and clingy as some of Ray's "*小奶狗* 'little puppy'" qualities that attracted her to him. In the following exchanges, the couple demonstrated how these qualities might be manifested in baby talk by modifying the prosodic features of their speech and using duplications.

**Example 38: Bead bead and cry cry**

1 C: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 我最糟糕的£童年經歷是什麼£ .hhh ((sniffing sound as if crying))？**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) What is my worst childhood experience? .hhh ((sniffing sound as if crying))**

2 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 嗯:就是把£彈珠塞到耳朵裡.£**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) Mm it's putting a marble inside your ear.**

3 C: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 你確定是彈珠?**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You sure it's a marble?**

4 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 嗯珠↑珠↑(.)[£反正就是珠↑珠↑啊£]**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) Mm. Bead bead. Anyway, it's bead bead.**

5 C: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) [呵呵呵呵]還↑有吧?這不↑是最糟糕的.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Hehehehe. There's more, right? This is not the worst.**

6 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 啊不然咧?摔斷牙齒喔?=**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) Then what is? Breaking (your) teeth?**

7 C: **((baby talk-child))((slow)) =喔呵呵呵呵£好像也很糟£(.)最糟糕的?**

**((baby talk-child))((slow)) Oh Hehehehe. (That) seems to be bad, too. (How about) the worst?**

8 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 最糟糕的(.)都很糟啊(.)我聽起來那個都很糟啊(.)**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) The worst. (They are) all the worst. That all sounded the worst to me.**

9 C: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 最↑糟糕的(.)最↑糟糕的(.) ((sniffing sound as if crying))會哭哭的.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) The worst. The worst. ((sniffing sound as if crying)) (The kind) that will cry cry.**

10 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 會哭哭的喔(.)那就是有一次你的好朋友(.)就是要離開教會了(.)妳就很傷心.**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) (The kind) that will cry cry. Then it's that one time when your best friend is leaving the church, you were really sad.**

11 C: £我怎麼不記得£?

How come I don't remember (this)?

12 R: **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) 有啊↑(.)妳還跟我講過欸(.)然後她就再也沒有聚會了(.)因為你對她做了一件事情.**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((protruded lips)) It happened. You told me about it before eh. Then she never came to a gathering because you did something to her.**

13 C: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 嘻嘻嘻£好啦£(.)那算.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Heeheehee. Ok. That (one) counts.**

The couple's exchanges in this transcript co-constructed the caregiver-child dynamic in this conversation and established the couple-centered footing that provided the verbal safe space for the couple to express emotion, offer compassion, and indicate disagreement. The baby talk and the sniffing sound in Turn 1 contribute to the role of the vulnerable child, perhaps occasioned by the question about the worst childhood experience. Ray's reciprocal baby talk and the laughter in the next turn could serve as a way to provide comfort and lighten the mood in the conversation about bad childhood experiences.

Chloe's response in Turn 3 showed her disagreement with the accuracy of Ray's answer. This perhaps prompted Ray to adjust his answer using duplication, another common feature in baby talk (Turn 4). While the duplication form *珠珠* 'bead' is not exclusively linked to baby talk in Mandarin Chinese, its combination with prosodic features typical of baby talk (e.g., higher pitch, slower pace, and protruded lips) made this utterance even more characteristic of baby talk than Ray's previous response. The couple continued to negotiate their answers and showed disagreement in baby talk in the following turns (Turns 5 – 8). The reciprocal baby talk in these exchanges jointly establish the couple-centered footing and mitigated the potential relational harm in

expressing different views. The couple's laughter throughout these exchanges also indicated that disagreement expressed under a couple-centered footing could perhaps avoid further escalation or relational-harming consequences.

In Turn 9, Chloe prompted Ray to give another answer and provided him with a clue using duplication *會哭哭的* '(The kind) that will cry cry.' Though still a comparatively marked form, the duplication of *哭* 'cry' has become popular among young people in Taiwan. The form is considered a cuter or *撒嬌 sajiao* way to indicate one's sadness. For instance, one can say, "*我們這禮拜沒時間約會了，哭哭* 'We don't have time to go on a date this week. Cry cry.'" In the next turn, Ray repeated the duplication and provided another answer in baby talk (Turn 10). This was when Chloe switched back to her normal register and said she didn't remember the incident mentioned by Ray, showing her reluctance to accept this answer (Turn 11). However, in the following turn, Ray continued elaborating in baby talk and eventually reminded or persuaded Chloe to agree with his answer. Turn 13 showed Chloe's agreement as she used the baby talk register and laughter to wrap up this round of questioning.

Most of Chloe's utterances, though expressing opposing views from Ray, were spoken in a baby talk register and with laughter. This helped cast her in the vulnerable, emotional, and capricious child role where she could playfully challenge the accuracy of Ray's answer without being rude or relational-harming. Ray's reciprocal use of baby talk co-constructed the caregiver-child dynamic, where he was the receptive and understanding adult offering comfort to his partner. By saying in baby talk, "*最糟糕的，都很糟啊，我聽起來那個都很糟啊* 'The worst. (They are) all the worst. That all sounded the worst to me,'" Ray expressed his compassion for his partner's past by evaluating all the experiences he mentioned as "the worst." Offering emotional

support, care, and nurturance is expected in his caregiver role occasioned by the exchanges in baby talk.

In the current research, my data contained cases of baby talk in which the prosodic modifications were less apparent, especially for men. This might be due to men's lower-pitched and more monotonous style of speech compared to women, making slight prosodic modifications more easily recognized as men switch to baby talk. Shifting to a relatively higher pitch and talking in slightly more melodious intonation can often be cues for men's baby talk register. In addition, my data also showed that couples' use of baby talk can go beyond paralinguistic and morpho-phonological modifications.

My data showed that baby talk can be identified in a couple's conversation on a contextual level. This typically happens when a couple engages in "childish bickering" or exchanges that are contextually similar to ones between a young child and a caregiver. For instance, when a partner asks for help with chores, another partner may verbally and jokingly reject the request. This may lead to further persuasion in a manner similar to a caregiver encouraging and convincing a child to help. The caregiver-child role-playing through the use of baby talk usually serves entertaining and relational-enhancing purposes. Rather than a serious rejection, the mock disagreement in baby talk can allow the couple to create mutual enjoyment in such exchanges.

Another example contextually resembling a caregiver-child conversation came from the spontaneous recording between my husband and me. When I was about to leave, my husband initiated a conversation similar to one between a caregiver and a child with separation anxiety.

**Example 39: No, don't leave!**

1 K: ((baby talk-child))((slow)) **No::↑ don't↑ leave(.) Where are you going?**

2 A: ((baby talk-caregiver)) I'm going to go grocery shop with mommy(.) That's why I gotta speed work and I gotta be fast (.) Because she's waiting for me.

3 K: ((baby talk-child))((slow)) **Aww::come↑ give me a hug.**

4 A: ((baby talk-caregiver)) You coming?

5 K: ((baby talk-child))((slow)) °No:°

6 A: ((baby talk-caregiver)) Ok(.) I'll be back soon.

7 K: ((baby talk-child))((slow)) **You promise↑?**

8 A: ((baby talk-caregiver)) Yes(.) I'll be right back(.) Cutie↑.

9 K: ((baby talk-child)) Heehee.

In this example, neither of us had an obvious prosody shift from our regular register, nor did we alter the morpho-phonological content of our utterances to match the features of baby talk. Yet, these exchanges still appear to echo the conversation between a child and a caregiver. Knowing my husband's personality and how he typically preferred to be seen as a mature and independent individual, it was apparent to me that his "childlike" utterances of not wanting me to leave were to express affection and invite attention (Turns 1, 3, & 7). I also reciprocated the sentiment by explaining my departure to comfort him (Turn 2) and promising him to return soon (Turns 6 & 8). Using an affectionate nickname (e.g., "cutie") also served a relational-enhancing purpose and offered an additional display of adoration (Turn 8). Our exchanges co-created a couple-centered footing where partners expressed affection and were responsive to each other's emotional needs.

This example also showed how baby talk may be co-constructed contextually without apparent prosodic or morpho-phonological modifications. As discussed

before, the practices of *撒嬌 sajiao* are often associated with vulnerability, sensitivity, and femininity. Perhaps to avoid such evaluation or association, couples may modify the verbal practice of *撒嬌 sajiao* or baby talk to one that is more "adult-sounding" yet reminiscent of a caregiver-child dynamic.

Similarly, the following exchanges showed use of baby talk to express reluctance for a partner to leave. The excerpt came from the spontaneous recording of Jerry and Lynn. The couple had been to a particular salon before and Jerry had not enjoyed waiting for Lynn there. His exact words were "*坐在那邊坐到整個人快死掉的那個* 'that (place) where (I) sat there to a point (I) almost died.'" However, as Lynn found it to be the cheapest place to get her eyelashes done, she was leaning toward going there again, ideally with Jerry's company. This was when Lynn used baby talk, perhaps to persuade Jerry to stay with her for the appointment.

**Example 40: J is leaving me**

1 J: (…) 妳就去那間啊(.)妳就約啊(.)反正我就載妳去啊:不然咧?=

(…) You can go to that one. You just make an appointment. Anyways I'll give you a ride there. Or what else?

2 L: =很遠欸.

It's far.

3 J: 它那附近到底有沒有什麼咖啡店之類的地方?

Does it have any coffee shop kind of places nearby?

**4 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) J↑要離↓我而去↑了.**

**((baby talk-child)) J is leaving me.**

5 J: 算了不然我就待在那裡好了(.)那裡還有冷氣吹.

Forget it. I'll just stay there. (They) have air conditioning there.

Jerry's utterance in Turn 1 suggested that he agreed to give Lynn a ride to the salon. However, by saying, "*我就載妳去啊* 'I'll give you a ride there,'" instead of "*我就跟妳去啊* 'I'll go with you,'" he did not commit to keeping Lynn company at the next appointment. Lynn's response in the next turn was perhaps a subtle way to persuade Jerry to stay, hinting that traveling back and forth might be "far" (Turn 2). Jerry's reply in Turn 3 still indicated his possible intention of leaving Lynn at the salon. This was when Lynn switched to a baby talk register and used a name-related nickname to say, "*J 要離我而去了* 'J is leaving me.'" This statement uttered in the baby talk register could initiate a caregiver-child dynamic in which the mature adult role is expected to offer comfort or cater to the needs of the vulnerable child. This perhaps played a role in persuading Jerry to change his mind. In the next turn, Jerry expressed his willingness to abandon his original plan and even provided a reason to help convince himself to stay with Lynn during the appointment. This example illustrated the persuasive power of baby talk and acting cute in couple's communication. However, similar to the other uses of verbal transgressions, positive evaluation and the persuasive power of baby talk are based on repetition and how couples use it as part of their couple-lect. Baby talk as a type of verbal transgression can still be construed as manipulative and insincere, even when used between romantic partners in a private setting.

Example 41 also came from Jerry and Lynn's spontaneous recording. In the excerpts, baby talk helped initiate the couple-centered footing and invoke a verbal safe space for one to act childlike and *撒嬌 sajiao* to gain the compliance and affection of a partner, though such an attempt may not always receive the expected uptake from a hearer. The baby talk register can also invite the attention and support of a partner when emotions (e.g., irritation, disappointment, happiness) are expressed.

The transcripts showed how Lynn used baby talk repeatedly to request Jerry to clean the bird poop off of her scooter.

**Example 41: Help me clean bird poop (Part 1)**

03:30 – 04:18

1 J: 妳剛說妳車上有鳥屎喔? (3.0)

You said you got bird poop on your scooter? (3.0)

2 L: ((loud)) 蛤?

((loud)) Huh?

3 J: 妳剛說妳車上有鳥屎喔?

You said you got bird poop on your scooter?

4 L: ((loud)) 你忘了嗎? (4.8) ((loud))前面那裡啊.

((loud)) You forgot?! (4.8) ((loud)) At the front.

5 J: 喔(.)對啊怎樣?

Oh yea. What (about it)?

**6 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 幫↑我清↑啊.** (5.0)

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Help me clean (it).** (5.0)

7 J: 幫妳清? (3.6) 不用管它就會不見了. (4.0)

Help you clean? (3.6) Don't mind it and it will be gone. (4.0)

**8 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 你不↑愛↑我↓.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You don't love me.**

9 J: 我沒有不愛妳.

I don't not love you.

**10 L: ((baby talk-child)) ((nasal)) 你說不用管它.**

**((baby talk-child)) You said not to mind it.**

11 J: 這這樣一包欸.

This-this is one bag eh.

(…)

In the Part 1 of the excerpt, the topic of bird poop was brought up by Jerry. Their exchanges from Turns 1 to 4 suggested that the couple previously had a conversation about the bird poop on Lynn's scooter already. Turns 5 to 7 showed the couple having different ideas about what to do with the bird poop. Lynn made the request for Jerry to go clean it for her in baby talk (Turn 6), but Jerry appeared to disagree with her and advised her to leave it. This was when Lynn used baby talk again to claim or complain that Jerry didn't love her due to his refusal to comply with her or cater to her wishes (Turns 8 & 10). Jerry disagreed with Lynn's claim in Turn 9 and initiated a topic shift in Turn 11. The topic shift was effective in mitigating the disagreement temporarily as the couple proceeded to discuss their online purchase, pet cat, and visit to the arcade earlier that day. The following excerpt showed how the topic of cleaning bird poop was revisited later in the recording.

**Example 41: Help me clean bird poop (Part 2)**

13:35 – 14:05

**1 L: 啊我的- ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 我的車:↑啊.**

**Ah My- ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) My scooter.**

2 J: 什麼車?

What scooter?

3 L: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 沾↑到鳥屎的車:↑啊.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Scooter that got stained with bird poop.**

4 J: 車怎樣啦?

What about the scooter?

5 L: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 沾↑到鳥屎的車↑=**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Scooter that got stained with bird poop.**

6 J:=鳥屎又怎樣啦? (8.0)

So what (there's) bird poop? (8.0)

**7 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 就要擦:↑車:↑啊.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Have to wipe the scooter.**

8 J: °我已經擦好啦°. (4.0)

I already wiped (it). (4.0)

(…)

Lynn's utterance began in her normal register, but she quickly switched to baby talk to mention her scooter again (Turn 1). Her tone in this excerpt sounded more irritated than in the last excerpt. The utterances in Turns 1, 3, 5, and 7 were similar to the whines and cries of a child when not getting their needs met. Jerry's noncomplying responses perhaps occasioned the growing irritation in Lynn's utterances. However, in Turn 8, Jerry finally revealed that he had already wiped the scooter for Lynn. Perhaps he was too quiet when making this statement, Lynn did not seem to hear it. There was a 4-second pause after Jerry's statement, and the couple returned to discussing their pet cat and arcade visit again. About a minute and a half later, Lynn requested for Jerry to go clean her scooter again in baby talk.

**Example 41: Help me clean bird poop (Part 3)**

15:42 – 16:03

**1 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 你什麼時候要幫人家用那個?**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) When are you going to help me with that?**

2 J: ((loud)) 用什麼?

((loud)) With what?

**3 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 鳥↑屎.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Bird poop.**

4 J: ((loud)) 我用完啦.

((loud)) I already did.

5 L: 蛤?

Huh?

6 J: 在哭喔?

What are you whining about?

**7 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 蛤:?** (2.0) 你什麼時候用完的?=

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Huh?** (2.0) When did you do it?

8 J: =早就用完了 *((Taiwanese)) 你是咧*?

I did it a long time ago. *((Taiwanese)) What is your (problem)?*

9 L: 啊(.)全部都有清乾淨喔?

Ah. It's all cleaned?

10 J: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 廢話.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Duh.**

**11 L: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 你↑好棒.**

**((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You're so awesome.**

12 J: ((loud)) 毛(.)毛(.)毛(.)

((loud)) Mao. Mao. Mao.

13: L: ((loud)) 喂.

((loud)) Hey.

(…)

Lynn returned to the topic once again in baby talk, asking Jerry when he was going to help her resolve the bird poop problem (Turns 1 & 3). This was when Jerry finally told her that he had already taken care of it (Turn 4). The uses of verbal transgressions (e.g., swearing and baby talk) in these exchanges suggested the couple's closeness with each other. These exchanges could also be seen as childlike bickering for entertainment and relational-enhancing purposes. Finally, Lynn used baby talk to compliment Jerry (Turn 11) before the couple jointly reprimanded their pet for something it was doing (Turns 12 & 13).

In my later correspondences with the couple about this particular incident, I found out Jerry had cleaned the bird poop before the recording even started. He initiated the bird poop topic in the first excerpt and appeared as if he did not want to clean it to tease Lynn. He originally planned for it to be a surprise and for Lynn to find out that he had already cleaned her scooter when she rode it later. However, Lynn's growing irritation, as indicated by her tone in baby talk, made him give away the surprise in the conversation. As Lynn did not have the same knowledge as Jerry about whether the scooter was cleaned or not, her goal to gain compliance was apparent in these exchanges. The use of baby talk might be to help construct a caregiver-child dynamic and initiate a couple-centered footing where Jerry would cater to her needs and offer support and affection to show his love for her.

On the other hand, Jerry took a different approach and co-constructed the couple-centered footing with Lynn by creating a child-child dynamic. The mock disagreement was an attempt to create amusement and surprise for later. Instead of catering to the emotional needs of his partner as the role of a caregiver, Jerry was acting more in the role of the mischievous and playful child. Perhaps due to his serious tone and a lack of other linguistic cues to suggest his co-construction in the

couple-centered footing, Lynn was unaware of his attempt to invite play until she learned that he had already cleaned her scooter.

This example illustrated how baby talk can help initiate a couple-centered footing, drawing resources from the conceptual spheres of the safe space, playground, and love zone. Yet whether the hearer intended to or made it apparent to co-construct the footing with the speaker was not guaranteed. Miscommunication may arise when romantic partners adopt different interactional dynamics in baby talk use. With repetition in baby talk use and intertextual experience within the couple's interactions, baby talk can be positively evaluated and accurately identified in daily conversations as well as incorporated into the couple-lect to support relational enhancement.

This section discussed how baby talk, as a type of verbal transgression, can be used between romantic partners as linguistic cues to create a couple-centered footing through two types of dynamics (i.e., the caregiver-child dynamic and the child-child dynamic). Baby talk invokes the conceptual spheres of the safe space and love zone in a couple-centered footing and allows one to express one's needs and feelings without fearing judgment while receiving emotional care and support from a partner. Baby talk can also encourage the co-construction of a verbal playground for one to be playful with a partner. Due to the potential for baby talk to be evaluated negatively in certain contexts, using it in intimate relationships is not without its risks. Repetition and 'intertextual experiences' (Gordon, 2009) of a couple can help establish baby talk as a means to signal and enhance relational closeness. While there may be cultural nuances between the meaning and importance attached to *撒嬌 sajiao* and the use of baby talk, these practices have a role in promoting intimacy of romantic couples regardless of their gender, race, or nationality.

## 4.6 Discussion: Relational-enhancing Strategies and the Construction of Conceptual Spheres in the Couple-Centered Footing

The chapter discusses the ways couples use relational-enhancing strategies to maintain intimacy and strengthen coupledom. Specifically, I discuss how the uses of the more "conventional" relational-enhancing strategies, such as terms of endearment (i.e., spousal terms, affectionate nicknames, name-related nicknames, and pejorative nicknames) and conversational humor (i.e., banter, comical hypothetical, and teasing), can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing to foster relational harmony. In addition, I explore how verbal transgressions like swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk can serve as relational-enhancing strategies to achieve relational goals in couples' conversations.

When relational-enhancing strategies are used reciprocally, romantic partners can be seen as co-constructing a couple-centered footing and making a joint effort to prioritize each other's emotional and relational needs. These strategies shape as well as draw resources from the conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing to maintain and foster intimacy in couples' daily conversations. Based on my data, I identified three conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing that emerged from couples' language use: the love zone, the safe space, and the playground. Each of these conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing encompasses the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations of the ways one should align with a romantic partner when managing the production and interpretation of utterances.

The conceptual sphere of the love zone is where romantic partners align with each other as lovers, engaging in communicative behaviors that express love,

affection, desire, and commitment. As the expression of love and affection is often considered the heart and center of couple's communication, the conceptualizations of the love zone are what people typically associate with having "healthy" and "loving" communication with a partner. In this conceptual sphere, one is expected to express loving and amorous feelings for their partner. It is also ideal to provide emotional and relational reassurance in a romantic relationship. Romantic partners are expected to prioritize relational harmony over selfish gain in the name of love.

Another conceptual sphere in the couple-centered footing is the safe space, where the roles of the romantic partners as dedicated teammates[16] are highlighted. As suggested by Maslow's (1946) work on human motivation, fulfilling one's 'safety needs' is considered fundamental to pursuing higher needs such as 'love and belonging.' Romantic couples' language use revealed the relational expectations within this conceptual sphere. A romantic partner is expected to offer each other protection, acceptance, and trust. One can count on their partner for support and care when they are vulnerable and in distress. One can also freely express thoughts and vulnerability in front of a partner without fearing judgment or retribution.

The playground, as a conceptual sphere in the couple-centered footing, foregrounds romantic partners' roles as playful companions. Here, partners dedicate themselves to fostering light-hearted interactions and cultivating mutual enjoyment, sometimes extending the playfulness to entertain or include a third party. This conceptualization emphasizes the importance of shared amusement and the creation of enjoyable experiences within the relationship, contributing to a sense of camaraderie.

[16] In recent years, the terms "*神隊友* 'heavenly teammate'" and "*豬隊友* 'piggish teammate'" have become frequently used in romantic relationships to discuss the effects of having a spouse who is good or bad at working as a team. Being a good teammate or being a "*神隊友* 'heavenly teammate'" requires one to be reliable, supportive, and accommodating. On the other hand, being a bad teammate or being a "*豬隊友* 'piggish teammate'" is a partner who is often irresponsible, unreliable, and unsupportive.

The conceptualizations of these conceptual spheres may have their roots in our 'basic human needs' (Maslow, 1946). The love zone is aligned with our 'love and belonging' needs and our ideals of gaining affection, attraction, and commitment in a romantic relationship. The safe space echoes our 'safety needs' and seeks security and support from our partner. The playground is also a part of fulfilling our 'love and belonging' needs but emphasizes more on camaraderie and sharing fun time. In addition, these conceptual spheres are open to the 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009) between romantic partners. As a couple continues to build on their couple-lect, they may also shape the beliefs, ideas, and expectations in the conceptual spheres within their communicative style. From the language use of American and Taiwanese couples that revealed and constituted these conceptual spheres, we can identify the shared communicative and conceptual resources couples may adopt to establish intimacy in a romantic setting.

Conceptually speaking, terms of endearment, as a way to lovingly address one's target of affection, is the relational-enhancing strategy that most typically aligns with the conceptual sphere of the love zone. Accessing the love zone by using terms of endearment can support the expression of love and commitment to a partner. Spousal terms, for example, draw upon concepts from the love zone to index commitment and celebrate relational achievement, thereby strengthening mutual affection. Using affectionate nicknames can also make use of concepts in the love zone to express the tender feeling one has toward a target of adoration. Often adopted in contexts where one seeks to connect or comfort a partner, these terms of endearment serve emotional and relational purposes that are integral to the conceptualizations of the love zone.

The verbal transgressions investigated in this chapter, with their taboo and 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) nature, are most conceptually aligned with the safe space in the couple-centered footing to have positive and

favorable evaluations. Swearing, for instance, draws resources from the safe space to index a couple's trust to express emotions and vent frustration using strong language in front of their partner. Sex-related talk accesses concepts from the safe space to index the couple's deep trust and knowledge about each other's private information, making the use relationally enhancing rather than harming. Baby talk, with its connection to vulnerability, requires the support of the safety, acceptance, and trust inherent in the conceptual sphere of the safe space.

On a conceptual level, conversational humor is the main category that shapes and invokes the conceptual sphere of the playground. The promotion of playful interaction for mutual enjoyment in conversational humor is the key notion in the conceptual sphere of the playground. The co-constructing nature of banter and comical hypotheticals demonstrate how couples may verbally establish a playground to engage in amusing interactions. Teasing, when interpreted within the sphere of the playground, is often evaluated positively as a means for relational enhancement.

However, based on the interactions of couples in my data, these relational-enhancing strategies may also draw resources from other conceptual spheres to establish a couple-centered footing in context (See Appendix 8: Conceptual Spheres Analysis of Relational-Enhancing Strategies for the complete analysis of the conceptual spheres drawn by each example of relational-enhancing strategies discussed in the research). Aside from aligning the most with the conceptual sphere of the love zone, terms of endearment may also adopt and shape the conceptual sphere of the safe space. Associated with exclusivity and legality, spousal titles underscore a partner's obligation to serve spousal duties and provide the care and support to sustain a long-term partnership. Affectionate nicknames and name-related nicknames, with their potential links to one's childhood and a vulnerable childlike state, indicate a sense of trust and security in the relationship for one to feel safe to act and be treated

like a vulnerable child. Pejorative nicknames, due to their potentially relational-harming nature, also adopt conceptualizations from the safe space to establish a couple-centered footing.

Other than conceptually aligning the most with the playground, conversational humor may also invoke other conceptual spheres in context. Different types of humor can make use of concepts from the safe space to support couples' expressions of extremity and play without fearing judgment. For example, the 'absurd extreme' (Winchatz & Kozin, 2008) quality found in couples' comical hypotheticals drew conceptual resources from the safe space, where one can be accepted and supported even when extreme ideas are expressed.

Compared to other more readily recognized relational-enhancing strategies, such as terms of endearment and conversational humor, verbal transgressions may require additional negotiation and repetition before being incorporated into a romantic partner's couple-lect to serve relational-enhancing purposes. The examples in my data showed that drawing concepts from multiple conceptual spheres can aid the negotiation and meaning-making of verbal transgressions as relational-enhancing strategies. As a verbal transgression becomes a part of a couple's repertoire of relational-enhancing strategy through repetitious and intertextual usages, the need to invoke multiple conceptual spheres in context to establish a couple-centered footing may be reduced.

The examples of swearing discussed in this chapter showcased how concepts from different conceptual spheres are drawn to establish a couple-centered footing. Example 28 adopted ideas from the safe space and the playground. The use of reciprocal swearing 幹 'fuck' as a form of verbal play provides emotional support and amusement while committing verbal transgression. Examples 29 and 30 utilized conceptualizations from the safe space and love zone to emphasize romantic partners'

affection and feelings. Example 31, however, only adopted the conceptualization of the safe space. It is also the example where the offensive swearing resulted in a conversation breakdown. This might suggest that drawing multiple conceptual spheres to construct a couple-centered footing when using verbal transgression can help better situate it as a type of relational-enhancing strategy. In other words, committing verbal transgression simply because one feels safe to socially transgress in the relationship may not suffice in warranting the use.

To better illustrate this point, compare the use of swearing in Example 30 to that of Example 31: "Because I'm trying not to kick you in the face, so I kept moving my leg to this side and hitting this GOD DAMN corner." and "*操你媽* FUCK YOUR MOM!" Both examples were cathartic and expressed frustration in loud swearing. The previous use in context highlighted one's trust to transgress verbally as well as a sense of care and love for a partner, whereas the latter indexed the trust to express anger and upsets freely toward a partner. From the uptakes of these two examples, the previous swearing occasioned a more supportive and relational-enhancing response than the latter. This might suggest that verbal transgression should ideally not only index closeness, security, and familiarity but also reinforce and make use of the concepts from the love zone and the playground to fulfill other relational-enhancing purposes. Otherwise, the verbal transgression may still be interpreted as relational-harming and inappropriate even when used between partners in close relationships, leading to conversation breakdowns and relational damages.

During the initial negotiation and meaning-making process of verbal transgressions in couples' conversations, concepts are more likely to be drawn from multiple conceptual spheres to avoid negative evaluation. As the verbally transgressive expressions become incorporated into a couple's couple-lect as readily recognizable relational-enhancing strategies, the need to invoke several conceptual

spheres to establish a couple-centered footing would possibly be reduced. This may be the reason why the offensive swearing example in this section was resolved relatively easily without further escalation. As this was not the first time the couple used the offensive expression in their conversations, the couple had negotiated and recognized this as a relational-enhancing use even without invoking multiple conceptual spheres in context.

The same can also be observed from examples of sex-related talk. My data showed that other than adopting concepts from the conceptual sphere of the safe space, ideas from the playground and the love zone were also drawn when using sex-related talk to establish a couple-centered footing. Example 32 showcased a couple jointly talking about a partner's sexual preference in a playful manner, drawing concepts from both the safe space and the playground. Example 33 revealed how a partner's word choice invoked the safe space and love zone to initiate a couple-centered footing as intimate knowledge and erotic desire between the romantic partners were expressed. The examples of sexual humor also made use of multiple conceptual spheres, particularly the safe space and the playground. As humor is inherently taboo and playful, they shape and adopt concepts in the safe space and the playground. In addition, when couples add personal elements and shared knowledge into the humor, they may also invoke conceptual resources from the love zone. Similar to drawing multiple conceptual spheres to establish a couple-centered footing, these uses can help position sex-related talk as relational-enhancing in couples' conversations. For instance, in the example of the "that's what she said" joke (Example 35), the sexual humor led to an uptake that supported the co-construction of a couple-centered footing through expressing intimate knowledge and shared sexual desire, adopting concepts from the love zone.

Couples' baby talk in my data also revealed how verbal transgression tends to invoke several conceptual spheres to better situate itself as a relational-enhancing strategy. Other than drawing ideas from the safe space when committing this verbal transgression, another key conceptual sphere supporting the use of baby talk is the playground. As discussed before, the two dynamics (i.e., the child-caregiver dynamic and the child-child dynamic) found in couples' baby talk cast the romantic partners in different roles. Though *撒嬌 sajiao*-related practices are often evaluated based on popular beliefs of "authenticity," couples in these types of exchanges are role-playing or engaging in verbal play to some extent. All the instances of baby talk discussed in this chapter were not indications of a romantic partner actually losing their ability to be independent, capable, strong, and understanding. On the contrary, it is through "role-playing" as a child that baby talk creates the chance for couples to engage each other in a play for mutual amusement and/or jointly express affectionate and tender feelings. For this reason, instead of "authenticity," I propose that the adoption of concepts from multiple conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing is what makes the evaluation of baby talk positive in couples' conversations.

As stated previously, infantilizing one's actions or being childish simply because one feels safe in the relationship may not warrant the behavior. If one insists on acting like a child verbally until their partner complies without it being a form of play or expression of affection, this can lead to negative evaluation and relational harm. Therefore, establishing the use as relational-enhancing and resulting in the co-construction of a couple-centered footing may require support of resources from multiple conceptual spheres.

Since these conceptual spheres can be shaped and negotiated through couples' language use and intertextual experiences, a specific linguistic cue with relational-enhancing purposes may be mapped onto different conceptual spheres depending on

its meaning in context and a couple's relational and communicative history. The three conceptual spheres emerging from the couple's uses of relational-enhancing strategies constitute the essence of the couple-centered footing. The uses of relational-enhancing strategies shape, construct, and adopt the conceptualizations of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground to shift to a couple-centered footing. It should be noted that other relational-enhancing strategies not discussed in this chapter but support the maintenance of couples' relational harmony (pronoun use, code-switching, wordplay, accent manipulation, joint storytelling, etc.) can also draw resources from these conceptual spheres to establish a couple-centered footing. As a couple continues to negotiate and make meaning of their verbal interactions in their relationship, linguistic strategies can acquire relational-enhancing meanings exclusive to the romantic partners in the relationship, forming couple-lect, inside jokes, and 'interaction rituals' (Goffman, 1967) that reflect the intimate knowledge of the couple. In doing so, the couple can also construct, shape, and refine the conceptual spheres in their couple-centered footing to include conceptualizations unique to their relationship.

# CHAPTER 5: MANAGING CLOSENESS AND BALANCING FOOTINGS IN COUPLE'S DISCOURSE

Language plays an important role in supporting the management and enhancement of intimacy in couples' daily interactions. The previous chapter illustrated how relational-enhancing strategies can shape and invoke conceptual spheres in the couple-centered footing to serve relational and conversational goals. In this chapter, I focus on the ways the aforementioned strategies may be used in context to balance between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversations. Though these two footings may not be the only ones present in couple's conversations, they are central to navigating the tension of 'connectedness-separateness' in romantic relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Similar to Gordon's (2009) findings of how frames may be 'embedded,' 'overlapped,' and 'blended' in a conversation, other footings may also operate alongside the couple-centered footing and individual-centered footing. In other words, varying footings may function on different layers or levels, interacting with one another depending on the conversation topics and the parties involved.

This chapter focuses on showcasing how shifts between the couple-centered footing and the individual-centered footing in couples' conversations may contribute to managing couples' intimacy. Maintaining a balance between the two footings can allow couples to negotiate varying stances, fulfill relational needs, and maintain a sense of coupledom and closeness. As couples develop their repertoire of relational-enhancing strategies and co-construct the conceptual spheres in their couple-centered footing through language use, they may adopt a variety of linguistics resources from their couple-lect to navigate the ebb and flow of their relationship.

In the following sections, I analyze and discuss two extended transcripts from the spontaneous recordings in my data to demonstrate how couples may shift between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing to balance the needs for self-expression and relational closeness. The first transcript showcased how the lack of linguistic cues to co-construct a couple-centered footing with a partner in disagreement may result in escalation and a potential conversation breakdown. To remedy the situation, additional linguistic effort is required to initiate and establish the couple-centered footing and repair the interaction. The disagreement can be resolved when both partners offer apparent linguistic cues to co-construct the couple-centered footing. In short, the failure or success to establish a couple-centered footing in a couple's conversation may be a key to provoking or resolving conflicts.

The second transcript revealed how the expression of opposing stances under a couple-centered footing could aid the negotiation process and maintain a sense of closeness between romantic partners. Couples may voice their upsets or complaints in a manner that invites more affection and attention by taking a couple-centered footing. Rather than leading to escalation and conversation breakdown, a couple may turn a potentially relational-harming situation into an opportunity to fulfill each other's relational needs by balancing footings in contexts.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the effects of taking a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in couples' discourse. A couple-centered footing allows romantic partners to better align with each other and prioritizes relational harmony in conversation, providing resources for daily maintenance and enhancement of intimacy. An individual-centered footing helps with one's self-expression and supports individuality, allowing romantic partners to maintain their identities and views as individuals in a relationship. I propose that having a healthy

balance between the two footings in couple's communication can nurture a stable, egalitarian, and fulfilling relationship.

## 5.1 Footings Shifts and the Escalation and Resolution of Couple's Disagreement

The following exchanges came from Jerry and Lynn's dinnertime recording. The couple was enjoying their dinner in the dining area of a convenience store. Lynn noticed Jerry didn't eat his seaweed side dish and asked him about it. This led to an extended discussion about Korean dishes and a disagreement on flavor preferences.

**Example 42: Korean side dish and blue ice cream (Part 1)**

1 L: 你不喜歡吃小菜喔? 欸不喜歡吃海帶喔?

You don't like to eat side dishes? Eh you don't like to eat seaweed?

2 J: 我不喜歡吃這樣的海帶.

I don't like to eat this kind of seaweed.

3 L: 那你怎樣的海帶?

Then what kind of seaweed?

4 J: 其實我對海帶也沒有什麼特別的:厭或惡(.)但是-就是:欸厭跟惡都是同一件事情(.)好跟惡啦.

Actually I don't have a particular hate or dislike for seaweed but-it's, eh hate and dislike are the same thing. Like and dislike.

5 L: 可是它有調味欸. (3.0)

But it's seasoned. (3.0)

**6 J:** ***((Taiwanese)) 無佮意(.)妳食就好(.)無要緊(.)妳食就好.***

***((Taiwanese)) Don't like (it). You can have it. It's ok. You can have it.***

7 L: 韓式小菜你也沒在吃啊.

You don’t eat Korean side dishes, either.

8 J: 海帶嗎?

Seaweed?

9 L: 牛蒡你也不[吃啊.]

You don’t eat burdock, either.

10 J: [牛蒡]我是真的不吃啊(3.0)牛蒡吃起來很詭異欸=

I really don’t eat burdock. Burdock tastes weird.

11 L: =不會↑啊↑我覺得很好吃欸=

No. I think it’s tasty.

12 J: =又沒有什麼味道(.)然後又硬得要死=

It doesn’t have much taste. And it’s hard (to chew) to death.

13 L: =它有味道啊.

It has a taste.

14 J: £我覺得它沒什麼味道£

I think it doesn’t have much taste.

15 L: 我媽以前都會在菜市場買牛蒡(.)我都超愛吃的.

My mom used to buy burdock at the market. I loved eating it.

16 J: £因為牛蒡很*((Taiwanese))俗嗎£?* (9.6)

Is it because burdock is *((Taiwanese)) cheap?* (9.6)

**17 L: J 沒有辦法在韓國生活.**

**J can’t live in Korea.**

18 J: 蛤? (5.2)

Huh? (5.2)

19 L: 借過.

Make way.

20 J: £借過£.

Make way.

Part 1 of the transcript showed the couple discussing their opinions on side dishes. It is apparent that Jerry and Lynn had different views about Korean side dishes, like seasoned seaweed and burdock. Rather than agreeing or highlighting commonality to promote relational closeness, the couple adopted individual-centered footings to talk about their respective opinions and preferences.

In Turns 6 and 16, Jerry switched to Taiwanese in his utterances. As mentioned before, Jerry is not a native speaker of Taiwanese. The few Taiwanese expressions that he knows and uses in daily conversations are learned from Lynn, a native speaker of Taiwanese. He also uses Taiwanese the most often with Lynn as he generally does not feel confident with his Taiwanese-speaking ability to use it with other people. Thus, Jerry's code-switching in his conversation with Lynn might be a marker of closeness and an attempt to initiate a couple-centered footing.

The attempt to shift to a couple-centered footing in Turn 6, however, was not reciprocated by Lynn as she continued to point out their different preferences. Jerry's attempt to shift to a couple-centered footing in Turn 16 also led to a silence of almost 10 seconds before Lynn finally responded in Turn 17. Based on the topic at hand, Lynn issued a tease against Jerry along with his name-related nickname (Turn 17). This could be seen as an effort to shift to a couple-centered footing for a more playful interaction. As the effort was not reciprocated by Jerry in the following turn, the couple still could not firmly co-construct a couple-centered footing together, resulting in another long pause of 5 seconds. In the following part of the transcript, Lynn repeated the tease with Jerry's name-related nickname (Turn 21), perhaps to re-invite

co-construction of a couple-centered footing and foster a sense of coupledom after discussing contrasting views for several turns (Turns 7 – 15).

**Example 42: Korean side dish and blue ice cream (Part 2)**

**21 L: 我說 J 沒有辦法在韓國生活.**

**I said J can't live in Korea.**

22 J: 不↑至於吧.

Not necessarily.

23 L: 嗯?

Mm?

24 J: 韓國又不是只有小菜:奇怪我只是不吃小菜而已他們主食我都£吃啊£ hh (.)而且我很喜歡吃魚板. (1.6)

It's not like Korea only has side dishes. Strange. I only don't eat the side dishes that's all. And I like to eat fish cake. (1.6)

25 L: 韓式料理嗎?

Korean food?

26 J: 魚板不是韓式料理嗎?

Isn't fish cake Korean food?

27 L: 你不可能吃魚板.

You can't possibly eat fish cake.

28 J: 它街邊小吃啊(.) ((loud))>韓式料理還有很多啊<£**妳也敢**£->£**妳才說我咧妳又不吃年糕**£<.

**It's a street-side snack. Korean food has a lot (of kinds). ((loud)) You dare to say- You are the one to talk. You don't even eat rice cake.**

29 L: ((loud)) 沒有我不是不吃:是因為台灣年糕都沒味道.

((loud)) No. It's not that I don't eat it. It's that Taiwanese rice cake has no flavor.

30 J: £那-妳吃過韓國的(.)韓國的有味道是不是£?

Then, you've had the Korean kind. Is it that the Korean (kind) has flavor?

31 L: 啊我沒吃過啊.

Well, I never had it (before).

32 J: £說不定韓國的吃起來跟台灣的差不多啊£.

Maybe the Korean kind taste similar to the Taiwanese kind.

33 L: 通常都-我喜歡它有-

Usually it- I like that it has-

**34 J: 那-我問妳(.)妳這輩子有吃到任何一家年糕是妳覺得(.) 哇 hh 這個年糕好讚我喜歡的嗎? (1.0) 從來沒有?**

**Then- (let) me ask you, have you ever had rice cake from any (restaurant) that you feel like, "Wow! This rice cake is so awesome, I like (it)?" (1.0) Never?**

35 L: 有我也忘了.

Even if I did, I forgot already.

36 J: £有£-

(If) yes-

37 L: 台灣的年糕[沒有入味啊].

[Taiwanese rice cake lacks flavor].

38 J: £[有的話妳就不會] 忘了吧£ (1.0)可是年糕不能煮太久啊(1.3)年糕煮太久它就會爛掉妳知道嗎?

[If yes then you wouldn't] forget. (1.0) But rice cake can't be cooked for long. (1.3) (If) rice cake is cooked too long it will become mushy, you know?

39 L: 那我覺得它應該(.)不要跟湯一起煮(.)它應該要跟很-很重鹹的醬.

Then I think it shouldn't be cooked with soup. It should be (cooked) with a very salty sauce.

40 J: 那不是辣炒年糕的樣子?

Isn't that (Korean) spicy rice cake?

41 L: 就乾麵.

It's dry noodles.

42 J: 就辣炒年糕啊.

It's (Korean) spicy rice cake.

43 L: ((loud)) 是啊(.)可是我之前吃過外面的辣炒年糕沒有那麼好吃啊.

((loud)) Yup, but the (Korean) spicy rice cake I had before didn't taste that good.

44 J: 那妳有吃過好吃的辣炒年糕嗎.

Then have you ever had delicious (Korean) spicy rice cake?

45 L: ((loud)) >就沒有啊:↑<

((loud)) (I said) No.

46 J: >那妳怎麼知道辣炒年糕是不好吃-<是[好吃的?]

Then how do you know (Korean) spicy rice cake is not delicious- is delicious?

47 L: ((loud)) [我說我]目前吃過的我覺得不好吃:=

I said the kind that I've had so far, I think, is not delicious.

48 J: =£啊我說那妳怎麼知道辣炒年糕是好吃的£?>£說不定辣炒年糕就是那樣啊£< hh

Well, I said then how do you know (Korean) spicy rice cake is delicious?

Maybe (Korean) spicy rice cake is just like that. hh

**49 L: ((loud)) *((Taiwanese)) 哭枵喔* (2.5) 我相信在:韓國會有更好吃的.**

**((loud))** ***((Taiwanese)) What are you whining about?*** **(2.5) I believe there are more delicious ones in Korea.**

50 J: 那等我們之後去韓國的時候妳再吃[吃看啊.]

Well, wait until we go to Korea in the future, then you can try it.

51 L: [不然:]它為什麼是一個:(.)熱賣的美食呢? (2.0)

Otherwise, why is it a popular delicacy? (2.0)

52 J: 不↑一定吧(.)臺灣有名的美食像滷肉飯妳也不太愛啊 (4.0) 這是取決於當[地文化啊.]

Not necessarily. Taiwan's famous delicacy, like braised pork rice, you don't like it that much, either. (4.0) It depends on the local culture=

53 L: [我們現在]是在講韓國=

=We're talking about Korea now=

54 J: =>我知道<(.)我是說我們今天用臺灣的角度來講的話(.)臺灣的傳統美食妳有很愛嗎? (3.0)

I know. I'm just saying if we look at it from the perspective of Taiwan. Do you have a particular love for Taiwan's traditional delicacy? (3.0)

55 L: 辣炒-辣炒年糕在韓國也蠻熱賣的啊=

(Korean) spicy rice cake is popular in Korea.

56 J: =啊那就是韓國的傳統美食啊.

Well, that's a Korean traditional delicacy.

57 L: 啊然後咧?

Well and?

58 J: 妳好像沒有聽懂(.)£算了£ hhh

You don't seem to understand. Forget it hhh

59 L: 因為重點不是那個啊 (5.0)

Because that's not the point. (5.0)

Lynn's tease and the combined use of Jerry's name-related nickname in Turn 21 might be another attempt to shift to a couple-centered footing to prioritize relational harmony after the couple expressed contrasting opinions under individual-centered footings. Nonetheless, Jerry continued to disagree with her and did not respond to Lynn's invitation for laughter and affiliation. This led to several turns of the couple taking individual-centered footings to express and defend their own views until Turn 28.

Jerry teased Lynn in a laughing tone in Turn 28 to perhaps shift the interaction into a more playful one and establish a couple-centered footing. The tease also did not result in a co-constructed couple-centered footing as Lynn continued to disagree with Jerry for several turns (Turns 29 – 33). In Turn 34, Jerry proposed a hypothetical scenario that could potentially invite the joint construction of a comical hypothetical to initiate a couple-centered footing. This attempt still was not reciprocated as the couple further expressed their individual views in a "factual" manner and did not shift their focus to creating mutual enjoyment in the conversation.

The couple's opposing opinions expressed under individual-centered footings resulted in an escalation of the disagreement. Lynn got louder and sounded more irritated in turns 43, 45, 47, and 49. Perhaps sensing her growing upset, Jerry used a laughing register in Turn 48 to respond to Lynn. This might be to frame the interaction as playful to prevent further escalation. On the other hand, Lynn responded with loud swearing (Turn 49). As discussed in Example 31, swearing is a way for the couple to signal their emotional distress and invite the partner to co-construct a couple-centered footing where relational harmony is prioritized and restored. This use was perhaps occasioned by Jerry's laughing register. Since Jerry made an effort to soften the conversation, Lynn also used the swearing to invite the co-construction of a couple-centered footing. However, the swearing led to a silence of about 2.5 seconds,

and she continued to defend her view. If Jerry had offered more relational-enhancing cues to establish the couple-centered footing with Lynn jointly, the conversation might have taken a more couple-centered direction after the swearing. Yet, the couple continued to justify and elaborate on their respective views.

As the couple continued to disagree with each other, long pauses occurred in Turns 51, 52, 54, and 59, signaling potential breakdowns in the conversation. It should be noted that while pauses are not uncommon in mealtime conversations, Lynn's tone further indicated the lack of willingness to engage in the conversation. Compared to her more enthusiastic and engaging tone at the beginning of Part 1, where she was higher in pitch, had more variation in intonation, and contributed more actively to the conversation, Lynn's responses began to sound more monotonous and disengaging since Turn 49. As mentioned before, a breakdown in a conversation is caused by a failure to continue coordinating with each other to accomplish communicative tasks and goals (Clark, 1996). This would require repair to restore a conversation flow (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Part 2 of the transcript can be seen as the process of the couple disagreeing and persuading each other of their views. Though they expressed opposing views in most of these turns, they collaborated in the communicative task of persuasion. However, when Jerry made an argument in Turn 56 to carry on the persuasion and the elaboration of a previous point, Lynn's statement of *啊然後咧?* 'Well and?' in the next turn posed a challenge to the relevance of his point and indicated her lack of willingness to further engage in the persuasion. Though Jerry attempted to use the laughing register again to soften the conversation in Turn 58, it did not help shift the conversation back to a more couple-centered one.

Part 2 of Example 42 illustrated how the lack of relational-enhancing cues to co-construct a couple-centered footing when engaging in extended disagreement could

potentially result in an escalation and conversation breakdown. In order to repair the relational harm and the obstructed conversational flow caused by taking individual-centered footings when expressing opposing views, the couple would have to re-establish a couple-centered footing. The following transcript showed how Jerry initiated a topic shift after a five-second pause to re-engage Lynn in a communicative task and re-establish collaboration.

**Example 42: Korean side dish and blue ice cream (Part 3)**

60 J: 是不是有藍色的霜淇淋還是什麼口味的啊?(2.0) L 我這邊看不到(.)妳那邊看得到嗎?

Is there blue ice cream? Or what flavor is that? (2.0) (I) can't see (it). Can you see (it) from over there?

61 L: =>看不到.<

=Can't see (it).

62 J: 轉過去看一下啦:=

Turn around and take a look.

63 L: =>沒空<.

(I) don't have the time.

64 J: 嘖(.) £轉個頭而已£(.)£哪有沒空£? (5.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((nasal))看:一:眼啦:::**

Tsk. ((laugh)) (It's) just a head turn. How can (you) not have time (for that)? (5.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((nasal)) Take a look.**

65 L: **((loud))** ***((Taiwanese)) =>啥潲啦<?*** **(4.0)**

**((loud))** ***((Taiwanese)) What the fuck?*** **(4.0)**

**66 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((nasal)) 看:一:眼啦:::**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((slow))((nasal)) Take a look.**

**67 L: ((loud)) *((Taiwanese))* *啥:潲:*啦?(2.0) >看不到啦.要看什麼啊？<**

**((loud)) *((Taiwanese)) What the fuck?* (2.0) ((I) can't see (it). What am (I) looking at?**

**68 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 霜淇淋的口味.**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) The flavor of the ice cream.**

**69 L: 他媽哪看得到啊?**

**How the heck can (I) see?**

70 J: 看不到嗎？(4.5) 是喔(.)我以為我這邊是被擋住(.)原來是那邊沒有嗎?(5.0) **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) 妳都不幫我看(.)妳好兇喔.**

(You) can't see (it)? (4.5) Is that so. I thought my side was blocked, but it turned out that it didn't have (the information) over there? (5.0) **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You don't even check for me. You are so mean.**

71 L: ((loud)) 看不到 (3.0)

((loud)) (I) can't see (it). (3.0)

72 J: 它是藍色欸(.)藍色是什麼口味啊?來 google 一下(.)不會是蘇打之類的?(33.0) 嘖嘖嘖嘖嘖嘖嘖 (13.0) 真的假的?(8.4) 我們這裡是什麼區啊?三民嗎?

It's blue eh. What flavor is blue? Let (me) Google it. Can it be soda or something? (33.0) Tsk tsk tsk tsk tsk tsk tsk (13.0) For real? (8.4) Which district are we in here? Sanmin?

73 L: °左營啦° (8.0)

Zouying. (8.0)

74 J: 這裡應該是富國店 (3.5) 嗯?這邊是 48 號還是 420 號啊?(6.0) 喔(.)420 號 (4.0) 好像有欸(.)我想買一個來吃吃看 **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 妳要吃嗎？(4.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 妳要吃嗎？**

This should be the Fuguo store. (3.5) Mm? Is this No. 48 or No. 420? (6.0) Oh (it's) No. 420. (4.0) Seems like (they) have (it). I want to buy one to try.

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Do you want to eat (the ice cream)?** (4.0)

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Do you want to eat (the ice cream)?**

75 L: 你自己先吃啊.

You eat it first.

**76 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 好吧↑:**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Ok.**

16:05-17:20 ((Jerry went to buy ice cream))

In an attempt to repair the relational harm caused by the inability to reach a consensus or establish a couple-centered footing, Jerry initiated a topic shift in Turn 60 and asked Lynn, using her name-related name, to help him check out information from her side of the seat. Though Lynn still responded to him, her irritation was apparent, as she was unwilling to comply with his request. Her response was monotone and fast, indicating her irritation and unwillingness to engage further in the conversation. Jerry started his utterance in Turn 64 with a laughing tone to frame the conversation as playful. However, Lynn still did not respond to him for 5 seconds. This was when he shifted to baby talk in Turn 64 to initiate a couple-centered footing, perhaps to further persuade and engage Lynn. Though Lynn's Taiwanese swearing in the next turn could be a relational-enhancing strategy indexing closeness, Lynn's irritated tone and non-compliant attitude might suggest that she needed more emotional support before fully engaging in a couple-centered footing. The couple then went on a few more turns where Jerry used baby talk to persuade Lynn to comply, and Lynn responded by swearing in an irritated tone (Turns 66 – 69).

In Turn 70, Jerry shifted to his normal register temporarily. Two of his utterances in the normal register were followed by long pauses. He eventually shifted to an even more melodious intonation and childlike speech to point out that Lynn was being

mean. As discussed in Example 9, the couple sometimes used this phrase along with name-related nicknames and baby talk to mitigate a disagreement or relational-harming situation. Right after Jerry shifted back to baby talk, Lynn responded to him again (Turn 71). This might suggest that the baby talk was helpful in verbally signaling one's willingness to prioritize relational harmony and supporting the repair of the escalated conversation.

In Turn 72, Jerry raised a series of questions regarding the ice cream to invite Lynn's participation and restore a more natural conversation flow. Lynn stayed verbally nonresponsive until she corrected him in Turn 73 about their location. After another eight-second silence, Jerry tried to talk to Lynn again about their location in a normal register (Turn 74). It wasn't until he switched to a baby talk register to ask if Lynn wanted some ice cream that Lynn finally responded to him (Turns 74 –75). Although Lynn did not directly accept his invitation for ice cream, neither did she decline it.

Part 3 of the transcript further indicated how the couple's interaction was under some trouble. There were many pauses throughout the conversation. Lynn's responses were relatively fast-paced, brief, lower-pitched, and monotonous compared to her usual speech. To repair the natural flow of conversation, the couple had to put in extra effort in initiating a couple-centered footing. In this example, while Lynn may seem unwilling to comply or respond, her reactions could also be seen as role-playing the capricious, emotional, and self-centered child. These exchanges were reminiscent of the conversation between a nurturing caregiver and a child throwing a temper tantrum. To some extent, being sulky and nonresponsive to Jerry's normal register but responding to Jerry's baby talk invited more uses of relational-enhancing strategies from Jerry. If understood as such, both partners could be seen to put in efforts to co-construct a couple-centered footing after the earlier conversation breakdown.

It should also be noted that such uses were not without their risks. Evaluating these exchanges as relational-enhancing requires 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009) and shared knowledge of the couple's couple-lect. This is perhaps the reason why the same exchanges could lead to further escalation for couples that have not established these strategies as relational-enhancing. For example, the topic shift initiated by Jerry could be viewed as changing subjects and being avoidant when the disagreement had yet to be properly resolved. Jerry's use of baby talk could also be evaluated as condescending in a disagreeing context. Moreover, Lynn's swearing could be seen as offensive in the context of a disagreement, resulting in further conflict and relational harm. The fact that the uses of these verbal transgressions did not cause further escalation showcased that they had been incorporated into the couple's repertoire of relational-enhancing strategies. In the next part of the transcript, Jerry bought an ice cream to share with Lynn.

**Example 42: Korean side dish and blue ice cream (Part 4)**

77 L: 矮額:↑

Aiyo.

**78 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 要↑不要↑吃↑一口看看?**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Do you want to have a taste?**

**79 L: ((baby talk-child)) 人家**還在吃這個.

**((baby talk-child)) I'm** still eating this.

**80 J: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 蛤?妳還在吃那個喔?那我先吃喔.**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Huh? You are still eating that? Then I'll eat it first.**

81 L: 嗯. (16.0)

Mm. (16.0)

82 J: ((ice cream eating sound)) 好詭異喔.

((ice cream eating sound)) It's strange.

83 L: °嗯°?

Mm?

84 J: 嗯? (7.0)

Mm? (7.0)

85 L: ((low pitch)) 那是什麼啊? 蘇打口味喔?

((low pitch)) What's that? Soda flavor?

86 J: **((baby talk-caregiver)) 嗯↓.**

**((baby talk-caregiver)) Mm.**

87 L: ((low pitch)) 它化出蘇打的味道

((low pitch)) It's melting the smell of soda.

88 J: **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))((slow)) 它叫蘇蘇打打口味.**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))((slow)) It's called So-so-da-da flavor.**

89 L: ((low pitch))有一種化學的味道.

((low pitch)) It has a chemical smell.

90 J: 妳有聞到喔? (2.0) 一開始是看它的樣子覺得它很化學.

You smelled that? At first, looking at it, (I) thought it was quite chemical.

91 L: ((low pitch)) 聞到啊. (9.0)

((low pitch)) (I) smelled (it). (9.0)

92 J: 不知道欸(.)可是這個吃完就想吃一點甜的東西啊.

(I) don't know eh. But after eating this, (I) want to have something sweet.

93 L: ((low pitch)) 不知道欸 (3.0) 因為我這個是甜的.

(low pitch)) (I) don't know eh. Because mine is sweet.

94 J: 額: (9.5) 第一口吃起來蠻怪的(.)但 (2.0) 多吃幾口你就會覺得 (3.6) 還不錯. (4.0)

Ugh. (9.5) The first taste is quite weird. But (2.0) after having some more, you would feel like (3.6) it's not bad. (4.0)

95 L: ((low pitch)) °買這一支多少錢°?

((low pitch)) How much is this (ice cream)?

96 J: 它一支 49 塊.

It's 49 dollars per (ice cream).

97 L: 啊. ((sound of item dropping))

Ah. ((sound of item dropping))

98 J: 啊呀. (39.7)

Ahya. (39.7)

99 L: 衛生紙咧?

(Where's) tissue?

100 J: 幫我拿著 (16.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) L↑沒有吃↑欸? ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))((slow))妳↑怎麼沒有吃?**(12.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 妳要吃嗎?** (3.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 那妳吃一口就好** (5.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))** ***((Taiwanese)) 試看覓咩*** (6.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))** ***((Taiwanese)) 試看覓*** (6.0)嘖 (2.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 我已經為了妳不用舔的了**(5.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 喂 (2.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) 嘖£喂£ hhh £喂£ hhh £喂:£ hhh £妳怎麼舔上癮了£**? 妳覺得怎麼樣?

Hold this for me (16.0) **((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) L didn't eat it eh? ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))((slow)) Why didn't you eat (it)? (12.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Do you want to eat (it)? ((3.0)) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Then just have a bite. ((baby talk-caregiver)) (5.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))** ***((Taiwanese)) Try (it)*** **(6.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))** ***((Taiwanese)) Try (it)*****. (6.0)** Tsk (2.0) **((baby**

**talk-caregiver))((nasal)) For you, I didn't even lick (it when I eat) (5.0)**

**((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Hey (2.0) ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal))**

**Tsk hey hhh hey hhh hey hhh. Why are you addicted to licking (it)?**

What do you think (about the ice cream)?

101 L: ((back to normal tone)) 就甜↑的蘇打啊. (6.0)

((back to normal tone)) It's sweet soda. (6.0)

102 J: 怎麼流下來了? (3.0)

Why is it dripping down? (3.0)

103 L: 它↑有沒有其他口味的啊?

Does it have other flavors?

104 J: 牛奶.

Cream.

105 L: 然後↑咧?

And?

106 J: 沒了(2.0)

That's it. (2.0)

107 L: **幹.**

**Fuck.**

108 J: 牛奶跟蘇打而已.

Only cream and soda that's all.

109 L: *((Taiwanese))* ***哭爸***(.)上次去夢時代沒看思樂冰 *((Taiwanese))* ***>創啥潲?<***

*((Taiwanese))* ***Good grief***. (We) didn't check (to see if they have) Slurpee at Dream Mall. *((Taiwanese))* ***What the fuck?***

110 J: 完全忘記這件事情欸=

Completely forgot about that eh.

111 L: =嘖厚

Tsk. Ho.

(…)

When Jerry came back with the ice cream, he immediately asked if Lynn wanted a taste in baby talk (Turn 78). Though Lynn did not accept the invitation, she used the expression 人家 'other' instead of *我* 'I' to refer to herself (Turn 79). According to Yueh's (2017) study, using 人家 'other' as a first-person pronoun is one of the common verbal components of *撒嬌 sajiao*-related practices. In addition, instead of a direct rejection, she offered a reason why she could not have the ice cream. Jerry responded in baby talk and expressed his understanding of Lynn's reason for not accepting his invitation. While the couple had achieved a co-construction of couple-centered footing here (Turns 78 – 80), it appeared insufficient in fully restoring their natural conversation flow.

Even though the couple managed to talk about the ice cream, there were still many pauses in between their exchanges (Turns 82 – 94). In addition, Lynn's intonation was rather monotonous and unenthusiastic, unlike her usual light-hearted speech style when talking to Jerry during dinnertime. This finally changed after Turn 100 when Jerry made multiple utterances in baby talk, code-switched, expressed his consideration for Lynn's preference, and laughed to invoke the conceptual spaces of the love zone, safe space, and playground to firmly establish a couple-centered footing. In Turn 101, Lynn switched back to her normal tone and responded to Jerry's question. From then on, there was more variation in her intonation. The two then went on to have conversations as usual. Lynn also cursed a few times in Turns 107 and 109 when mentioning a shared experience with Jerry.

This extended transcript demonstrated how failed attempts to co-construct a couple-centered footing when disagreeing with each other may lead to potential escalation and a conversation breakdown. In order to resolve the disagreement, the couple may have to put in additional effort in establishing a couple-centered footing. A natural conversation flow may be restored after both partners have offered apparent relational-enhancing cues to co-construct a couple-centered footing. In maintaining intimacy in couples' daily conversations, jointly establishing a couple-centered footing may be key to preventing and resolving conflicts.

## 5.2 Balancing Footings to Maintain Closeness in Potentially Relational-Harming Situations

The following transcript was a 12-minute conversation from the spontaneous recording of my husband and me. I was in our bedroom alone at first, trying to get some sleep but feeling upset that I was sleeping alone again. My husband opened our bedroom door slightly and peeked into the room for a few seconds without making a sound or coming in. Though it couldn't have been anyone else but him, I could not tell for sure as the room was completely dark. Already upset and somewhat weirded out by his "quirky" behavior in the dark, I repeated, "What?" in an irritated tone.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 1)**

1 A: What? (4.0) What? (3.0) What? (3.0)

**2 K: I feel like you discriminate against me.**

3 A: £How:↑? What:↑?

**4 K: Yeah I feel like I'm under discrimination(.) Mm.**

5 A: £What£?

**6 K: I feel like I'm getting discriminated against.**

7 A: £By what:↑£?

**8 K: Felt like I just went into a- a whole white person's crib(.) ((lower-pitch sounding)) What do you want in here nigga? You ain't got no business here. (4.0) <u>Move</u>(.) <u>Nigger:</u>(.)**

**9 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) I didn't↑ even <u>do</u> all that. (16.0)**

10 K: °Crazy°.

11 A: Mm:?

12 K: °Crazy°.

13 A: Why?

14 K: WHY?

15 A: Mm?

16 K: WHY?

17 A: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) WHY↑? (2.0)**

**18 K: °My wife is crazy bro°.**

**19 A: What↑? ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) What↓chu↑ tal↑kin'↓'bout:?**

20 K: Talking a whole bunch of **shit**.

**21 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) I didn't↑.**

22 K: I don't ever be sitting here saying it to my **wife(**.) she come in(.) look at me(.) I don't be sitting here (.) ((imitate Anita's voice)) **What the hell** do you want?

23 A: £I↑ DID NOT <u>SAY</u>↑ THAT£(.) £I just said <u>what</u>£?

24 K: °Ah nah you-you said it°(.) It's how you said it.

25 A: £How did I say it£?

26 K: ((imitate Anita's voice)) What?

27 A: Wh(hh)at↑? Hehe

28 K: ((imitate Anita's voice)) WHAT↑?

29 A: What?

30 K: I'm looking (.) What↑?

31 A: Hehehe

32 K: They had more- they had [increasingly more attitude to it every time you repeated it(.) Like DAMN.]

**33 A:** [Hehhhhehhhehehe] £I MEAN- **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) I was- I- You didn't have an answer and I thought it might be£(.) £a bad person coming to get me£.**

**34 K: Tsk WHO gonna get into this vault of an apartment?**

**35 A: £You↑ never [know↑£?]**

**36 K: [This bitch] like Fort Knox(.)Ain't nobody about to break into this bitch.**

**37 A: ((baby talk-child)) It↓ could↑ be a ghost.**

**38 K: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) Oh(.)Ghost don't open up- They don't have no reason to open up no doors.**

**39 A: ((baby talk-child)) Yeah(.) 'cause they↑ don't↑ need to open doors.**

**40 K: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) Exactly.**

**41 A: ((baby talk-child)) They↑ just go through walls.**

**42 K: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) Exactly(.)So why the fuck- hehe £Ain't gonna be no ghost opening that shit up£?**

**43 A: ((baby talk-child)) Oh↑:↓:.**

**44 K: ((baby talk-caregiver)) It's↓ either↑ going to be me↑ or your mom.(2.0)**

**45 A: Well. (3.0)**

**46 K: Crazy woman. (4.0)**

**47 A: What if you was <u>possessed</u> though?**

**48 K: <u>You're</u> possessed.**

**49 A: Hehhh. (4.0) (…)**

Already upset about my husband potentially not sleeping in the bed with me that night, my response to him peeping into the room was not the most welcoming or friendly (Turn 1). Instead of taking offense, my husband initiated a tease to shift the interaction into a more playful one (Turns 2). The absurdity of his tease amused me and I responded in a laughing tone (Turns 3). The play was co-constructed as I provided him with verbal cues to further elaborate the humor in the next couple of turns (Turns 4 – 7). My husband's elaboration in Turn 8 could be an initiation for a comical hypothetical. Instead of co-constructing a comical hypothetical with him, I supported the couple-centered footing by using baby talk (Turn 9). After a 16-second pause, my husband quietly teased me by saying I was crazy (Turn 10). Again, I supported his tease by inviting him in various turns to elaborate it further (Turns 11 – 16). In Turn 17, I shifted to baby talk to offer a relational-enhancing cue, perhaps as an encouragement for further play under the couple-centered footing. This was when he repeated the tease using a spousal title, another linguistic cue that could help establish a couple-centered footing (Turn 18). Once again, I encouraged him in baby talk to elaborate further (Turn 19). From Turns 20 to 32, the uses of swearing, spousal term, baby talk, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features such as the informal negative inflection *ain't*, and much laughter between us solidify the playful and relational-enhancing nature of these exchanges. Though we were expressing different evaluations toward my previous reaction, we did it in a way that still drew resources from the conceptual spheres of the love zone, safe space, and playground to establish a couple-centered footing. Consequently, instead of an escalation, the

exchanges resemble a mock disagreement for mutual enjoyment and relational enhancement.

It should be noted that the use of AAVE is also recognized as a marker of intimacy between my husband and me. This variety of English is commonly used by urban communities of working and middle-class African Americans (Mufwene et al., 2022; Wolfram, 2024). Some of the common AAVE features in my husband's speech include using *ain't* as a general negative indicator, using *gon'* or *gonna* for "going to," deletion of the copula *be*, was/were generalization, and some urban vocabulary choices (e.g., *crib* for "home" or *dogging* for "putting down") (See Wolfram (2024) for a list of AAVE features identified in North America). When speaking to family and close friends, I often hear my husband using this variety. However, when interacting with people outside his immediate circle, he would switch to a more "standard" type of speech to avoid being negatively evaluated. As stated eloquently by Morgan (2022, p. 277), "African-American verbal styles and repertoires continue to flourish, in spite of American middle-class values which both criticize and fetishize the culture and language." From my observation of my husband for over a decade, I see him navigate this dualism where he refrains from using AAVE in a professional setting to avoid presenting himself as "bad, uneducated, and unintelligible" to the dominant culture and yet expressing his "wit, creativity, vitality, and resilience" in a more relaxed setting as an African American man in the United States.

Together for a decade as an interracial and intercultural couple, I gradually picked up some features of AAVE from my interaction with my husband. As most of my Taiwanese peers and social circle were not familiar with AAVE, this is a variety that I use the most when I am around my husband. There were many times my husband expressed his pride and appreciation for my integration into his culture when he noticed AAVE features in my conversations with him. In a way, our use of AAVE

reflected our intercultural influence and mutual effort to accommodate each other's background as a couple, indexing our closeness and reinforcing a sense of coupledom.

In Turn 33, I initiated a comical hypothetical in baby talk to suggest that my earlier reaction or irritation was not directed toward him but potentially "a bad person coming to get me." Using baby talk, I casted myself in the role of a vulnerable child to justify my prior emotional or inexperienced response to the situation. This led to multiple turns of co-construction of the comical hypothetical in baby talk between us (Turns 32 – 48). In addition, the element of absurd extreme commonly identified in couples' comical hypothetical was also found in these exchanges. For instance, the ideas of a "ghost" coming in the room or my husband being "possessed" were all quite unlikely and extreme scenarios, even in a hypothetical situation.

Part 1 of the transcript demonstrated how humor can be used to initiate a couple-centered footing and mitigate a potentially relational-harming situation. As I was already upset about sleeping alone, my hostility could be detected from my initial responses to my husband peeking into the room. His tease helped shift the interaction to a playful one. Though we appeared to disagree with each other's teases and claims, the varying views were expressed under a couple-centered footing where various relational-enhancing cues could be detected from both of our utterances. The following part of the transcript illustrated how potentially relational-harming complaints or concerns can be expressed under a couple-centered footing to avoid escalation and maintain intimacy.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 2)**

**49 A: Hehhh. (4.0) ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) £You gon' give me a kiss£?**

**50 K: No man.**

**51 A: [£Why£?]**

**52 K: [I'm mad] at you=**

**53 A: =£Why you mad at me for£?=**

**54 K: ='cau:se you just fuck with your husband man(.) You be dogging him.**

**55 A: ((baby talk-child)) £I didn't↑-uh what↑£?**

**56 K: You be dogging him man.**

57 A: I don't be dogging you.

**58 K: I came here to be with my wife but rather I get the(.) ((imitate Anita's voice)) What you in here for? State your business. ((normal-sounding)) Like damn↑ (.) All right↑(.) Shit. Have the room to yourself then.**

59 A: It's not THAT.

60 K: Then what is it then?

61 A: The- I don't know: I was worried that you got other stuff going on.

62 K: LIKE WHAT?

63 A: Like you was trying to get dressed so you could go out and buy some drinks and **shit?**

64 K: No=

**65 A: =And then you saw that your wife was awake so you like- kind of like- ((imitate Kyrios's voice)) Oh shit(.) she's up(.) [Ok let me-]"**

66 K: [Girl when-] When has that ever deterred me?

67 A: **((imitate Kyrios's voice)) Let me-let me.**

68 K: That has never deterred me. If I'm gonna buy=

69 A: **((imitate Kyrios's voice)) =Let me=**

70 K: =I'm just gonna buy me a drink=

71 A: **((imitate Kyrios's voice)) =£Let me:£**

72 K: That ain't never-

73 A: **((imitate Kyrios's voice)) =Let=**

74 K: =That ain’t never deterred me at all.

75 A: **((imitate Kyrios’s voice)) Let me see if [she's UP↑]**

76 K: [I’ll-I’ll-]

77 A: **((imitate Kyrios’s voice)) Or she's sleep↑ [or-]**

78 K: [I will] take the criticism to the-to the chin(.) Hehehe

79 A: £To the chin£?

80 K: Yup(.) right to the chin. (6.0)

In Turn 49, I requested a kiss in the baby talk register. My husband directly rejected this request in the next turn. However, as we had previously maintained a couple-centered footing, his rejection could be interpreted as throwing a temper tantrum and being playfully childish. This was quickly confirmed in Turns 52 to 58 when he stated that I mistreated him. Again, we expressed different evaluations of my previous reaction under a couple-centered footing. Using terms of endearment, conversational humor, swearing, baby talk, and some linguistic features of AAVE, the exchanges conveyed my husband’s mock complaint, helped resolve my earlier upset, and allowed us to co-construct playful interaction for mutual enjoyment.

In Turn 59, I loudly contested his hypothetical interpretation of my earlier reaction. This was a clear shift into an individual-centered footing as more focus was placed on self-expression and negotiation of ideas rather than relational harmony and connection. When my husband prompted me to clarify (Turns 60 & 62), I finally revealed a then concern of mine (Turns 61 & 63). Around the time of this recording, we had several heated and emotional discussions about his drinking choices. My concern for his health had made it difficult for me to accept his preference for drinking hard liquor as opposed to other drinks with lower alcohol percentages. However, his goal to save money propelled him to purchase the cheapest drinks with

the highest alcohol percentages. Though we came to an agreement that he would try his best to reduce his alcohol consumption, I still found him occasionally buying hard liquor in my absence. This was also another reason why I assumed he was gauging the situation to decide if he could go out to get some hard liquor again when he peeked into the room.

In Turn 63, I directly voiced out my complaint and concern with a swear word. Then, I proposed a hypothetical interpretation of his earlier action by re-enacting the scenario in his voice. The use of a spousal term, swearing, and role-playing in this hypothetical suggested that this was an attempt to construct a couple-centered footing and shift the interaction to a more playful one, potentially inviting a joint creation of a comical hypothetical. Nonetheless, instead of co-constructing my hypothetical scenario, he created his own version of a hypothetical and stated that he would take the criticism "to" the chin if he were caught buying a drink. This slip of the tongue or unfamiliarity with the expression "take the criticism on the chin" made both of us laugh, solidifying yet again the playful nature of these exchanges.

This part of the transcript showed that concerns or complaints that can potentially harm a couple's relationship can still be expressed in a relational-enhancing manner. The uses of conversational humor, swearing, spousal terms, and features of AAVE all contributed to establishing these exchanges as couple-centered and relational-enhancing. By balancing between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing when voicing varying thoughts, we managed to express ourselves without compromising our relational needs. The next part of the conversation began with my request to get a kiss again. In this round of negotiation, my husband still rejected my request in a manner similar to a mock disagreement.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 3)**

81 A: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You gon' give me a kiss?**

82 K: No: bro.

83 A: **((baby talk-child))((nasal)) You ain't gon' give↑ me no kiss↑?**

84 K: You done- nope(.) 'cause you done acting up.

85 A: What? WHAT I gotta do: to get back to=

86 K: =There ain't nothing you can do.

87 A: £What↑£?

88 K: Just be better.

89 A: £Be be(h)tter? he ((loud))? AT WHAT↑? (2.0) [Like?]

**90 K: [£Not discriminating] against your husband bro£=**

**91 A: =Like closing: refrigerator doors better?**

92 K: Yup(.) °I hate that refrigerator°.

93 A: hhhehe

**94 K: Stupid-ass refrigerator(.)** I was thinking about that before I went to sleep.

95 A: Rea↑lly↓

**96 K: °I hate that fucking refrigerator°(.) °I have it replaced if I had money°.**

97 A: Mmhehe

**98 K: °Throw that bitch off the top of the building or something°? (2.0) °Stupid-ass [refrigerator°.]**

99 A: [Hehe]he(.) All my ice cream became soup.

**100 K: Fucking stupid (6.0) You would have thought I just left the whole fucking door wide ass open(.) Some stupid shit. (2.0) Make me not even want to go back in that bitch ever again 'cause <u>I ain't</u> fucking up(.) I don't care.**

101 A: Hhheehee you just gotta(.) clo:se it tha:t's all.

**102 K: And not have to sit here(.)and do a whole fucking(.) football charge-**

103 A: £Football [charge£?]

**104 K: [Like I'm-]Like I'm doing a <u>shoulder</u> fucking charge. <u>BOOM</u>(.) [Up in this fucking thing].**

105 A: [Oohhheheha][hahaha]

**106 K: [Fucking close] the door(.) Shit stupid as fuck.**

107 A: I mean:: in the fridge's defense hhhehe

**108 K: °This ain't football practice°?**

109 A: Uhhehe we had that fridge since I was in(.) I think middle school.

110 K: Well it need to be <u>retired</u>=

111 A: =Tsk man: we don't got refrigerator money↑.

112 K: I know(.) It's a shame.

113 A: °Refrigerators° are <u>expensive</u>.

114 K: °I know. **Who gon' carry that shit up- hhh £up£ nine flights of steps°?**

115 A: Huh?

116 K: **I said who's gon' carry that shit like nine flights of steps?**

117 A: You talking about a new fridge?

118 K: Mmhmm.

119 A: Yea. (15.0)

As my husband rejected my request for a kiss again (Turns 81 & 82), we continued to negotiate in the following turns (Turns 83 – 90). Our utterances were phrased with features of AAVE, spousal term, baby talk, and laughter, suggesting the light-hearted and relational-enhancing nature of these exchanges. Or, as discussed before, my husband's rejection could be a mock disagreement reminiscent of a child

being uncooperative when throwing a temper tantrum. If so, this could be viewed as baby talk in a contextual form to invite affection and attention from a partner to tend to one's emotional needs. In addition, this also creates a child-child dynamic in our exchanges, allowing us to co-construct play for mutual entertainment.

In Turn 91, I built on the concept of "be better" and initiated a tease toward my husband's recent accident of not properly closing the freezer door. This was not the first accident my husband had with the refrigerator. I reminded him a couple of times in the past that the refrigerator door was old and required a little extra care to make sure it was fully closed. Yet, another accident happened earlier that day. So, when he teased me about discriminating against him, I responded with a tease about his refrigerator accident, potentially expanding the exchanges into a banter and also suggesting my hope for his improvement on the refrigerator situation. This led to his complaint about the refrigerator in the following turns (Turns 94 – 108).

Throughout his rant, there were many instances of swearing, humor, and linguistic features of AAVE. My laughter suggested that I recognized his rant as taking a couple-centered footing in which he expressed a shared upset about the refrigerator situation as I was, rather than taking on more of an individual-centered footing to defend his action. Though I shifted to an individual-centered footing and spoke for the refrigerator in Turn 107, my husband still agreed with me and initiated a comical hypothetical in Turns 114 and 116. The combined use of humor, swearing, laughter, and AAVE features indicated his effort to shift the conversation to a couple-centered one.

This excerpt showcased how another previously discussed topic or unresolved issue can be renegotiated under a couple-centered footing. While revisiting these topics can trigger unresolved upsets, balancing between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing can help a couple make new meanings in a relational-

enhancing way. Even when potentially relational-harming comments are made (e.g., Turns 90 & 91), a couple can still maintain a rather stable conversation flow with the support of the couple-centered footing. In the next part of the conversation, I made another attempt to invite physical affection from my husband. This was when he shifted his voice to the baby talk register and rejected me, confirming his previous refusals as contextual shifts to baby talk to invite more emotional comfort before granting compliance.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 4)**

120 K: Mm?

**121 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Mm: you gon' look at your beautiful wife again?**

**122 K: °Mm↑mm↓°.**

**123 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) No?**

**124 K: ((baby talk-child))((slow)) °I'm going to bed(.) °Nobody likes me°.**

**125 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Look↑ at me. (7.5)**

**126 K: Mm?**

**127 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((nasal)) Look at your wife again?**

**128 K: ((baby talk-child))((nasal))((slow)) Why? Nobody likes me anyway.**

**129 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) What you <u>mean</u>↑?**

**130 K: °Mmmm°.**

**131 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) I like↑ you↑.**

**132 K: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) °No you don't°=**

**133 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) =Yes I <u>do</u>↑.**

**134 K: Hhhh ((sound of Anita poking Kyrios)) Mm? ((sound of Anita poking Kyrios)) Mm?**

**135 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) Can I get a ki:ss?**

**136 K: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) <u>No</u>.**

**137 A: ((baby talk-caregiver))((slow)) Or can I give <u>you</u> a kiss?**

**138 K: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) <u>No</u>. hh**

**139 A: Hh(.) Can I blo:w you a kiss?**

**140 K: ((baby talk-child))((nasal))((slow)) Mm↑mm↓.**

**141 A: £What you gon' do if I blow you a kiss£?**

**142 K: I will knock you out.**

**143 A: Wh(h)at?**

**144 K: Mm(.) I'mma get up and put my hands on you.**

**145 A: Tsk man: over a <u>kiss</u>:↑?**

**146 K: Mm↓hm↑**

**147 A: Hhhhh**

**148 K: Hhhhh**

149 A: I'm just gonna have to=

150 K: =My brother say he be putting-he be putting his hands on his girlfriend(.) It made me laugh.

151 A: What↑? For real↑?

This part of the excerpt began with me asking my husband to look at me in a baby talk register and spousal title (Turn 121). After he rejected me, I continued to speak to him in a baby talk register (Turns 122 & 123). This was when he also shifted to a baby talk register to respond to me and said that he was going to bed because nobody liked him. (Turn 124). As his speech style and demeanor resembled an

uncooperative child using baby talk to invite more emotional support and attention, I shifted my baby talk from a more childlike register to a more nurturing one to repeat the request (Turn 125). In this case, the role shift could be detected by pitch and nasality involved in these utterances. Generally speaking, when I was taking more of a childlike role, my baby talk register would be much higher in pitch and more nasally than in a nurturing adult role. As he didn't respond to the request right away, I used the caregiving baby talk register to encourage his compliance again (Turn 127).

In the following turns, we continued to negotiate for a few more turns in baby talk (Turns 128 – 140). However, instead of a serious negotiation of contrasting opinions, these exchanges were more similar in nature to a mock disagreement designed and co-constructed for relational purposes. Through role-playing as the emotional and vulnerable child and the nurturing and patient adult, we drew resources from the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground to establish a couple-centered footing. Not only was affection expressed verbally in these exchanges, but the intention to seek physical intimacy was also conveyed in my repeated requests.

As my requests were still not granted, I initiated a hypothetical question in Turn 141 to further negotiate. In the following turn, my husband shifted the hypothetical scenario into a comical hypothetical by adding in the element of absurd extreme. Though this comical hypothetical was shorter than the other examples identified in my data, it still achieved the goal of creating a playful imaginary space for us to have fun and share laughter (Turns 141 – 148). As I continued to expand on the comical hypothetical in Turn 149, my husband brought up a related topic about his brother and shifted the conversation back to real-life topics (Turn 150).

Part 4 of the transcript mostly consisted of couple-centered exchanges. Relational-enhancing cues could be identified throughout the conversation. We

supported each other in creating the mock disagreement and comical hypothetical to fulfill emotional needs and achieve relational goals. As concerns and complaints were expressed previously, reconnecting with a couple-centered conversation for the purpose of relational harmony could be helpful in maintaining intimacy and reinforcing the sense of coupledom. The next part of the transcript began with my husband's long narrative about what happened between my brother-in-law and his girlfriend.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 5)**

150 K: =My brother say he be putting-he be putting his hands on his girlfriend(.) It made me laugh.

151 A: What↑? For real↑?

152 K: Yea: He said he don't be li:ke hitting her but he'd be like- They'd be arguing and she talking to him and said-She be saying out of pocket **shit(**.) She like gets stonewall: she don't want to talk to him(.) He'll grab her like(.) ((imitate his brother's voice)) Nah: you gon' talk to me(.)Like £he like-£ hehe £he be pinning her down and be like£ ((imitate his brother's voice)) >Nah you gon' to talk to me<(.) We gon' talk this **shit** out. And £I'd (h) be like-£ hehehe

**153 A: £I could never see you do that(.) 'cause you don't like to talk shit out£.**

154 K: £I'm↑ like↑£- yea↓(.) £He a real one for that(.) too£. I told him I was like(.) Damn nigga that's some very mature way of han(hh)dling things£ hehehe

155 A: £I'm gonna try that next [time£.]

156 K: [Like] ((imitate his brother's voice)) >HELL NAH< you ain't going out this house(.) You gon' talk about this right now(.) We gon' talk through this **shit(**.) I'm like [£aww:£]

157 A: [£Can I try-] Can I try that on you£?

**158 K: £Hell no bro£=**

**159 A: =£What£? £What you gon do£? [£YOU AIN'T GON'£-]**

**160 K: [I'mma fu-]**

**161 A: [You ain't gon'] [appreciate-]**

**162 K: [I'm gon' put on the gloves.]**

**163 A: [You ain't gon'-]**

**164 K: [I'm gon' put on the gloves.]**

**165 A: Tsk.**

**166 K: I'mma be like(.)Here(.) put these on.**

**167 A: £You ain't gon' appreciate↑ that I'm trying to <u>talk</u> shit out£?**

**168 K: Mm↑mm↓.**

**169 A: £What↑£?**

**170 K: We gon' have to fight.**

**171 A: [Why?]**

172 K: [Why is] it so hot in this room though?=

173 A: =So what?

174 K: Ho:t bro.

**175 A: £<u>You're</u> hot£ hhh**

**176 K: £I know: right£?**

177 A: You should turn the fan- hehehe ((Beeping sound of Kyrios turning the fan on simultaneously with my laughter)) ok. (5.0)

My husband's narrative included several linguistic features of AAVE. As mentioned before, these traits index intimate speech between us. He introduced the story into the conversation as something that made him laugh (Turn 150). His own

laughter and the use of swearing also suggested that the story was told to serve entertainment and relational purposes (Turn 152). In Turn 153, I supported his storytelling by sharing a laugh with him and playfully teased him using concepts from his story. This tease was made possible because of our shared knowledge about each other's communication styles and intertextual experiences of our disagreements. Since my husband was the type of person who preferred to calm down before talking things out, he did not appreciate being pressured to resolve the issue when he was not ready. In the past, it was common for him to leave an emotional disagreement and keep to himself for days until we re-establish communication. Since I prefer to keep communication open, I used to find it frustrating that he would disengage himself in conflicts. This was why I saw it as an opportunity to teasingly propose trying the same on him in the future (Turns 155 & 157) when he seemed to be praising his brother for confronting issues with his partner in a timely manner (Turns 154 & 156).

After my proposal was rejected, I initiated a hypothetical question to allow for further negotiation (Turn 158 & 159). My husband then shifted the hypothetical scenario into a comical hypothetical by adding in the element of absurd extreme of us actually putting gloves and engage in a fight. The comical hypothetical was co-constructed for several turns (Turns 160 – 170). Though his suggestion for a physical altercation seemed like a disagreement with what I proposed, the fact that he intended to engage in a fight rather than avoid it indicated his changing attitude and gradual acceptance of my stance to maintain contact in conflicts. To some extent, this conversation was fruitful in the meaning-making process of our conflict interactions. Drawing resources from our shared knowledge and conceptual spheres of the couple-centered footing, we took another step toward negotiating a mutually acceptable means to deal with our future emotional disagreements.

In Turn 172, my husband changed the subject to the temperature of the room. His rhetorical question about the room being hot shifted the conversation from the hypothetical scenario back to reality. The word "hot" in his utterance also occasioned a sex-related interpretation. Though our comments in Turns 175 and 176 could be taken literally, our laughing voice suggested otherwise. Our laughter indicated that we acknowledged and appreciated these comments as sexual puns and humor.

This part of the transcript also showcased how couples can use relational-enhancing cues to establish a couple-centered footing in their daily conversation to maintain intimacy. When sharing ideas, daily events, or stories about other people, couples can further build on the topic and/or shift the narrative to having a couple-centered focus, potentially making new meanings in the relationship. Co-constructing a couple-centered footing in everyday conversations can not only help foster a sense of coupledom and relational closeness, but also support the negotiation of meaning between romantic partners. In the following part of the conversation, I requested to get a kiss and got rejected again. So, I decided to blow my husband a kiss like I proposed previously in Turn 139.

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 6)**

178 K: Haha £feel so sorry for my brother man£=

179 A: =£You gonna give me a kiss or <u>what</u>£?

180 K: <u>NO</u>.

181 A: Muah whhhh ((Anita blow Kyrios a kiss)) £You gon' accept my-↑ .hhhhh ((Kyrios gently tap Anita's face))

182 K: Hehe

183 A: Did you↑ just↑ slap↑ me↑?

184 K: £I did£(.) £I slapped the kiss away £.

185 A: £You just slapped↑ me↑ in the form of a kiss £?

186 K: £I slap the kiss£ hehe whhhh ((Kyrios blow Anita a kiss)) £There you go↑£. Hehehe £wh(h)at **lo(h)ve**£? Hehehe

187 A: Muah ((kissing sound))

188 K: Hehe

**189 A: ((baby talk-child)) WHY YOU BACK AWAY?**

190 K: hhh 'cause I already give you-

**191 A: ((baby talk-child)) <u>Get</u> in here.**

192 K: £I already give you a kiss£(.) £You get over here£.

193 A: What↑?

194 K: ((low pitch monster voice)) Get over here.

195 A: And then you gon' be like=

196 K: =Move=

197 A: =oh I'm already all the way=

198 K: =Yup=

199 A: =on the edge=

200 K: =Yup. [I am gon' say that.]

201 A: [Go back to your own-]

202 K: Yup. That's right. (3.0)

203 A: [You can't put too-]

204 K: [You gotta teach] tomorrow?

205 A: My wri:st over here(.) and my elbow over here(.) have some issue.

**206 K: Oh: I ain't touching your crippled self man.**

207 A: £Cri↑ppled↓ se:↑:↓lf£?

**208 K : °Yup°(.) °Crippled over here°.**

209 A: £What↑£?

**210 K: ((Imitate and mock Anita's voice)) You can't touch anything=**

211 A: =I-

**212 K: (Imitate and mock Anita's voice)) You can't touch anything [man I swear.]**

213 A: [Tsk I-JUST SAY YOU GOTTA] be careful(.) It's already weird.

**214 K: ((Imitate and mock Anita's voice)) I am injured=**

**215 A: ((Imitate and mock Kyrios's imitation)) =I <u>am injured.</u>**

After turning the fan on, my husband shifted the conversation back to talking about his brother (Turn 178). Since I still hadn't received a kiss, I requested for it again in Turn 179. Similar to his previous reactions to this request, he rejected it. This was when I blew him a kiss, as proposed in Turn 139. To my surprise, he playfully tapped me on the face right after I blew him the kiss. The tap was really gentle that it felt more like a touch. However, an intertextual interpretation of his statements to put his hands on me if I blew him a kiss in Turns 142 and 144 would make the tap an actualization of his earlier claim. This might be why I responded to it as such and playfully asked him if he just "slapped" me (Turn 183). He owned up to the "slap" in the next turn but stated that he was slapping the kiss away and not me.

From Turns 178 to 186, we had taken individual-centered footings in expressing our personal views and wants. Yet, the exchanges were still light-hearted and playful, perhaps due to the substantial effort in co-constructing a couple-centered footing in previous parts of the conversation. It was apparent that our conversation flow was not obstructed, and we were still able to laugh with each other, even after the playful "slap." Another reason why this part of the conversation was not escalated may be a result of his assertion about the target of the slap. At first, I suspected the slap was targeted toward me, but he affirmed that it was the kiss that he slapped away. This

might also be key in maintaining relational harmony in couples' disagreement. Instead of rejecting a partner, it is less relational-harming to reject a third-party entity or concept.

In Turn 186, my husband blew me a kiss back and used terms of endearment to re-establish the couple-centered footing. This led to me giving him a kiss on the lips (Turn 187). He responded with a laugh while I contested loudly in the baby talk register about him slightly backing away when I leaned in for the kiss (Turn 189). So far, relational-enhancing cues were given by both of us to co-construct the couple-centered footing. However, we shifted back to individual-centered footings as we negotiated who should take the initiative to move closer (Turns 191 – 202). As this disagreement came to a halt, we both initiated new topics to continue the conversation flow (Turn 203 – 204).

A topic shift was also seen as a way to mitigate a disagreement and restore the conversation flow in Jerry and Lynn's example shown in Section 5.1. As demonstrated by the next part of the transcript, the topic shift might be a strategy to temporarily postpone a halted negotiation so that the romantic partners could shift to a different footing and reconnect before returning to the topic. Sometimes, resolutions may be reached within the same conversation, or they may require several negotiations spanning a few days or even months, depending on the severity of the topic at hand. For instance, my husband's drinking issue has been discussed and renegotiated several times since we got married in 2022. The exchanges from Turns 60 to 80 can be seen as another meaning-making and negotiation process of the topic. However, compared to some of the more emotional and triggering conversations we had in the past, we were able to approach it in a more couple-centered and light-hearted manner this time. Though we have yet to come to a definite resolution on this topic, we have reached a point where we verbally and actively respect and support

each other's stances to the best of our abilities. This can serve as another example of how 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) works to make new meanings in the relationship and help negotiate a sense of coupledom in the process.

My topic switch initiated in Turns 203 and 205 was related to the minor aches I experienced then in my wrist and elbow. This occasioned my husband's tease in Turns 206 and 207. The tease made me laugh, and I supported it by providing cues for him to elaborate further (Turns 207 & 209). He then imitated my voice in a mocking manner in Turns 210 and 212. When I contested in Turn 213, he continued to imitate my voice in Turn 214. In the next turn, I mocked his imitation by repeating what he said previously. These exchanges were pretty similar to childish bickering or playful banter. Though we did not switch to a baby talk register by modifying the morpho-phonological features of our voices, the exchanges could still be seen as two people taking on the roles of playful children who banter for fun. By doing so, we re-established a couple-centered footing and reconnected after taking opposing views under the individual-centered footing. In the next part of the transcript, my husband initiated a topic switch again by repeating his previously unanswered question (Turns 204 & 216).

**Example 43: You gon' give me a kiss? (Part 7)**

216 K: You gotta teach tomorrow?

**217 A: Why? What you wanna learn? Hhhhaha[haaaaa]**

**218 K: [You're strange(.) Da(h)ng] heh**

219 A: £You didn't like↑ that↑£?

220 K: **Hehe £You're weird£.**

221 A: £Why? You don't like↑ that↑£?

222 K: £You're strange£ hehehe £why you over here [nigga£? Give me some room.]

**223 A: ((baby talk-child))((nasal)) [£'cause I-'cause I] <u>love</u>: <u>you</u>:£ Mm:** ((18 seconds of repeated kissing sounds))

224 A: Why you say you're sorry for your brother? What happened? (4.5)

225 K: He's just going through it. (…)

Continuing the nature of the playful banter in the previous turns, I did not take my husband's question seriously, nor did I respond to it with the actual information of my availability that he was seeking (Turns 216 – 217). I responded as if he intended to learn from my class, creating the incongruity required for humor. This led to his laughter and a tease in the next turn. We continued to laugh at my humor for another couple of turns (Turns 218 – 221). Then, my husband asked me why I was on his side of the bed in Turn 222 with linguistic traits of AAVE. His utterance showed I had physically moved closer to his side of the bed. Before he finished his sentence, I responded in the baby talk register and attributed my physical action as a sign of my love for him (Turn 223). After that, we showered each other with kisses for about 18 seconds. Until this point, all of the disagreeing stances we had expressed since my husband opened the bedroom door were resolved to some extent (See Table 3).

**Table 3. The couple's expressions of disagreeing stances, viewpoints, and their resolutions in the conversation**

| K's Stance & Viewpoints | A's Stance & Viewpoints | Resolutions |
|---|---|---|
| A is hostile toward K (e.g., Turns 2, 8, 22, 58) | Finds K's behavior suspicious (e.g., Turns 33, 37, 47) | Concerns & needs addressed (e.g., Turns 52 & 61) |
| Rejects Kiss (e.g., Turns 50, 82, 136, 180) | Requests Kiss (e.g., Turns 49, 81, 135, 179) | Blow each other kisses (Turns 181 & 186); a long period of kissing (Turn 223) |
| Not going to sneak drink (Turns 68, 70, 74) | Concerned about K's sneak drinking (Turns 63 & 65) | K owns up responsibility and takes criticism on the chin (Turns 78 & 80) |
| Stupid fridge; not going to do a football charge to close it (e.g., Turns 94, 102, 104, 108) | Old fridge; needs K to close the door with care (Turns 101, 107, 109) | Need to get a new fridge one day, if finances allow (Turns 96, 110 – 113) |
| Nobody likes K (Turns 124, 128, 132) | Likes K (Turns 131 & 133) | Physical & verbal expressions of affection (Turns 222 & 223) |
| Will physically fight with A in future conflicts (Turns 158, 160 –170) | Will try talking things out immediately with K in future conflicts (Turns 155 & 157) | Will stay in contact during conflicts (Turn 170) |
| A should move closer to K (Turns 192 & 194) | K should move closer to A (Turn 191) | A moves closer to K because of love (Turn 222 & 223) |

Throughout the conversation, we worked through several disagreeing stances and reached mutually acceptable resolutions. The transcript demonstrated how potentially relational-harming conversations can be carried out with the use of relational-enhancing strategies to balance between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing. By doing so, romantic partners can express their personal concerns and relational needs while maintaining a sense of connection and intimacy as a couple.

When all the disagreement had been resolved, I reinitiated the topic of my brother-in-law (Turn 224). My husband brought up this topic earlier, but I cut it short with my request for a kiss. We continued discussing his brother and family for 25 more minutes before ending the conversation and going to sleep. This part of the conversation consisted of lengthy monologues from my husband expressing his views and concerns for his brother's well-being. To support his speech, I offered minimal cues (e.g., "mmhmm," "yup," "yea") and occasionally provided some related thoughts on the topic.

It should be noted that the occurrences of relational-enhancing strategies in the later exchanges were relatively low. We mainly took individual-centered footings when discussing his family. However, the fact that the discussion about his family lasted even longer than the couple-centered and relational-focused conversation we had earlier showed the importance of this topic to my husband. This might indicate that shifting to a topic on which a partner intended to elaborate further might also be important in supporting a healthy conversation between romantic partners. In other words, having "good" communication does not only require a couple to co-construct a couple-centered footing to nurture their coupledom verbally but also to allow for self-expression to be done within an individual-centered footing where one can focus on expressing their own thoughts, concerns, and selfhood.

In the upcoming section, I discuss the dynamics of taking a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in couples' conversations. I also explore the comparable traits of a couple-centered footing and individual-centered footing based on my data. I argue that maintaining a healthy balance between the two footings can cultivate a stable, egalitarian, and satisfying relationship.

## 5.3 Discussion: Couple-Centered Footing and Individual-Centered Footing in Couple's Discourse

The current research examined how couples adopt relational-enhancing strategies to establish a couple-centered footing and maintain intimacy in conversations. As shown in my data, couples may adopt relational-enhancing strategies (i.e., terms of endearment and conversational humor) and verbal transgressions (i.e., swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk) as linguistic cues to initiate and co-construct a couple-centered footing. Drawing resources from the conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground in the couple-centered footing, the linguistics strategies also shape these conceptual spheres when fostering a relational-focused conversation. For couples of varying relational histories and communication styles, repetitious and 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009) are necessary for a strategy to be recognized as relational-enhancing. As a couple continues to negotiate and make meaning of their verbal interaction, they may establish their unique ways of communication and include different linguistic elements into their couple-lect. For example, the use of spousal terms and AAVE features in conversation holds special weight to my husband and me.

Generally speaking, couples prioritize relational harmony and make an effort to align with each other when taking a couple-centered footing. As discussed in Section

5.1, the failure and success of co-constructing a couple-centered footing in conversation can impact the couple's communicative collaboration and relational harmony. In addition, Section 5.2 showed how balancing a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing can help avoid potential relational harm when expressing disagreeing stances. However, this does not suggest that focusing only on building couple-centered conversations by using relational-enhancing strategies is sufficient for having "good" communication in an intimate relationship.

To foster a stable, egalitarian, and fulfilling relationship, a couple has to maintain a healthy balance conversing in a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing. In line with Baxtor and Montgomery's (1996)findings on the tensions inherent in romantic relationships, couples have to manage relational closeness and individual autonomy in conversations. Always communicating under a couple-centered footing may make one seem overly focused on pleasing their partner to ensure relational maintenance that they are willing to forfeit self-expression. While this may be relational-enhancing at first, it may make the relationship appear insincere, forced, unattractive, and one-sided in the long run. Psychology research also supports that maintaining a sense of coupledom and individuality is key to cultivating a healthy relationship (Bowen, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Olson, 2000).

The spontaneous recordings of the couples in my data showed that the majority of the conversations couples have in their daily interactions were done under an individual-centered footing. Aside from verbally maintaining intimacy, couples also seek to express and perform their personal identity by sharing personal thoughts, individual experiences, and subjective opinions about everyday events and encounters. In an egalitarian relationship, romantic partners are encouraged to have their individual identities, views, wants, and needs. Romantic partners' individualities and the commonality a couple finds within their individualities are essentially what create

the attraction and connection. To put it simply, it is because one has ideas and principles of their own but is willing to negotiate, compromise, and make necessary adjustments to accommodate and associate with a partner that makes the relationship meaningful and intimate. This is demonstrated in Example 40, where Jerry and Lynn negotiated about the appointment at the beauty salon. Jerry expressed his initial plan to drop Lynn off at the salon under an individual-centered footing. After Lynn initiated a couple-centered footing with the baby talk register to persuade Jerry to stay, Jerry expressed his final decision to keep Lynn company under an individual-centered footing. Stating his final decision under an individual-centered footing could convey a sense of ownership of his decision, showing his willingness to change his mind to consider both of their needs.

Another reason why it is not ideal to always communicate under a couple-centered footing is that it may deprive a couple of the chance to grow and strengthen the relationship through deep conversations and negotiations about individual differences. If one chooses to take a couple-centered footing and prioritizes relational harmony at all times, one may tend to avoid voicing concerns and worries in a relationship. This could be seen in the negotiation about drinking between my husband and me. In the many times that we had discussions about this topic in the past, we shared our personal concerns and viewpoints on the issue. It is due to the constant effort to discuss and renegotiate our varying stances over multiple conversations that we were able to reach a point where we could address and accommodate both of our needs to the best of our abilities. This provides us with the opportunity to grow and strengthen our bond as a couple as we gradually integrate each other's perspectives into our worldviews.

An individual-centered footing facilitates self-expression and maintains individuality, enabling romantic partners to uphold their identities and stances within

a relationship. When taking an individual-centered footing, one is more concerned with expressing, prioritizing, and aligning with one's own thoughts, needs, and emotions. As the current study focuses on exploring the relations between language use and intimacy, more attention is paid to examining the linguistic strategies used to establish a couple-centered footing in daily conversations. Utterances without apparent cues for relational enhancement are analyzed as operating under an individual-centered footing. More studies will have to be conducted before we can gain deeper insights into the linguistic traits and the conceptual spheres of an individual-centered footing. However, through my study on the couple-centered footing, some comparable traits between the two footings emerged in my data (See Table 4).

**Table 4. Couple-centered footing versus individual-centered footing**

| | **Couple-centered Footing** | **Individual-centered Footing** |
|---|---|---|
| **Communication Goal** | Prioritizes relational harmony & strengthens intimacy | Focuses on self-expression & maintains sense of self |
| **Conceptual Spheres** | The love zone, safe space, & playground | The performance stage & the castle |
| **Linguistic cues** | Relational-enhancing strategies (e.g., terms of endearment & conversational humor) & verbal transgression (e.g., swearing, sex-related talk, baby talk) | Identity-based strategies (e.g., uses of accents or registers that reflect sociocultural background) & disagreeing/ persuasive expressions |
| **Footing Establishment in Context** | Often requires co-construction between romantic partners | Can be established by one speaker |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Effects on Interpersonal Relationships** | Pros: Strengthens intimacy & coupledom<br>Cons: Lack of self-expression & deprives chance for relational growth | Pros: Supports individuality & self-disclosure<br>Cons: Appears self-centered & prone to create conflict |

Based on my data analysis, several comparable traits between the two footings can be identified. First, a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing support different goals in communication and interaction. A couple-centered footing encourages and prioritizes relational harmony. Shifting into a couple-centered footing can help verbally strengthen coupledom and mitigate potential relational harm in context. An individual-centered footing emphasizes the expression and alignment with one's sense of self. When one expresses themselves in an individual-centered footing, they convey who they are, where they come from, and what they believe to be true.

Next, the two footings comprise different conceptual spheres. In my analysis of a couple-centered footing, three conceptual spheres have emerged. These conceptual spheres comprise the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations of how one should align with a romantic partner when managing the production and interpretation of utterances. Firstly, the "love zone" supports and influences a couple's articulation of affection and commitment to one another. Secondly, the "safe space" is where romantic partners can engage in verbal transgressions without fear of judgment or harm. Lastly, romantic partners create verbal fun and play with each other in the "playground."

On the other hand, an individual-centered footing may contain conceptual spheres of the "performance stage" and the "castle." The conceptual sphere of the

performance stage is directly related to one's expressions and performances of identity. When taking an individual-centered footing, the conceptual sphere of a performance stage supports one's expression of their affiliation with a certain gender, sexual orientation, race, education level, socioeconomic status, sociocultural background, and belief system. Individuals engage in various 'communities of practice' (Eckert, 2006) as social actors in their daily lives, foregrounding and performing different identities, including those based on activities rather than categories (Goodwin, 1990). Symbolic resources, such as language, appearance, and personality, can be used to display oneself as an acceptable cultural member (Eckert, 1989). In addition, the resources one draws upon from various concepts of one's identity to perform and maintain one's sense of self can vary depending on the ideology and contexts of the interaction. In other words, one may draw concepts and shape the conceptual sphere of the performance stage by performing characters one identifies oneself with in front of a certain audience. Next, the conceptual sphere of the castle is where one holds their selfhood as valuable and worthy of advocacy and protection. Under an individual-centered footing, one may prioritize the expression and promotion of their thoughts, wants, and needs. When facing disagreeing stances from a partner, one may defend and protect their views and values as if guarding a castle from an adversary.

The linguistic strategies one uses to establish a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing may vary. As explored in the previous chapter, relational enhancing strategies, such as terms of endearment and conversational humor, can help initiate a shift into a couple-centered footing. Moreover, verbal transgressions, including swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk, can construct a couple-centered footing when used to foster intimacy. Other strategies that may be meaningful to each

couple, such as code-switching, may also be incorporated into a couple's couple-lect to initiate a couple-centered footing.

In the current study, utterances without apparent cues for relational enhancement and a focus on expressing oneself are analyzed as taking an individual-centered footing. However, based on the previous conceptual spheres of the individual-centered footing discussed, two types of language use appear to be central to initiating an individual-centered footing. First, personal identity-based linguistic strategies may be cues to shape the conceptual sphere of the performance stage and initiate an individual-centered footing. For instance, Lynn's Taiwanese-accented Mandarin use can be seen as an indication of her sociocultural background as a Taiwanese native speaker growing up in Southern Taiwan. Other uses of accents or registers associated with a particular sociocultural background or personal identity, such as features of AAVE, may also be considered as a cue to shift to an individual-centered footing. Sociolinguistic researchers have devoted substantial attention to the role of language in expressing, shaping, and constructing identities (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Llamas & Watt, 2010; Preece, 2016). Further research can be done to explore how certain identity-based strategies may help establish an individual-centered footing to align with one's selfhood in communication.

Moreover, since the conceptual sphere of the castle supports the expressions of personal thoughts, values, needs, and wants as valuable, linguistic strategies and markers for persuasion and disagreement are another type of language use commonly found when taking an individual-centered footing. Past linguistic research provided some examples of such persuasion strategies and disagreement markers. Based on Johnstone's study (1989), persuasion strategies may contain the use of 'logical connectives' (e.g., thus, hence, therefore), 'rhetorical deixis' (e.g., here, now, this), visual metaphors, formulaic language (e.g., "you know what they say"), proverbs, etc.

Disagreement markers include contradictory statements, rhetorical questions, intensifiers, judgmental vocabulary, etc. (Rees-Miller, 2000). Adopting these linguistic cues when taking an individual-centered footing may be a reason why some conversations would lead to escalation. As romantic partners prioritize the protection and promotion of their thoughts and preferences, they defend their views and wants and seek to influence their partner to comply. While these may support self-expression and maintain selfhood, they are not the most relational-focused ways to connect with a partner. Nevertheless, more research would have to be conducted before conclusions can be drawn. My research provided some preliminary understanding of how certain linguistic cues may help shift between an individual-centered footing and a couple-centered footing in the conversations between romantic partners.

Establishing a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing requires different numbers of speakers. While one partner can initiate a shift into a couple-centered footing, both romantic partners would have to offer linguistic cues to establish the footing to fully foster intimacy in conversation. As Part 2 of Example 42 demonstrated, Jerry and Lynn's missed opportunities to co-construct a couple-centered footing in a disagreement led to an escalation and a breakdown in conversation flow. Ideally speaking, the couple-centered footing should be established by both partners in the conversation. For an individual-centered footing to be established, one speaker would suffice. One simply has to refrain from using relational-enhancing strategies and focus more on getting one's personal ideas, opinions, and thoughts across to shift into an individual-centered footing.

As discussed before, having a healthy balance between taking a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing is key to building healthy communication in an egalitarian relationship. This is because these footings may have different effects

on interpersonal relationships. Taking a couple-centered footing helps strengthen intimacy and coupledom. However, it can also lead to a lack of self-expression and deprive the relationship a chance to grow. On the other hand, an individual-centered footing supports individuality and self-disclosure. Both of these play an important role in preserving one's personal identity. They can also help romantic partners gain a deeper understanding of each other. Yet, taking an individual-centered footing can appear self-centered and are more likely to create conflict in conversations.

So far, I have discussed the individual-centered footing in comparison with a couple-centered footing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these two footings are not distinct or irrelevant concepts. Instead, they can be seen as two ends of a continuum. On the one hand, we have utterances that may be phrased by adopting several readily recognized relational-enhancing strategies meaningful to the couple. For example, using terms of endearment in baby talk register, "*我的親親小寶貝，老婆屁屁* 'my dear little baby, wifey booty'" can be viewed as directly tapping into the couple-centered footing. On the other hand, utterances that have no relational-enhancing cues and are spoken to express a personal view may be found at the other end of the continuum. Utterances like "*牛蒡我是真的不吃啊，牛蒡吃起來很詭異欸* 'I really don't eat burdock. Burdock tastes weird.'" align with one's personal stance, views, and wants and operate right under an individual-centered footing. In my data, many occurrences could be located somewhere in the middle of this couple-centered footing/individual-centered footing continuum. For instance, in Part 2 of Example 42, Lynn's statement about Jerry, "*我說 J 沒有辦法在韓國生活* 'I said J can't live in Korea.'" falls in between the two footings. While the name-related nickname and the tease may initiate a shift to a couple-centered footing, the statement can also be interpreted as Lynn expressing her personal view and judgment about Jerry. Jerry's individual-centered response, "*不至於吧* 'Not necessarily.'" might be

an indication that he interpreted Lynn's statement as leaning more toward an individual-centered footing rather than a couple-centered footing.

Due to footings being on two ends of a continuum, an originally individual-centered linguistic cue can be incorporated into a couple's couple-lect as a relational-enhancing strategy to index closeness and couple-centered conversation, and vice versa. The use of AAVE features between my husband and me would be one of the examples to demonstrate this point. As a Taiwanese person who learned and used English in a school setting most of my life, I did not have consistent AAVE input until I met my husband. When we first met, my husband's occasional use of certain vocabulary and grammatical features from AAVE reflected his racial background. Still, these uses were foreign to me. He often had to explain what the words or phrases meant verbally and culturally in his community. As our relationship deepened and we got to spend more time together, I began to grasp certain linguistic features in AAVE and use them in conversations with my husband. Over time, our uses of AAVE with each other have become a way to index familiarity, relaxedness, and intimacy in our relationship. Through intertextual uses and meaning-making in our conversations, the AAVE features went from maintaining my husband's individuality and establishing an individual-centered footing to supporting our relational harmony and fostering a couple-centered footing.

Furthermore, as I became familiar with certain uses of AAVE, I also caught myself occasionally using these uses in contexts outside of my conversations with my husband. To some extent, my occasional uses of AAVE features with other people indicate how these linguistic uses have become integral to my identity as a wife to an African American, reflecting how a linguistic cue of the couple-centered footing in a couple's communication can also support one's self-expression in other contexts. This may serve as evidence that individuals can acquire certain linguistic strategies from

their interpersonal relationships and gradually integrate these language uses into their daily self-expression to maintain their sense of self in relation to others.

While I have argued for the importance of balancing between a couple-centered footing and the individual-centered footing in couple's conversations, it should be noted that I am not suggesting these two as the only footings possible in couple's discourse. Depending on the topic or the parties involved in the conversation, couples may also adopt other footings in producing and interpreting utterances. For instance, couples in the interview may refer to each other using a third-person pronoun when sharing their stories or views with the researcher, making the interviewer the direct recipient or 'addressee' and their partner the listener or 'auditor' in their utterances (see Bell (1984) for more discussions on the different persons and roles in a speech situation).

In Example 24, when Joy and Kessie were talking about their dating story, Joy teased Kessie by saying that she "pretended" to be sick so that she could crash at her place. In Joy's utterance, she addressed Kessie using a third-person pronoun. "…*她也是很快就是:就是:假裝感冒啊*'…**she** also very quickly pretended (she) was sick.'" The utterance was produced and designed in a manner that aligned with the perspective of the researcher as an addressee hearing the story for the first time, serving as a direct response to the researcher's interview question. In addition, the teasing utterance also initiated a co-construction of the couple-centered footing with Kessie, indexing their closeness and building rapport with all parties involved. In other words, different footings may operate on different layers or levels. In line with Gordon's (2009) findings of framing in family discourse, Varying footings, like frames, may interact with each other in 'embedding,' 'overlapping,' and 'blending' manners in conversations.

Similar to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) view of the inherent contradiction of 'connectedness-separateness' in romantic relationships, I maintain that the concern of taking a couple-centered and individual-centered footing is central and fundamental in couple's conversation, regardless of the other potential footings or frames that may be involved. This is because the constant tension of tending to mutual relational needs in the relationship or focusing more on one's selfhood and autonomy is often manifested and negotiated through shifting between the couple-centered and individual-centered footings.

As couples navigate the complexities of an intimate relationship, they may maintain intimacy, negotiate differences, and fulfill relational and emotional needs by balancing a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversation. To cultivate a stable, egalitarian, and satisfying relationship, one should be able to express oneself under an individual-centered footing to sustain a sense of selfhood, as well as connect with a partner under a couple-centered footing to strengthen coupledom. Through repetition and 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009), couples may co-construct their communication style or couple-lect and build a repertoire of linguistic cues for relational enhancement in their daily conversations. One can also benefit from their interpersonal interactions with their partner as they expand on their ways of self-expression and grow as an individual in a relationship. In essence, healthy communication in a romantic couple is one where partners can verbally foster a sense of intimacy, security, and fun in the relationship, as well as appreciate and respect each other for their individualities.

# CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This dissertation explores the role of language in enhancing intimacy and building fulfilling relationships in the context of romantic relationships. Taking an interactional sociolinguistics approach, I examine the relational-enhancing strategies and verbal transgressions romantic couples may use as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing in interaction. Based on over 120 hours of conversational data from couples' elicited conversations, interviews and naturally occurring interactions, I explore how the couple-centered footing can be established by couples to enhance relational closeness, mitigate relational-harming situations, and provide emotional support in context. Three conceptual spheres (e.g., the love zone, the safe space, and the playground) emerged as the main sources that shape and are shaped by the linguistic constructions of the couple-centered footing. As couples progress in their relationships, they negotiate and make meaning intertextually of their language use, incorporating linguistic resources into their couple-lect to achieve relational and communicative goals throughout the process. By balancing between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing in conversations, romantic partners can tend to their relational connection while managing a sense of selfhood. With a view to bridging the fields of sociolinguistics and relationship science, the current research provides valuable insights into the specific ways couples can use language to nurture intimacy and loving connection in romantic relationships.

In the following sections, I summarize the major findings of this research in response to my research questions, discuss the significance and implications of the study, and present possible directions for future research.

## 6.1 Summary of Major Findings

To further understand the concept of 'couple-centered footing' (Kendall, 2006) and how it contributes to romantic couples' maintenance and enhancement of intimacy in daily interaction, I examine the relational-enhancing strategies that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing in context. Taking concepts from Goffman's definition of 'footing' (1981), I define a couple-centered footing as the ways romantic partners align with each other to prioritize the harmony of the relationship and foster intimacy when producing and interpreting their utterances. On the other hand, I define an individual-centered footing as aligning with one's own thoughts, beliefs, and needs as well as prioritizing self-expression and individuality in managing one's utterances. The following research questions guided my analyses in this study:

1. **What are the relational-enhancing strategies that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing?**

Based on the analyses of my data from elicited conversations, couples' interviews and naturally occurring interactions, terms of endearment and conversational humor are the two strategies most widely used by couples in my data to establish a couple-centered footing. To reveal the complexities in the usages of these strategies, I discuss them in subtypes. For terms of endearment, couples may adopt spousal titles (e.g., husband and wife), affectionate nicknames (e.g., babe, honey, dear, sweetie), name-related nicknames (e.g., diminutives of first name and family nicknames), and pejorative nicknames (e.g., booger, chubby, poopy, stinky) in their daily interactions to express affection, provide emotional support, and achieve relational goals. In addition, the use of conversational humor is presented in the forms of banter, comical

hypothetical, and teasing. The co-construction of conversational humor provides mutual entertainment and supports relational closeness in couples' interactions. When used reciprocally, these relational-enhancing strategies co-construct a couple-centered footing for the couple to prioritize relational harmony in conversations.

While the research focuses on examining the use of terms of endearment and conversational humor in couple's discourse, couples may also adopt other linguistic strategies into their couple-lect through 'intertextuality' (Gordon, 2009) to achieve relational goals. In naturally occurring data, other strategies that couples may use for relational-enhancing purposes, such as code-switching and 'ventriloquizing' (Tannen, 2003, 2004), are also identified. This suggests that couples may cultivate their own conversational patterns based on their relational and interactional experiences, and incorporate different expressions, codes, or signs into their couple-lect as relational-enhancing strategies to foster intimacy.

**2. What are the verbal transgressions that can serve as linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing?**

Verbal transgressions, language uses typically evaluated as 'improper' (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) and taboo, are found to serve relational-enhancing purposes in the conversations of couples in my data. Couples may adopt swearing, sex-related talk, and baby talk as relational-enhancing strategies to establish a couple-centered footing in their daily interactions. As these strategies may not be readily recognized and accepted as serving relational-enhancing purposes, a couple may have to draw more conceptual resources and engage in 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009) before the uses can be incorporated into their couple-lect. The inherent taboo nature and risks in using verbal transgressions may perhaps index a high level of trust, connection, and relational quality between romantic partners.

When romantic partners commit verbal transgression together, they establish a couple-centered footing that provides the intimacy and safety required for strengthening relational closeness and coupledom.

**3. What conceptual resources or spaces are shaped and utilized in context to support utterances within a couple-centered footing?**

Three conceptual spheres emerged from couples' use of relational-enhancing strategies and verbal transgressions in contexts: the love zone, the safe space, and the playground. These conceptual spheres operate within the couple-centered footing and provide the resources and knowledge for couples to produce and interpret their utterances in a couple-centered conversation. The love zone promotes the expression of affection and commitment between romantic partners. The safe space encourages expressions of thoughts and feelings and transgressions of social norms without fearing judgment from a partner. The playground allows romantic partners to engage in verbal play for mutual enjoyment. Each of these conceptual spheres contains the psychological motivations, conceptual resources, and shared relational expectations of how romantic partners should align with each other when managing their conversations in a couple-centered footing. While relational-enhancing strategies draw resources from different conceptual spheres to establish a couple-centered footing, they also shape the conceptual spheres through intertextual uses in context.

**4. How do the shifts between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing facilitate the enhancement of intimacy and sustainment of individuality in couples' conversations?**

From the analyses of two extended conversations of romantic partners engaging in potentially relational-harming exchanges, I illustrate the importance of maintaining a

balance between communicating in a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing. In Example 42 in Chapter 5, the failure to co-construct a couple-centered footing when expressing varying views in individual-centered footings for several turns can lead to escalation and conversation breakdown. To remedy the potential relational harm, a couple would have to produce utterances with apparent relational-enhancing cues to co-construct a couple-centered footing and relationally reconnect. Example 43 demonstrates how balancing between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered in conversations can support the negotiation of varying views and transform potentially relational-harming situations into ones for relational enhancement. The analyses of these examples suggest that healthy communication in an egalitarian relationship may require keeping a balance between verbally maintaining relational closeness and expressing one's selfhood. As aligning with a partner and prioritizing relational harmony in a couple-centered footing is important to couple's communication, so is expressing one's individuality and maintaining autonomy in an individual-centered footing.

The answers to these questions provide rich insights for the existing literature on footing and interactional sociolinguistics, language and intimacy, and relationship science. By studying how couples express affection, commit verbal transgression, and engage in verbal play to establish a couple-centered conversation, the study reveals the ways language may support the maintenance of intimacy in the context of romantic relationships. Through the process of 'intertextual meaning-making' (Gordon, 2009), couples may create couple-lect or communicative styles unique to their interactions and relational history. The findings of this study have several theoretical and practical implications for the fields of sociolinguistics, family discourse, relationship science, and gender equity education.

## 6.2 Significance and Implication of this Study

The current study contributes to the existing bodies of literature in sociolinguistics, family discourse, and relationship science. The research design and the findings enrich our understanding of how linguistic strategies may serve relational-enhancing purposes in the context of romantic relationships. The interdisciplinary nature of the research also helps bridge the fields of linguistics and psychology by providing a deeper look into how relational closeness and coupledom can be strengthened in couple's communication. Furthermore, the research's findings have practical implications for marriage and family counseling and gender equity education. By sharing my research results, it is my goal to help couples and individuals cultivate a fulfilling life through building healthy and rewarding relationships.

I begin by discussing the current study's contributions to the academic fields of sociolinguistics, family discourse, and relationship science. First, the data collection method of the current research has implications for the methodology of sociolinguistic studies aiming to investigate communicative behaviors that are more private and sensitive in nature. Using combined sources of elicited conversation data, couple's interviews, and naturally occurring interactions, my research offers structured and comparable data as well as an unfiltered and authentic look into couples' lives. Due to the delicate and private nature of couple's discourse, its linguistic data may be more difficult to acquire than other discourses. Researchers in the past often turned to fiction or published materials to study couples' conversations (e.g., Alberts, 1986; Channell 1997; del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006). My study demonstrated that data can be collected from different sources to complement each other and allow for a more comprehensive look into private interpersonal communication.

Next, my approach to studying a couple-centered footing provides a new theoretical concept—the conceptual sphere—to footing and framing research. My work is the first to discuss more than just the linguistic constructions and the functions of the footings but also identifies the potential "conceptual spheres" operating within the footing to support the production and interpretation of couple's utterances. Previous works on footing and framing sometimes confound footing shifts as a kind of "role shift." This can be seen from Kendall's (2006) discussion of the linguistic constructions of a 'couple-centered footing.' According to Kendall's (2006) discussion, a couple-centered footing is established when a couple linguistically foregrounds their 'non-parental social relations' (p. 424). Such an understanding of footing may be overly simple and cannot account for the specific relational and communicative goals the speaker intends to achieve by shifting footings. In my study, I propose the notion of the conceptual sphere to highlight the psychological motivation behind footing shifts. This theoretical concept can allow researchers to explore deeper into how interlocutors may make meaning and invoke different footings to fulfill a variety of relational, emotional, and communicative goals in interaction.

Third, my view of a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing being two ends of a continuum suggests that footing shifts may not be a clearcut linguistic phenomenon. Couples may adopt varying numbers or types of linguistic cues to establish a couple-centered footing. Different linguistic strategies may also hold varying relational-enhancing powers for couples depending on their relational or intertextual experiences. Considering the shifts between footings as moving closer to one end of a continuum than the other can support the discussion on how couples may manage closeness while maintaining a sense of self. In other words, one does not lose oneself when taking a couple-centered footing, nor does one forget about their partner

when expressing themselves in an individual-centered footing. This take on footing shifts can perhaps allow for further discussions on how linguistic cues for one footing may carry over to another as interlocutors negotiate meanings in contexts.

Fourth, the findings of the current research contribute to the study of family discourse. To my knowledge, my work is the first to explore the couple-centered footing in the context of romantic relationships. While previous interactional sociolinguistic studies proposed the term (Kendall, 2006) and related concept (Gordon, 2009) of the 'couple-centered footing,' they approached it more as a "byproduct" of discussing other family-oriented footing or framing members may take in a family setting. The linguistic construction of this footing is reduced to the absence of 'child-centered kinship terms' (Kendall, 2006) or other child-centered cues. As a couple is a basic unit for forming a family, the quality of the relationship maintained and revealed in their language use is crucial to understanding family dynamics and its stability. My findings may allow for a more comprehensive look into family discourse and how a couple-centered footing, like 'a child-centered footing' (Kendall, 2006), may also contribute to creating family solidarity.

Lastly, the current study enriches the findings of relationship science by providing the linguistic basis for what "positive" and "effective" communication may be in couple's communication. As discussed before, research following a psychology tradition often examines couple's communication by studying categorizations of 'positive' or 'negative' communicative behaviors and their correlation with relational satisfaction (e.g., Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006; Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gill et al., 1999; Meeks et al., 1998; Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007; Williamson et al., 2012). Though these works offer us confirmation of the importance of having "positive" and "effective" communication in a fulfilling relationship, how such communication can be achieved is often left unexplored. My findings can contribute to psychology

research on couple's communication and offer evidence from a linguistic perspective as to how "positive" and "effective" communicative behaviors may be manifested in language use.

In addition to the theoretical contribution discussed so far, the current research provides practical implications to the fields of marriage and family counseling and gender equity education. For marriage counseling professionals and romantic couples seeking to improve couple's communication skills, the current research offers valuable insights into the linguistic measures one may take to achieve relational goals in couple's conversations. While good communication skills alone may not resolve all relationship problems, having the knowledge and tools to regularly check in relationally and emotionally can help couples build a solid foundation to better weather the challenges they may face. The relational-enhancing strategies can be taught as ways couples may communicate intimacy and maintain a sense of coupledom in their daily interactions. In addition, the relational-enhancing aspect of verbal transgressions can be pointed out to expand couples' understanding of the possible ways to convey trust, affection, and solidarity. The conceptual spheres of the love zone, the safe space, and the playground can also be devised into an informative guide or training material to help couples learn the concepts behind creating relational-enhancing conversational styles or couple-lect unique to their relationships. Couples may further benefit from the idea of maintaining a balance between communicating in a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing. By learning the ways to shift between the two footings in their daily conversations, egalitarian couples may have more linguistic tools to maintain relational closeness while sustaining individuality.

The findings of my work can also contribute to lesson designs in gender equity education. As the goal of gender equity education is to encourage respect for gender

diversity, eliminate gender discrimination, and support gender equality through education, concepts can be drawn from the current research to teach people ways to establish personal boundaries and engage in healthy interpersonal interactions, especially in the contexts of romantic relationships. By refraining from using relational-enhancing strategies to co-construct a couple-centered footing with others prematurely, one can avoid sending out wrong signals or inviting unwanted affection. One can also learn how certain linguistic strategies, such as verbal transgressions, may make one feel uncomfortable or offended when used in the beginning stage of a relationship. To prevent possible offense or relational harm, one can choose the more readily established or "conventional" types of relational-enhancing strategies to promote closeness and bond with a potential love interest. My analyses on the use of baby talk of men and women can be further used to change people's stereotypes about this register being 'feminine' in nature (Yueh, 2017). This can allow for a more gender-neutral and positive evaluation of using this register for relational enhancement in interpersonal contexts.

In sum, the findings of the current research have led to a deeper understanding of the ways language may contribute to fostering intimacy and building a healthy, egalitarian, and fulfilling relationship. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, my study provides valuable insights for sociolinguists, marriage counselors, and gender equity educators to carry out more work to help people connect better relationally and emotionally through the use of language.

## 6.3 Directions for Future Research

The current study laid the groundwork for future explorations of the relationships between language, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships. While my analyses

present fruitful findings to enrich the fields of sociolinguistics, couples' discourse, and relationship science, more needs to be done to fully capture the complex role language plays in nurturing intimacy and healthy interpersonal relationships. The following suggestions offer potential research directions for future research.

First, the concepts of individual-centered footing can be further explored. The notion of an individual-centered footing arose during my exploration of the couple-centered footing. When one takes an individual-centered footing, they align with their own thoughts, beliefs, and needs as well as prioritize self-expression and individuality in managing their utterances. Though the current research is the first to propose the idea of an individual-centered footing, my discussions are limited to its role in contrast to a couple-centered footing. Future works can collect more linguistic data from a person's daily language uses to investigate the linguistic construction, conceptual spheres, and communicative goals of an individual-centered footing. Such research may be helpful in revealing how personal and emotional boundaries may be set through language use. The understanding of an individual-centered footing can also contribute to the investigation of interpersonal communication. As one is always navigating the tensions of 'connectedness–separateness' in interpersonal relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), knowing how one verbally aligns with one's selfhood may allow researchers to gain a more comprehensive look into the ways an individual-centered footing may affect interpersonal communication.

Next, more work can be done to explore the different footings and frames invovled in couple's discourse. While the current research identified the couple-centered footing and the individual-centered footing as central and fundamental to navigating couple's daily interaction and relational contradictions, there may also be other footings and frames at work in couple's conversations depending on the topics and the parties involved. As demonstrated in Gordon's (2009) study, the 'embedding,'

‘overlapping,’ and ‘blending’ of frames in conversations can contribute to how families create meaning and ‘familyness.’ Future research can examine how varying footings and frames, alongside the couple-centered footing and the individual-centered footing, contribute to couple’s everyday maintenance of relational harmony.

Third, the notion of maintaining a balance between a couple-centered footing and an individual-centered footing can be expanded to explore other types of dyadic communication, such as parent-child relationships or friendships. In family discourse, family members constantly negotiate footings and frames to fulfill varying needs (Kendall, 2006). In parent-child relationships, I suspect that the ways or extent to which one should linguistically manage the competing needs for relational connection and personal autonomy in the family may shift as a child grows older and becomes a teen. As teenagers are transitioning into young adulthood, their interactions with parents may have a great impact on their identity formation (Arnett, 1997). Profound insights can be gained from observing how teenagers and their parents may verbally balance between a “couple-centered footing” and an “individual-centered footing” to maintain closeness and the need for independence in their daily interactions.

Fourth, studies can be conducted to examine the nonverbal or gestural strategies that may be used to establish a couple-centered footing. Past research on the nonverbal expressions of affection identified the different ways one may express fondness, desire, and emotions using physical cues. For instance, the outstretched arms could be an invitation for a hug and initiation of intimacy (Goodwin, 2021), a romantic kiss could be an admission to arousal and further physical interaction (Wlodarski & Dunbar, 2013), and an affective touch could signal compassion and assist in emotion regulation when one is in distress (Cekaite, 2020). These nonverbal practices, whether accompanied by verbal cues or not, have much potential to communicate relational-enhancing meanings in a romantic setting. Works can be done

to examine how nonverbal relational-enhancing strategies, such as a kiss or hug, can also support the expression of love, safety to transgress, and engagement in play in the context of intimate relationships.

Finally, interdisciplinary research can be conducted to examine the relationship between the frequency of couple-centered conversations and relational satisfaction over time. When asked to rate their relationships, the couples in my study had an average of 8.71 out of 10 satisfaction ratings at the time of their interview. This perhaps suggests that my research is based on the conversations of couples that were interacting and communicating relatively well in their relationship. Based on the findings of my research, it may be hypothesized that couples experiencing relational issues and feeling less satisfied in the relationship are less likely to initiate or co-construct a couple-centered footing in conversations. Such findings may help confirm the essential roles language and communication play in nurturing intimacy and satisfying relationships.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Research Invitation

### RESEARCH INVITATION FOR COUPLES

### The Story of Us:

### Couple's Narrative and Communicative Behavior

Hi, my name is Anita Yen Chiang (she/her pronouns). I am a linguistics Ph.D. student from Taiwan, and I am currently a visiting student researcher affiliated with the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. From my past relationship experiences as well as my research on romantic discourse and couple's communication, I realized just how little we know about the communicative behaviors of lovers. It is thus my goal to research more on the ways people establish relationships and intimacy through communication in the hope of finding the secrets to building better relationships.

As a visiting student researcher at UC Berkeley, I am inviting couples from the area to participate in an interview for my comparative study on couple's narrative.

**Who can participate?** Couples of all ages, races, genders, and sexualities are welcomed. However, since the main objective of this research is to make cross-cultural comparison between Taiwanese and US couples, at least one of you (either you or your partner) has to be *born and raised in the US*.

**What will happen?** Both you and your partner will be in the interview together for about 70 to 80 minutes. You will be asked to answer basic questions about your relationships and play fun games with your partner during the process. The interview will be conducted in English and will be recorded for research purposes. Research records and video recordings will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to these records.

**When and where?** We can have the interview at a time and place that is convenient to you and your partner (Please go on Doodle to check my availability and pick a time slot that works for both you and your partner: https://doodle.com/meetme/qc/JMCO0fUH4I). If you do not have any special preferences, the interview will take place in a conference room at 1995 University Avenue, Berkeley.

**What can you gain?** 1) Learn something new and interesting about your partner and relationship; 2) Experience unique and fun dating activities with your partner; 3) Contribute to the improvement of our scientific and societal knowledge of romantic relationships; 4) Gain helpful tips and tricks on how to better communicate with your partner after the interview. (If you prefer a short Mandarin Chinese learning/practicing session or want to learn more about Taiwan and Taiwanese dating culture, we can do that too). *Disclaimer: I am a linguistics researcher, not a licensed therapist. If you need further help with your relationship, please speak to a professional.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me via email or phone. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Anita Yen Chiang

Visiting Student Researcher

Institute of East Asian Studies

# 伴侶訪談研究邀請

## 我們的故事：伴侶言談與溝通行為研究

您好，我是師大英語系 (語言學組) 博士生江妍，目前正在執行一個跨文化伴侶溝通的研究計畫，旨在探索美國與臺灣情侶的言談和溝通行為，以及親密關係建立和溝通之間的關聯及重要性。過去我在美國加州柏克萊大學擔任訪問研究員時，便邀請了多對美國情侶參與我的研究訪談，如今我也誠摯地邀請臺灣情侶們參與我的研究，與我分享您們的感情故事。

**誰可以參與這個訪談？**歡迎任何年紀、性別、性向的臺灣情侶來參與我的研究。由於本研究為臺美跨文化比較研究，因此，至少其中一位伴侶 (您或是您的伴侶) 必須在台灣出生長大。

**受訪者要做些什麼？**您和您的伴侶兩人將參與約莫 80 – 90 分鐘的訪談，過程中我將會問一些關於您們感情的基本問題，也會邀請您和您的伴侶玩兩個互動小遊戲，訪談會以中文進行，並因研究需求，將全程錄影錄音，所有相關影音及書面檔案將視同機密處理，只有相關研究人員可以取得。

**訪談時間與地點？**訪談時間與地點以您和您伴侶方便為主，除了每週日之外，其他時間皆可和研究員預約訪談時間；如果您沒有特別偏好的地點，訪談將於臺師大雲和街教學大樓 (臺北市大安區雲和街 1 號) 二樓的空教室進行。

**有什麼好處？**1) 您將可以更深入地了解您的伴侶和您們的親密關係；2) 和您的伴侶一起經歷有趣且獨特的約會活動；3) 為親密關係研究貢獻一份心力，造福更多有情人；4) 訪談結束後，可向研究員討教有效的伴侶溝通法及戀愛相處之道。*聲明：我是語言學研究員，並非有執照的諮商師，如果您有更多親密關係方面的困擾，請洽專業心理治療師。

如果您和伴侶有意願參與我的訪談研究，或是有任何關於研究的其他問題，都歡迎您以電話或電子郵件方式與我聯繫。

非常感謝您，期待有機會與您相遇！

江妍

臺師大英語系 (語言學組) 博士生

# Appendix 2: Basic and Relationship Information of Couples Participated in the Interview

## American Couples

| No. | Together for____ | Pseudo-nym | Age | Sex | Sexual Orientation | Nationality/Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 Years+ Never married | Laura | 22 | Female | Heterosexual | Filipino American/Asian |
| | | Kevin | 26 | Male | Heterosexual | White American |
| 2 | 4 Months Never married | Nora | 22 | Female | Bisexual | Ukrainian American/White |
| | | Lisa | 23 | Female | Homosexual | Chinese American/White |
| 3 | 7 Months Never married | Paul | 24 | Male | Homosexual | Hispanic American/ Latino & White |
| | | Barnie | 23 | Male | Queer | White American |
| 4 | 1.5 Years+ Never married | Mandy | 23 | Female | Pansexual | Japanese American/Asian |
| | | Raven | 39 | Female/ Genderqueer | Homosexual | Korean American/Asian |
| 5 | 7 Months Never married | Zara | 20 | Female | Homosexual | White American |
| | | Carley | 21 | Female | Homosexual | White American |
| 6 | 10 Years Never married | Brandon | 34 | Male | Heterosexual | White American |
| | | Cindy | 29 | Female | Bisexual | White American |

# Taiwanese Couples

| No. | Together for___ | Pseudo-nym | Age | Sex | Sexual Orientation | Nationality/Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 Year+ Never married | Jerry | 23 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Lynn | 22 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| 2 | 9 Years+ 2019 Married | Emily | 31 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Harry | 29 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 3 | 10 Months+ Never married | Ivy | 24 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Rory | 23 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 4 | 12 Years+ 2015 Married | Maya | 31 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Zach | 30 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 5 | 2.5 Years Never married | Chloe | 24 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Ray | 26 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 6 | 6 Months+ Never married | Henry | 26 | Homosexual | Male | Taiwan/American/Asian |
| | | Aaron | 21 | Homosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 7 | 1 Year+ Never married | Jasper | 28 | Homosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Calvin | 29 | Bisexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| 8 | 6 Years+ Never married | Joy | 34 | Bisexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Kessie | 30 | Bisexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| 9 | 1 Year+ Never married | Theo | 20 | Heterosexual | Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Sharon | 24 | Heterosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| 10 | 11 Months+ Never married | Taylor | 30 | Homosexual | Female/Male | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Jade | 22 | Homosexual | Female/ Genderqueer | Taiwan/Asian |
| 11 | 2 Years+ Never married | Sasha | 26 | Homosexual | Female | Taiwan/Asian |
| | | Robin | 30 | Homosexual | Female/Male | Taiwan/Asian |

# Appendix 3: Questions Used in 20 Questions Game

## 20 Questions Game

Each of you should take turns picking a card out of the deck to ask your partner the question that's written on the card. If your partner answers correctly (you be the judge), he or she receives the number of points indicated for that question, and you receive one point. If your partner answers incorrectly, neither of you receives any points. The same rules apply when you answer. The winner is the person with the higher score after you've both answered **all** the questions.

1. What was I wearing when we first met? (2)
2. Name one of my hobbies. (3)
3. What stress am I facing right now? (4)
4. What makes me feel most competent? (4)
5. What turns me on sexually? (3)
6. What is my favorite way to spend an evening? (2)
7. What personal improvements do I want to make in my life? (4)
8. What kind of present would I like best? (2)
9. What is one of my favorite ways to be soothed? (4)
10. Who is my greatest source of support (other than you)? (3)
11. Name one of my major rivals or "enemies." (3)
12. What would I consider my ideal job? (4)
13. What do I fear the most? (4)
14. What is my favorite holiday? (2)
15. What kinds of books do I most like to read? (3)
16. Name one of my concerns or worries. (4)
17. What was my most embarrassing moment? (3)
18. What was my worst childhood experience? (3)
19. What are two of my aspirations, hopes, wishes? (4)
20. Do I have a secret ambition? What is it? (4)

# 你問我答

您們將輪流抽出問題卡，並問您的伴侶卡片上的問題，如果您的伴侶答對了（由您決定），您的伴侶將獲得題目後方列的分數，您也會獲得一分；如果您的伴侶答錯了，您們兩人都不會獲得分數。當卡牌**全部**回答完畢後，最高分的人獲勝。

1. 第一次見面的時候我穿了什麼？(2)
2. 請說出一個我的嗜好。(3)
3. 現在有什麼讓我感到壓力？ (4)
4. 我擅長什麼？(4)
5. 什麼能夠激起我的性慾？(3)
6. 我最喜歡用什麼方式度過午後時光？(2)
7. 我最想要讓自己在哪方面變得更好？(4)
8. 我最喜歡什麼樣的禮物？(2)
9. 請說出一個能有效安撫我的方式？(4)
10. 誰是我最大的支柱？(3)
11. 請說出一個我主要的競爭對手或「假想敵」?(3)
12. 我認為的理想工作是什麼？(4)
13. 什麼最令我感到恐懼？(4)
14. 我最喜歡的節日是什麼？(2)
15. 我喜歡讀什麼類型的書？(3)
16. 請說出一個我最近在煩惱的事。(4)
17. 請說出我發生過最糗的事。(3)
18. 我最糟糕的童年經歷是什麼？(3)
19. 請說出兩個我的願望或抱負。(4)
20. 我有沒有什麼藏在心裡的志向呢？請問是什麼？(4)

# Appendix 4: Prompt for Desert Island Survival Game

## Desert Island Survival Game

Imagine that your cruise ship just sank in the Caribbean, and you awaken to find yourselves on a tropical desert island. The crew and other guests are nowhere in sight – the two of you are the only survivors. One of you is injured. You have no idea where you are. You think there is some chance that people know of the ship's distress, but you are not sure, a storm appears to be on the way. You decide that you need to prepare to survive on this island for some time and also to make sure you will be spotted by a rescue party. There is a bunch of stuff from the ship on the beach that could help you, but you can only carry **10 items**.

### ***Your Mission***

**Step 1:** Each of you mark down on this piece of paper what you consider the **10 most important items** to keep from the inventory list below, based on your survival plan. Then **rank-order these items** based on their importance to you. Give the most crucial item a 1, the next most crucial a 2, and so on. There are no right or wrong answers.

**Step 2:** Share your list with your partner. Together come up **with a consensus list of items and their ranks**.

### ***Ship's Inventory***

___ 2 changes of clothing
___ AM-FM & short-wave radio receiver
___ 10 gallons of water
___ Pots and pans
___ Matches
___ Shovel
___ Backpack
___ Toilet paper
___ 2 tents
___ 2 sleeping bags
___ Knife
___ Small life raft, with sail
___ Sun block lotion
___ Cook stove and lantern
___ Long rope
___ 2 walkie-talkie sender-receiver units
___ Freeze-dried food for 7 days
___ A picture of loved ones
___ 1/5 bottle of whiskey
___ Flares
___ Compass
___ Regional aerial maps
___ Gun with six bullets
___ 50 packages of condoms
___ First-aid kit with penicillin
___ Oxygen tanks
___ Coffee beans
___ A book about survival skills
___ 20,000 dollars
___ 2 fishing hooks

# 荒島求生

想像您所搭乘的郵輪在加勒比海地區沉沒了，您醒來發現自己已在一個熱帶荒島上，除了您和您的伴侶外，沒有發現其他船員和旅客的蹤影，您們似乎為僅存的生還者，而且其中一人還受傷了，您們不知道自己身在何處，可能有人已經知道郵輪的遭遇，但是也無法確定，暴風圈似乎正在逼近您們所在的島嶼。您們決定先暫時試著在島上生存下去，同時也確保自己能有機會被搜救隊發現，船艙中有一些物品也被沖到島嶼上，您們決定帶走一些來幫助自己，但是只能夠帶走**10 樣物品**。

## ***您的任務***

**步驟一：**您將從以下物品清單中，標選出 **10 樣**您認為最能夠幫助您的物品，並**依照重要順序排列**，1 為最重要的物品，2 為次重要的物品，依此類推，答案沒有對錯。

**步驟二：**將您挑選出的物品清單與您的伴侶分享，並**討論出一個兩人都能接受的清單及10 樣物品的排序**。

## ***船艙物品清單***

___ 兩套盥洗衣物
___ AM-FM & 短波電台接收器
___ 十加侖的水
___ 湯鍋和平底鍋數個
___ 火柴數根
___ 鏟子
___ 背包
___ 捲筒衛生紙
___ 兩個帳篷
___ 兩個睡袋
___ 刀子
___ 小的逃生筏與帆
___ 防曬乳液
___ 烹調用火爐和油燈
___ 繩子
___ 兩個無線對講機
___ 七天份的乾糧
___ 一張親人的照片
___ 五分之一瓶威士忌
___ 閃光信號彈數個
___ 指南針
___ 區域航空地圖
___ 槍和六顆子彈
___ 五十個保險套
___ 急救箱與青黴素
___ 氧氣瓶數個
___ 咖啡豆
___ 野外求生書
___ 兩萬元美金
___ 兩個魚鉤

# Appendix 5: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

## Pre-interview Questionnaire

Thank you so much for participating in this research. Your answers in this brief survey will help me better prepare interview questions for you. Your responses will only be used for research purposes, and the information will not be disclosed to your partner during the interview without your permission. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me now or contact me via phone or email.

1. Your email address _____

2. How old are you? _____ years old

3. What is your nationality _____

4. What do you consider your racial/ethnic identity? (Check all that apply)

☐ American Indian/Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black/African American

☐ White

☐ Hispanic/Latino

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ Other: _____

5. What is your sex assigned at birth?

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other: _____

6. To which gender identity do you most identify?

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Genderqueer

☐ Transgender Man

☐ Transgender Woman

☐ Other: _____

7. What is your sexual orientation?

☐ Bisexual

☐ Heterosexual

☐ Homosexual

☐ Other: _____

8. How many relationships have you had in the past (not counting the one you are currently in)? _____

9. What is your marital status?

☐ Never married

☐ Married (to the partner that will participate in this interview with you)

☐ Divorced (from a previous partner)

10. In general, how would you rate your current relationship?

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Least satisfied | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | Most Satisfied |

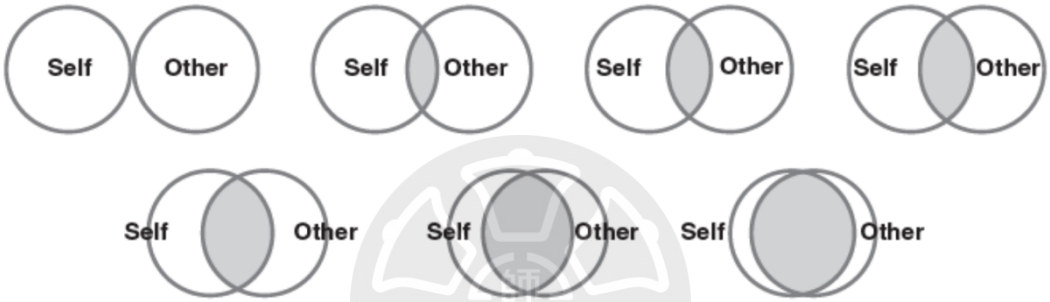
11. How would you rate your current partner?

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Worst Partner | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | Best Partner |

12. How would you rate yourself as a partner?

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Worst Partner | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | Best Partner |

13. How close to your partner do you feel? Please circle the picture below that best describes your current relationship.



# 問卷調查

非常感謝您參與我的研究，您在問卷中的答案將幫助我準備合適的訪談問題，使我們的訪談進行得更加順利。您的答案僅供研究使用，研究人員也不會在面談當中未經您的同意將答案告知您的伴侶，請放心作答。如果您有任何問題或疑慮，請直接和研究人員反應，或是以手機、郵件方式與我聯絡，謝謝！

1. 您的電子信箱 _____

2. 年齡 _____ 歲

3. 您的國籍是 _____

4. 您的生理性別為？

☐ 女性

☐ 男性

☐ 其他: _____

5. 您認為您屬於哪一個性別？

☐ 女性

☐ 男性

☐ 性別酷兒

☐ 跨性別男性

☐ 跨性別女性

☐ 其他: _____

6. 您的性傾向為？

☐ 雙性戀

☐ 異性戀

☐ 同性戀

☐ 其他: _____

7. 您之前有過幾段感情經歷 (不包含現在這段)？_____

8. 您的婚姻狀態為何？

☐ 從未結婚

☐ 已婚

☐ 離婚

☐ 其他: _____

9. 概略來說，您會給您目前這段親密關係幾分？

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 最不滿意 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | 最滿意 |

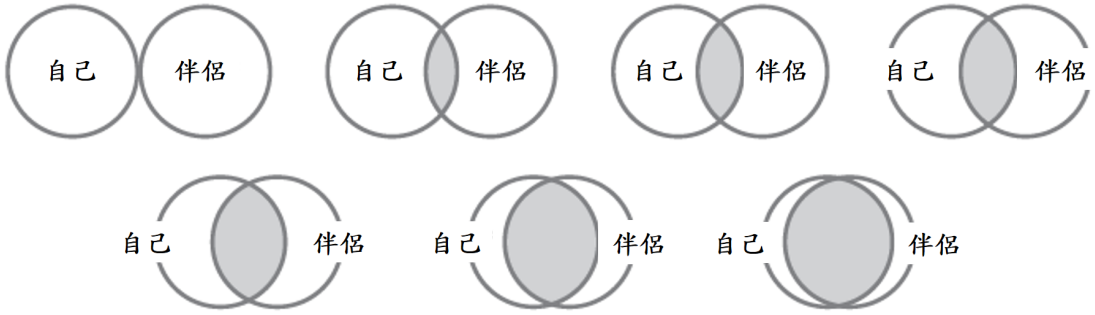
10. 您會給您目前的伴侶幾分？

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 最糟伴侶 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | 最好伴侶 |

11. 您會給您自己幾分？

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 最糟伴侶 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | 最好伴侶 |

12. 您感覺自己和伴侶有多親近？請圈選出最足以描述您們當下關係的圖。



# Appendix 6: Interview Questions

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

*TURN ON THE RECORDING DEVICE*

Thanks for agreeing to be in my study. I am going to ask you some questions about your relationship. If there is any question you do not want to answer, just let me know. No big deal; we will go on to the next question. You will also get to play two games with your partner.

***Relationship information***

1. Tell me your story, as detailed as possible.
    a. How did you meet?
    b. What was your first impression of your partner?
    c. What would you say is the turning point of your relationship? (friends → lovers)
    d. How long have you been together?
    e. How does your relationship evolve or change over the years?
    f. Who says I love you first?
2. Have you met each other's family?
    a. If yes, tell me about the experience.
    b. Does your family approve of your partner?
    c. If no, do you plan on meeting each other's family? When?
    d. How do you imagine it to go?

***Partner information***

1. Can you tell me what your partner is like in your eyes?
2. What did you find attractive in your partner when you first met? (Has it changed over time? What about now?)
3. What are some of your favorite qualities of your partner?
4. What are some of your partner's quirks?
5. What are some things you think your partner can improve on?
6. If you have to pick 5 adjectives to describe your partner, what would they be?

***Daily Interaction***

1. What would a typical week look like for you two?
2. How often do you talk to or see each other?
3. What's the most common way of communication for the two of you? (text? phone call? Email?
4. What is something your partner does or says from time to time that makes you happy or feel loved and appreciated?
5. In what ways does your partner demonstrate love for you?
6. What is the most romantic thing you have ever done for each other?
7. In disagreements, does one of you usually give in? Tell me what would usually happen.
8. What do you usually have arguments about?
9. How is this relationship different than those that have not worked out?
10. What specific things do you plan to do to stay in love and keep the romance?

***Relationship Evaluation***

1. What do you think is the strength of your relationship?
2. What do you think is the weakness of your relationship?
3. Compared to other couples you know, what is the sort of dynamics you guys have as a couple?

***Others***

1. If you can say something nice to your partner right now to make them feel appreciated, what would it be?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your relationship?
3. Do you have any questions for me?

Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with me for the study!

# 訪談指南

*開啟錄影錄音設備*

感謝你們參加我的研究，接下來我會問你們一些關於你們的感情的問題，如果有任何問題你們不想回答，只要跟我說就可以，我們可以跳到下一題。

***關係資訊***

1. 告訴我你們的故事，越詳細越好。
    a. 你們怎麼認識的？
    b. 你們對彼此的第一印象是什麼？
    c. 你們關係的轉折點是什麼？是從什麼時候開始從朋友變成戀人？
    d. 你們在一起多久了？
    e. 從在一起到現在，你們的感情有經歷過什麼階段性的改變嗎？例如，剛開始跟現在的相處有沒有什麼不同？
    f. 是誰先說「我愛你」的？還記得當時的情景是什麼嗎？
2. 你們見過彼此的家人了嗎？
    a. 你還記得發生什麼事了嗎？
    b. 你的家人喜歡你的伴侶嗎？
    c. 如果還沒有，你們有計畫要見彼此的家人嗎？什麼時候？
    d. 你們覺得到時見面的情景會是怎樣的？

***伴侶資訊***

1. 請告訴我你的伴侶在你眼中是什麼樣的。
2. 在剛認識你的伴侶時，關於他的什麼是最吸引你的？現在也還是一樣嗎？
3. 你最喜歡你的伴侶的哪些特質？
4. 你的伴侶有沒有什麼怪癖？
5. 你覺得哪些事情是你的伴侶還能再進步或是調整的？
6. 如果你可以挑五個形容詞來描述你的伴侶，會是哪五個詞呢？

***日常互動***

1. 一般來說，你們兩人的一周是怎麼過的？
2. 你們多常見到彼此？
3. 你們最常用的溝通方式是什麼？(訊息？電話？電子郵件？視訊？)
4. 有沒有什麼你的伴侶會做的事情或是說的話，能令你感到開心或被愛、被珍惜。
5. 你的伴侶會用什麼方式表達他對你的愛？

6. 你們為彼此做過最浪漫的事情是什麼？
7. 你們吵架或是有爭執的時候，誰會先低頭？告訴我通常發生的經過是什麼。
8. 你們一般會為什麼事情吵架？
9. 現在這段關係跟過去那些已經結束的感情有什麼不一樣的地方？
10. 你們會做些什麼事情來讓愛情保鮮？維持愛情的溫度？

***關係評估***

1. 你認為你們感情的優勢是什麼？
2. 你認為你們感情的弱點是什麼？
3. 跟其他你們認識的情侶相比，你們是一對什麼樣的情侶？(是搞笑的？照顧人的？還是怎樣的？)

***其他***

1. 請對著彼此說一段能讓對方感覺到被珍惜、被重視、被愛的話。
2. 你們還有想要補充什麼其他關於你們的感情和關係的想法、心得與觀察嗎？
3. 你們有想問我的問題嗎？

感謝你們和我分享你們的故事和想法！

# Appendix 7: Glossary of Transcription Symbols

| | |
|---|---|
| [ | The onset point of the overlap |
| ] | The end point of the overlap |
| = | No pause or break between utterances |
| - | A cut-off or self-interruption, often with a glottal stop |
| wo::rd | A lengthening of the prior sound |
| word | Indicates emphasis |
| WORD | Sounds louder than the surrounding speech |
| °word° | Sounds quieter than the surrounding speech |
| >word< | Increased speaking rate |
| ↑↓ | Obvious shift into high or low pitch |
| .hhh | An inbreath |
| hhh | An outbreath, often due to a laugh |
| . | Falling intonation |
| ? | Rising intonation |
| (h) | Laughter in speech |
| £word£ | Smiley voice or suppressed laughter |
| ~word~ | Shaky voice or crying |
| (.) | A micro pause of no substantial length |
| (0.0) | A timed paused long enough to indicate a time |
| (…) | Omission |
| *((code)) word* | Possible hearings |
| (()) | Analyst's descriptions or comments |

# Appendix 8: Conceptual Spheres Analysis of Relational-Enhancing Strategies

| Examples[17] | Relational-Enhancing Strategies | Conceptual Spheres | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Love Zone | Safe Space | Playground |
| **Example 1: Call me husband** | Spousal Title | v | | v |
| **Example 2: Husband, I love you** | Spousal Title | v | | v |
| **Example 3: Me and my wife don't want kids** | Spousal Title | v | | v |
| **Example 4: Little cutie** | Affectionate Nickname | v | v | |
| **Example 5: You are the snookums after all** | Affectionate Nickname | v | v | |
| **Example 6: Babe…** | Affectionate Nickname | v | v | |
| **Example 7: It's a Yen** | Name-related Nickname | v | v | v |
| **Example 8: J and L** | Name-related Nickname | v | | |
| **Example 9: J is mean!** | Name-related Nickname | v | v | v |
| **Example 10: L is really smacked by the spice!** | Name-related Nickname | v | v | v |
| **Example 11: J you help me** | Name-related Nickname | v | v | v |

[17] Example 15 is interview data presenting a couple's view on the importance of "being funny" and "acting silly" with each other. Example 20 is an excerpt of a couple verbally constructing a hypothetical situation for problem-solving. Both examples were not analyzed to illustrate the uses of relational-enhancing strategies in context. As a result, conceptual sphere analysis is not applicable to these two examples.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Example 12: L added too much salt** | Name-related Nickname | v | v | |
| **Example 13: Stinky Baby** | Pejorative Nickname | v | v | v |
| **Example 14: Little fatty, damn fatty** | Pejorative Nickname | v | v | v |
| **Example 16: Two tigers, will run fast?** | Banter | | | v |
| **Example 17: Go home and suck fingers** | Banter | | v | v |
| **Example 18: Your cat pooped your money away** | Banter | | v | v |
| **Example 19: You think I should take a nap before I go brush my teeth** | Banter | | v | v |
| **Example 21: I'd just sacrifice myself so you don't die of starvation** | Comical Hypothetical | v | v | v |
| **Example 22: Was that apartment haunted?** | Comical Hypothetical | | v | v |
| **Example 23: Tease her to entertain everyone** | Teasing | | v | v |
| **Example 24: She "pretended" to be sick and crashed at my place** | Teasing | v | v | v |
| **Example 25: For me, you ate grass twice** | Teasing | v | v | v |
| **Example 26: Oh God what doesn't?** | Teasing | v | v | v |
| **Example 27: You've gained weight** | Teasing | v | v | v |
| **Example 28: Fuck fuck fuck fuck** | Swearing | | v | v |
| **Example 29: I love you, too. Shit!** | Swearing | v | v | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Example 30: God damn corner** | Swearing | v | v | |
| **Example 31: Fuck your mom!** | Swearing | | v | |
| **Example 32: You like to look at big boobs** | Sex-related Talk | | v | v |
| **Example 33: Nipples and sexually caressing** | Sex-related Talk | v | v | |
| **Example 34: I can't hear you with my dick in your mouth** | Sex-related Talk | v | v | v |
| **Example 35: That's what she said** | Sex-related Talk | v | v | v |
| **Example 36: Color gold, ejaculate, and socioeconomic status** | Sex-related Talk | v | v | v |
| **Example 37: Get angry, reproductive organ, and promotion gadget** | Sex-related Talk | | v | v |
| **Example 38: Bead bead and cry cry** | Baby talk | v | v | v |
| **Example 39: No, don't leave!** | Baby talk | v | v | v |
| **Example 40: J is leaving me** | Baby talk | | v | v |
| **Example 41: Help me clean bird poop** | Baby talk | v | v | v |