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Mark V. Redmond
Iowa State University
Associate Professor Emeritus

mredmond@iastate.edu
515-233-4503
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Abstract

Six forms of content adaptation in everyday interactions were studied: topical adaptation including self-disclosures; explanatory or elaborated adaptation, adaptation by with-holding or avoiding explanation and information; adaptation through examples, comparisons, and analogies; adapting vernacular/language; and personal referencing. Significant content adaptation was found for all items. Adaptation was examined in response to four activators: knowledge of the partner, nature and history of the relationship, partner’s mood and behaviors, and location/circumstances. The nature and history of the relationship was the most significant activator. Additional analysis of several independent variables revealed that the nature of the interaction occurring in private particularly when interacting to facilitate the relationship had a greater impact on content adaptation than relational closeness or knowledge of the partner.
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Content adaptation in this study is *not* the alteration of a message in response to a partner’s comment that occurs as a normal part of the collaborative process of interpersonal interactions (generally reflected by such approaches as: interaction adaptation theory, Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995; accommodation theory, Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; mutuality, Graumann, 1995, and common ground, Clark, 1992); instead, content adaptation involves the strategic altering of information or content in response to the speaker’s conceptualization of the listener, interpretation of the listener’s behaviors, or anticipation of reactions. Responding to the comment “I liked that movie” by saying “I liked it too,” is not considered content adaptation within the scope of this study but rather represents collaboration. Deciding to lie and say you liked the movie when you really didn’t because you believe the other person would be hurt if you expressed dislike for the movie would be content adaptation. Such content adaptation of interpersonal messages is inherent in the transactional conceptualization of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal messages are influenced by people’s knowledge of the relationship and the other (Planalp, 1987), and by the behavior of their partners (Miller & Steinberg, 1975). However, research on adapting messages or content in interpersonal interactions is limited, requiring the use of tangential theory and research on which to build a theoretic foundation.

People make certain assumptions about the knowledge possessed by their interaction partners and they adapt their communication accordingly. These assumptions may be based on specific knowledge about the other person, on socially learned rules, or on egocentric projections. For example, passing a stranger on the sidewalk and saying “Hello” involves a predisposition that the other person understands English. The other person’s reaction provides feedback which
might cause a person to immediately alter the assumptions under which he or she interacts. This process involves the listener taking responsibility for understanding the speaker’s message and seeking what is referred to as common ground (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Graumann, 1989). Common ground research related to referential communication sees the achievement of understanding as a collaborative process (Graumann, 1989). This process involves speakers taking listeners’ perspectives into consideration when creating messages and listeners taking the speakers’ perspectives into consideration when interpreting their messages. In essence, speakers wonder, “What information does this particular listener need that I should add to ensure understanding?” Listeners wonder, “What do I know about the speaker that helps me understand what this message means?”

Spoken messages reflect both egocentric qualities and adaptation. In a study on referential communication and the use of common ground, participants who were prompted to respond quickly to the referential task were more likely to create initial utterances that failed to use common ground than those who were given as much time as they wanted to create an utterance (Horton & Keysar, 1996). In essence, the speakers failed to take into consideration the other person’s point of view and created an egocentric message. Horton and Keysar’s (1996) study did not allow for feedback from the listener; subsequently, the speaker was not cued to any violation or failure to appropriately adapt the message. Their communication task involved participants describing moving objects such as small circles and gray dinosaurs as they appeared on a computer screen to a confederate listener. While allowing a maximum amount of control of variables, such a study seems removed from what occurs in everyday social interactions.

Krauss, Fussell, and Chen (1995) identified two processes that occur in how messages are adapted in an attempt to reach understanding or common ground: the use of prior knowledge of
the listener either specifically or in general, and the use of interactional feedback. In examining the first process, research found that messages created for a person’s own use in identifying nonsense figures (essentially, egocentric messages) worked poorly in communicating to others (Krauss, Fussell, & Chen, 1995). Krauss and Fussell (1991) found that when friends created messages intended for their partners, their partners identified the nonsense figures more successfully than when given someone else’s description (the difference was small but the authors believe this was due to the homogeneity of the student population). The success of prediction was relatively weak (60%) and the messages were rather idiosyncratic which led the authors to infer that message creators miscalculated the common ground between themselves and their friends (Krauss & Fussell, 1991). Again, the task might not reflect what occurs in everyday interpersonal interactions.

Research on referential communication has certain limitations. It has focused heavily on specific task oriented communication such as providing map directions, or describing an object to select from a set of objects (see review by Yule, 1997). The seminal study by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) involved one participant attempting to have another participant identify tangram figures. The number of words needed to achieve success diminished as the number of trials increased. While this study is analogous to what might happen in a task interaction between interactants, its application to less task oriented interactions is unclear. Referential communication research has not examined typical, everyday interpersonal interactions. One reason for this failure is the way that referential communication is defined. Referential communication is sometimes seen only as the creation of messages that include references to map points or objects (Yule, 1997) rather than the conscious use of additional references to enhance the understanding of messages. Yule argues that referential communication is at the
opposite end of the continuum to interpersonal communication (Yule, 1997). This distinction is made because Yule (1997) sees referential communication focusing on the message and interpersonal communication on the person. However, this bipolar conceptualization of interpersonal communication as message or person-oriented fails to recognize the connection between messages and listeners. The underlying theme of the current study is that there are times when individuals are aware of their message and consciously adapt their language to their listeners to achieve their social and personal goals.

Another line of research specifically examines the development of listener-adapted communication, primarily in children. Delia and Clark (1977) had 6, 8, 10, and 12 year old children describe what they would say to accomplish each of six different goals, such as getting a ball that had accidentally gone into a man’s yard (from two pictures, one with a smiling man, the other with a frowning man). Twelve different pictures of people were used as the target for the children’s messages. The children were interviewed, and prompted as necessary to get a response. The response was then rated according to eight levels of adaptation. The highest rated responses were those with a high degree of elaborateness and specification about what the child might say. Older children were found to adapt more to the listener as pictured in the hypothetical situations. This study did not attempt to identify the specific forms of adaptation but tended to focus more on the degree to which the child was sensitive to cues in the pictures about the conditions of the listeners and the necessity to alter requests and explanations. In assessing children’s resistance to compliance gaining strategies, McQuillen (1986) did not find as much elaboration and specification as did Delia and Clark; however, he did find support for the adaptation of resistance strategies to the compliance gaining agents (mother, best friend, or younger child) among 10th graders.
Manusov (1995) drew upon accommodation theory and nonverbal adaptation theory in examining behaviors between romantic partners. Adaptation was essentially defined by the degree of reciprocity of nonverbal behaviors between individuals. One conclusion Manusov reached was that adaptation appeared to be part of everyday interactions. In addition, she observed that adaptation affects and reflects relational status. Likewise, Cappella (1991) viewed adaptation as an important part of interpersonal communication with mutual adaptation as its defining characteristic. However, little attention has been given to determining the ways people adapt or accommodate their “content” in everyday interactions.

**Types of Content Adaptation**

A review of relevant theory and research, and the results of two pilot studies have lead to the identification of six significant ways individuals adapt the content of their messages during interpersonal interactions. The following section provides a description of these six forms of content adaptation that were explored in this study.

*Topical adaptation including self disclosures* occurs when speakers choose topics or issues to discuss because of known interest or shared commonality with their partners (for example, asking about mutual friends, talking about a party they both went to, talking about a class they take together). Choosing topics because of the listener’s familiarity occurred in a study of initial interactions between American dyads and American-International dyads (Chen, 1996). In that study, some evidence was found that those with higher cognitive complexity were more likely to adapt their topic selection to their partner (Chen, 1996). Krauss and Fussell (1991) observed that speakers must assess a listener’s knowledge about a topic in order to produce effective interactions. After coding the interactions between 36 pairs of students (18
acquaintance pairs and 18 friends), Planalp (1993) found that friends’ conversations included discussion of the relationships, activities, possessions, and beliefs associated with their partners.

One particular topic that individuals might choose to discuss is themselves. Sharing information about one’s self in an interpersonal interaction is a form of adaptation when the individual has chosen to disclose in response to who the other person is. Disclosure is often thought of as a personality trait but recently has been viewed as transformational and related to relationship goals (Dindia, 2000, Duck & Pittman, 1994). The decision to disclose information seems to be bounded by the goals of the individual, relational expectations, and social norms of appropriateness. Self-disclosure varies among relationship types (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, Kenny, 1997; Van Lear, 1987) and its presence would be expected to vary in every everyday interactions.

*Explanatory or Elaborated Adaptation* involves providing additional information or detail because of a recognition that the other has certain informational deficiencies. For example, giving background information about someone you are talking about who is unknown to the partner or giving information about a topic about which you know the other is uninformed. Clark and Marshall (1992) discussed the need to provide reference repairs when individuals did not share common ground. One type of repair, horizontal repairs, involves speakers providing more information than they would normally about a particular definitive reference to insure common ground. For example, “Fred was really a jerk today… you know… that guy with red hair that works in receiving.” Planalp (1993) found that sometimes during interactions, acquaintances provided explanation of their connections to other people referred to in the conversation. Elaboration might overlap with self-disclosures as well, when individuals expand on information about themselves when they recognize the other person might not understand a particular
reference; “I know my behavior might seem a little erratic right now, but I’m under a lot of pressure at work right now and my parents are on my case.”

*Adaptation by With-Holding or Avoiding Explanation/Information* includes: not providing explanation because of awareness of what knowledge the receiver already possesses; not providing information to avoid an anticipated undesired reaction from the receiver; and not providing information because of a fear of how the other might potentially use the information (the listener passing on the information to other people). For example, not elaborating on parts of an auto-engine when describing a car problem because the sender is known to be knowledgeable about cars; not telling the other you saw his or her lover with another because he/she would be hurt; and, not telling about your interest in a mutual friend because you know the sender would blab about it to the mutual friend. Altering or avoiding certain information was found to be the most significant dimension of content adaptation in a factor analytic study of 40 items tapping various dimensions of adaptation (Redmond, 1997). Research on topic avoidance has identified four reasons individuals strategically decide not to discuss a topic: self protection, relationship protection, partner unresponsiveness, and social inappropriateness (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998).

*Adaptation through Examples/Comparisons/Analogies* that are specifically chosen because the sender believes the receiver will find them relevant to the receiver’s needs. Examples include describing people unknown to the receiver by comparing them to those known by the receiver and explaining roller blading by comparing it to ice skating because the sender knows the receiver is an avid ice skater. Participants in a controlled instruction giving task where they were visually isolated from one another incorporated analogies as a way of establishing common ground (Boerger & Henley, 1999). In explaining how to build a lego model from a set
of pictured instructions, the describers often used analogies as references for unusually shaped pieces and for describing the assembly process. The builders utilized interrogative analogies as a way of describing what they had done or the pieces with which they were working.

*Adapting Vernacular/Language* occurs when specific words are chosen or avoided because of the effect on the receiver. The use of formal address in response to status differences, using slang when the relationship is perceived as informal or using nicknames or teasing comments between close friends are examples of language adaptation. In addition, adaptation can be in the form of consciously selecting words that are perceived to be understandable to the other person or utilizing words that have a unique meaning to the interactants. Using appropriate language that could be understood by a partner and which was neither superior nor condescending was one of the strategies identified by Mottet and Richmond (1998) in an analysis of how individuals achieve immediacy. In applying perspective taking to language, Schober (1998) argued that a speaker essentially takes on the language of the listener as they continue to interact. Schober (1998) provided evidence that speakers’ word choices are affected by their partners’ word choices and that people’s conceptualizations are affected by their history with partners in achieving understanding or common ground. Schober and Clark (1989) conducted a study in which one person interactively described the placement of 12 out of 16 tangram figures to an unseen partner over the course of six trials. In the first trial, describers averaged 73 words and receivers 39 words before placement of a tangram; in the second trial these numbers fell to 13 and 3 respectively. Participants collaborated in creating common language references for each of the figures that required fewer words. Overhearers who listened to the interaction for trials 4, 5, and 6 were very inaccurate in ordering the tangrams because they lacked understanding of the references developed by the collaborating pairs (Schober & Clark, 1989).
One study examined how “experts” adapted their language to listeners by having pairs of participants who could not see each other put 16 postcard pictures of New York landmarks in the same order (Isaacs & Clark, 1987). When both participants were from New York (pairs of experts) they were able to use specific language references and fewer words than when one of the participants was a novice (non-New Yorker).

**Personal Referencing** of specific aspects known about the other including attitudes, interests, personality qualities, traits, demographic information, etc., is another form of adaptation. Examples of personal referencing include, “I’ve got something to tell you I think you’ll find funny,” “Could you help me balance my checkbook you’re so good at math?” “That’s a behavior I’d expect from you, given the way you were raised.” Mottet and Richmond (1998) also found direct references were identified as a strategy for enhancing immediacy. Planalp (1993) found references to basic biographical information was notably absent in interactions between acquaintances and references to mutually known others was the strongest quality distinguishing friends from acquaintances.

While previous theory and research led to the identification of these six types of adaptation, the conceptual boundaries and distinctions among them is nebulous. For example, strong relationships can be expected between adapting analogies/comparisons and language choice/vernacular; and between personal referencing and self-disclosure. In addition, the categories themselves often reflect a broad spectrum of potential adaptive behaviors triggered by different stimuli. The decision to reveal information about oneself represents a form of topical adaptation that differs substantively from raising other topics of interest to the recipient (the person’s interest in badminton or Harrison Ford movies). These categories of adaptation provide a broad foundation from which to explore ways in which individuals adapt their content.
Adaptation Activators

The claim that in interpersonal interactions people adapt their communication in response to another person fails to adequately reflect the different cues that evoke adaptation. This study examines four such cues referred to as adaptation activators: 1) knowledge of the partner’s personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes; 2) the nature and history of the relationship; 3) the partner’s mood, state of mind, and behavior during the interaction; and 4) the location and the circumstances occurring around the interaction.

**Partner Knowledge (Personality, Beliefs, Likes, Dislikes):** In elaborating on person knowledge, Berger (2002) wrote “knowledge about cointeractants’ dispositions, including such characteristics as intelligence and ability, significantly influences the kinds of messages individuals are likely to generate…” (p. 183). Krauss and Fussell (1988) in their discussion of other-relatedness in language identified background knowledge as necessary for speakers in developing socially effective messages. Planalp and Garvin-Doxas (1994) discussed ways in which the amount of mutual knowledge would affect interactions between strangers, acquaintances, and friends. They saw some form of adaptation occurring in each relationship such as recognizing and adapting to strangers’ community memberships or contemporary status, and friends who “assume knowledge of each other’s lives, especially their present lives, and use it almost constantly in conversation” (p. 15). Uncertainty reduction theory, social penetration theory and constructivism as applied to communication all involve the acquisition and use of information about other people to effectively manage relationships. While the acquisition of information about another person seems to be a natural part of relationship development, the degree to which that information actually affects adaptation of content is less clear.
**Nature and History of the Relationship:** The history that two individuals share is a source of common ground, reference to which is a form of adaptation. This form of adaptation includes references to historically based relational knowledge—to prior shared events, to previous conversations, or to shared personal information. While not specifically discussing adaptation, Steve Duck (2002) emphasized that relational history provides a valuable basis for understanding one’s partners and that interactants react to each other within the context of their history of interaction. Similarly, Krauss and Fussell (1988) argued that individuals can infer background knowledge about a partner because of previous interactions (both partners attended the same event). Individuals’ message content can be expected to reflect their understanding of and adaptation to the nature and history of their relationships.

**Partner’s Mood, State of Mind, and Immediate Behavior:** Emotional intelligence or affective competence often are conceptualized by the ability of a person to recognize and adapt appropriately to another person’s emotional condition (see for example, Eisenberg, 2001). Emotion knowledge was another form of social interaction knowledge identified by Berger (2002) that “not only enables individuals to understand other’s emotional states, it serves to guide the production of the individual’s own emotional responses” (p. 183). During everyday interactions, participants might adapt their communicative behavior in response to their partners’ immediate condition during the interaction--mood, state of mind, as well as other on-going behaviors.

**Location and Circumstances Surrounding the Interaction:** Berger (2002) claimed that context knowledge enables people to “alter their individual actions and their interactions in response to a multitude of contextual exigencies (p. 183)” including the physical and social context. Being responsive to the context while interacting with other people is an important
 social skill related to such concepts as self-monitoring, objective self-awareness, and self-consciousness (Berger & Bradac, 1982). As discussed earlier, research on referential communication often examines the impact of the context and physical conditions on speakers’ messages. The location and surrounding circumstances in which an interaction occurs may require adaptation by the interactants. For example, the presence or absence of other people could impact the amount of self-disclosure or topics.

Several factors contribute to potential differences on the impact of the activators on content adaptation. The first two activators, partner knowledge and relational history, draw heavily upon preexisting knowledge that is evoked and applied in the given interaction. They both depend upon the recall of relevant information to facilitate adaptation. The second two activators, partner mood/behaviors and location/circumstances represent a response to cues that occur within the moment of any given interaction. They depend heavily on perceptiveness and sensitivity to the immediate situation and interaction. However, all four activators depend upon both recall and perceptiveness to some degree. The activators also vary in their partner centeredness. Three activators, knowledge of partner, relational history, and partner’s mood/behaviors are directly connected to specific knowledge and observations about the partner, while the fourth activator, location and circumstance, is less so.

Several additional independent variables are included in this study for their potential impact on content adaptation: closeness of the relationship, knowledge of the partner, the nature and depth of the interaction, the purpose for the interaction, the nearness of potential eavesdroppers, and the sex of the respondents and their partners. Duck, Rutt, Hoy Hurst, and Strejc (1991) found that “quality” judgments about the interaction occurred in the following ascending order: stranger, acquaintance, lover, friend, relative, and best friend. They found that
the ascending order differed for the “value” of the interaction: acquaintance, stranger, friend, best friend, lover, relative. The variation in rankings varied from the predicted pattern of stranger, acquaintance, friend, best friend, lover, relative. The inclusion of relative in the list does raise a concern because relationships with relatives can vary greatly in their level of intimacy, and might not necessarily be the most intimate relationship as presented by Duck et al. (1991). Planalp and Benson (1992) and Planalp (1993) reported on a number of differences that distinguished the conversations between acquaintances from those between friends.

Duck et al. (1991) found variations between the type of relationship and the purposes for the interactions; for example, they found that lovers meet most often for relational purposes. Thus, there is some expectation that the nature of the interaction should affect the content of everyday interactions. In developing a taxonomy of speech events that reflected the purpose of social and personal interactions, Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) found differences in the types of events associated with acquaintances, friends, close friends, romantic partners, parent-child, and siblings. These events included gossiping, small talk, catching up, joking around, and recapping the day’s events. Some events depended more on mutual knowledge and thus tended to be more frequent in friendships than acquaintances. The need to adapt might be more significant when the purpose of the interaction is to have an in-depth discussion of relational concerns compared to an interaction focused on small talk or just passing time raising the next research question.

Duck et al. (1991) found significant differences between both the male and female respondents and a significant effect according to the sex of the partner. Their findings suggest that sex might have an effect on the type of adaptation as well. One study of gender differences in the responses to a series of vignettes describing troubled friends found a number of differences in the way men and women responded, though the effect sizes were small and perhaps inflated
leading the authors to question whether there were any real differences (Michaud & Warner, 1997).

**Method**

A self-report method was employed in this study that was similar to the Iowa Communication Record (Duck et. al, 1991). The Iowa Communication Record taps into everyday communication behaviors by having “respondents record their recollections of conversations” (p.236). This method has the advantage over laboratory settings of creating a data set reflective of “everyday” interactions selected by the participants. The use of self-report allows for data collection on natural and everyday interactions. The vast majority of research on accommodation, common ground, and perspective taking has occurred in a laboratory settings typically dealing with fairly regimented and prescribed tasks. The use of self-reports with their inherent limitations is balanced against a need to examine naturally occurring day-to-day interactions.

Self-reports can provide insights into the thinking and intentions of the sender. Outside observers are unable to assess sender intentionality which results in the failure to completely identify adaptations. Observers are unable to assess what the sender has chosen *not* to express. This means external observation cannot assess the degree to which a speaker has elected not to cover some topic, not to use particular language, not to use certain examples, etc. Outside observers also lack a foundation from which to understand what adaptive choices are available to a speaker. For instance, an individual might think his or her conversational partner might not understand the term “vituperation” and therefore adapts the message by using a phrase he or she believes the listener will understand, like “personal insults”.
External observations might lead to the conclusion that some behaviors were adaptive on the part of the senders when in actuality the senders were not intentionally adapting the messages (Krauss & Fussell, 1988) but were engaging in egocentric behaviors or self-projections relevant to their own interests and not those of the listeners. Despite inherent limitations, individual participants are in the best position to identify their adaptive behaviors. In addition, the belief by people that they have adapted may be as critical as true adaptation. If a speaker believes he or she has adapted to the other, then it is the belief that affects their behaviors, perceptions, expectations, and interpretations.

Participants received a packet that included instructions to respond to the enclosed questions after they have had an uninterrupted, face-to-face interaction with another person that lasted at least ten minutes. In the exploratory studies students tended to report heavily on close friend relationships, therefore, a special request was made that they consider using a stranger or acquaintance interaction. All responses were anonymous, though participants were asked to record a four digit self-selected code that would be used to match their responses with their responses to another scale not reported in this study. The instrument began with twelve demographic questions similar to those on the Iowa Communication Record: sex and age of participants, length of interaction, nature of the relationship, length of the relationship, etc. Next, respondents read the following instructions preceding the actual adaptive items:

Take a moment to consider your communication behavior and decisions during this interaction. Think about how … (one of four phrases from below inserted here, each representing one of the adaptive activator conditions) … affected each of the behaviors described in the items below. Circle the number following each item that corresponds to your degree of agreement or disagreement.
The four adaptive activator phrases:

1. your partner’s personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes;
2. your partner’s mood, state of mind, and behavior during this interaction;
3. the nature and history of your relationship;
4. the location and the circumstances occurring around your interaction

The twelve items used to tap content adaptive behaviors resulted from modifying items developed in three exploratory studies. In the first study, open-ended questions were used to identify some of the ways individuals adapted their communication content. In the second study, specific scaled items were developed on the basis of the open-ended responses and the types of content adaptation identified in the literature (discussed earlier). In the third study, thirty-three items that included indications of the percentage of time spent engaging in various adapted behaviors were further refined and tested in a pilot study to help identify a concise set of items. This process led to the selection of two items for each of the six types of adaptation with each item reflecting a different quality of adaptation. For example, topical adaptation including self-disclosure was tapped with the items “I intentionally raised certain topics for discussion” and “I openly shared personal information including my emotional state.” The distinctiveness of each item means responses to any given pair are not implicitly correlational but should be additive. Limiting the questionnaire to twelve items was intended to increase response rates. The earlier use of percentages to indicate adaptation proved confusing and produced confounding results, therefore, the final twelve items were presented as seven point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) with a midpoint of 4 (Neither Agree/Nor Disagree). Each item was phrased to reflect the occurrence of the adaptive behaviors during the interaction (See Table 1). Seven items involved adapting in a positive manner; such as, raising certain
topics, sharing more personal information, and including certain references. Five items represented negatively oriented adaptive behaviors; such as, avoiding topics, limiting information, and altering illustrations and stories. These five negatively oriented items were reversed scored for the purposes of analysis.

Students in several undergraduate communication courses served as respondents. One hundred and sixty-six students participated (127 females, 39 males). The female participants reported on 76 male partners and 45 female partners, while the male participants had 20 male partners and 19 female partners. The average participant age was 21.0 years old ($SD = 2.68$). The average of their estimates of their partners’ age was 22.0 ($SD = 4.1$). Participation was voluntary. The average reported length of the interactions was 70 minutes (one interaction of five minutes was reported and the longest interaction lasted for eight hours).

**Results**

One demographic item asked participants to indicate the nature and closeness of their relationship by selecting among a list of relationship types that were “listed in order of increasing levels of closeness.” Despite instructions requesting for reports on less intimate relationships, the following distribution of relationships were identified: stranger, 4; acquaintance, 4, casual friend, 10; friend, 19, close friend, 37; best friend/fiancée/lover/spouse, 62, and one missing. The average length of time reported for how long they had known the other was 44.3 months ($SD = 55.4$ months). Another item asked “How well do you know this person (the order represents increasing levels of knowledge” with 4.2% of the respondents indicating barely, 1.8% a little, 15.1 % somewhat, 23.5% fairly well, and 55.4% very well. While significant correlations were found between the length of the relationship and both how well they knew their partner ($r = .269$,
and the level of closeness \((r = .195, p < .05)\), the small amount of variance accounted for indicates that the length of a relationship has a minimal impact on how well participants felt they knew their partners or the level of intimacy. On the other hand, the level of closeness and reports of how well they knew their partner correlated at \(r = .81 (p < .001)\) indicating a strong relationship between these two relational qualities.

The status of the relationship was reported as quickly becoming closer (16.9%), slowly becoming closer (31.3%), remaining stable (44%), slowly becoming distant (7.2%), and quickly becoming distant (0.6%--one relationship). The nature of the interaction was characterized as very casual, passing time (18.7%), quick up-dating (10.8%), good visit, more than just an update but not too in-depth (29.5%), somewhat in-depth discussion (32.5%), and as very in-depth and intense discussion (8.4%). People were reported within hearing distance of almost 37% of the conversations.

In answering the question of whether participants reported adapting their content, a one sample t-test was conducted for each of the twelve adaptive items examining their variation from the neutral midpoint of four. The data from all four adaptive activator forms were collapsed for this analysis. The null hypothesis predicts a normal distribution of responses around the midpoint. The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated none of the twelve items had distributions differing significantly \((p < .001)\) from normal which adds confidence to this use of t-test. Seven of the items had significantly larger means from the midpoint as shown in Table 2 while the remaining five were significantly smaller. The five lower items dealt with behaviors associated with reducing, avoiding, and altering information compared to the other seven which dealt with providing and sharing information. The dynamics underlying these findings are explored further
with factor analysis and a correlation matrix. The overall deviations from the midpoints indicate significant reported adaptive behavior on the part of the respondents.

The two items generated for each of the six types of adaptation were not developed as a scale for each type, but rather as an initial exploration of the behaviors associated with each rubric. Having only two items per adaptation type limits the ability to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis. However, an exploratory factor analysis of the twelve items was used to identify underlying dimensions shared by the twelve items. Factor analysis using principal components extraction with varimax rotation produced four factors with Eigenvalues above 1.0 (parallel analysis also identified a four factor model, O’Conner, 2000) accounting for 65.5% of the variance (See Table 3). Factor 1 (items 4, 5, 6) labeled Information Massaging accounts for the greatest amount of variance in adaptive behaviors and includes the items that deal with adapting by limiting, avoiding, or not sharing information. Factor 2 (items 1, 7, and 10), Personalizing, deals with language issues (using certain analogies, examples, and words) as well as sharing personal information including emotional state and will be discussed later. Other-Centering, factor 3 (items 2, 11, and 12), has to do with references to information known about the other, to mutually known people and activities, and the selection of topics raised. Finally, factor 4 (items 3 and 9), Diffusion, dealt with providing more explanation and elaboration and decreasing reports of reducing sarcasm, slang and joking. The items comprising these factors were averaged to produce four measures with reliabilities listed in Table 3. A one sample t-test of each factor against the midpoint revealed significant adaptation occurring among the reported interactions for information massaging ($M= 3.38$, $sd = 1.57$, $t (165) = -5.11$, $p <$
.001), personalizing ($M = 4.79, \ sd = 1.17, \ t (165) = 8.74, \ p < .001$) and other centering ($M = 5.02, \ sd = 1.12, \ t (165) = 11.67, \ p < .001$) but not for diffusion ($M = 4.03, \ sd = 1.34$).

The interactions among the 12 items were examined through the use of a bivariate correlation matrix (see Table 4). The large number of significant correlations indicates strong interaction among the various adaptive behaviors, however the overall magnitudes of the correlations is small with no two items sharing more than 44% variance indicating the items each capture a unique quality of adaptation. Item 10, choosing certain words, significantly related to all the other items indicating a thoughtful consideration of phrasing by respondents in conjunction with other forms of content adaptation particularly the use of examples and analogies ($r = .59$) and references to information known about the partner ($r = .40$). The next most frequently interrelated items with 9 significant correlations are intentionally raising certain topics (item 2) and altering illustrations and stories (item 8). On the other hand, the two items that seem most unique are reducing the usual amount of sarcasm, slang and joking (item 9) which only correlated with three other items, and including references to mutually known people, activities, etc. which correlated with four.

The number of small but significant correlations among the twelve items and the identification of four factors suggests a cumulative item score would reflect overall content adaptation. Thus, the item scores were summed to produce an overall measure of content adaptation to use in examining the four adaptive activators (partner’s personality, relational history, partner’s mood, and location) ($\alpha = .74, \ N = 166$). Reliability coefficients were also calculated for each form to ensure the measure was reliable for each adaptive activator: partner’s personality, beliefs, likes and dislikes ($\alpha = .70, \ N = 45$); partner’s mood, state of mind, and
behavior during the interaction ($\alpha = .80, N = 42$), nature and history of the relationship ($\alpha = .62, N = 37$), and location and circumstances ($\alpha = .76, N = 42$). An ANOVA found no significant differences among them [$F(3, 162) = 1.08, p > .30, \eta^2 = .02$]. ANOVAs using the four factors (created as an average of the items identified with each factor) found no significant difference on information massaging or diffusion across the four adaptive activators but did find significant differences on personalization [$F(3, 162) = 4.99, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09$] and other centering ($F(3, 162) = 3.78, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$). The use of post-hoc, LSD tests of the two significant activators revealed that personalization occurred significantly ($p < .05$) more in response to the nature and history of the relationship ($M = 5.37, sd = .76, N = 37$) than partner’s personality ($M = 4.81, sd = 1.14, N = 45$), mood ($M = 4.64, sd = 1.34, N = 42$), and location ($M = 4.42, sd = 1.16, N = 42$). The other three activators were not significantly different in the occurrence of personalization. The nature and history of the relationship ($M = 5.40, sd = 1.00, N = 37$) and the partner’s personality ($M = 5.13, sd = .88, N = 45$) were significantly greater in other-centering than location and circumstances ($M = 4.58, sd = 1.27, N = 42$). The amount of other centering in response to partner’s mood ($M = 5.00, sd = 1.20, N = 42$) did not significantly vary among the activators. Information massaging and diffusion appear to be somewhat universal forms of adapting that occur regardless of the activator while personalization and other centering are sensitive to differences among the activators with the nature and history of the relationship being the most significant.

Participants provided information on the closeness of the relationship, knowledge of the partner, the nature of the interaction, purpose for the interaction, and nearness of other people that were examined as independent variables for their impact on content adaptation. The seven levels of closeness ranging from “stranger” to “my best friend/fiancée lover/spouse” were treated
as an interval scale but did not significantly correlate with the summary adaptation measure ($r = .07$). Closeness significantly correlated with the personalization factor ($r = .33, p < .001$) but not with the other three factors. How well respondents reported knowing their partners did not significantly correlate with the overall measure ($r = .08$) and correlated with personalization ($r = .30, p < .001$). Respondents were asked about the nature of the interaction and presented with five choices treated as interval data: 1) very casual, simply passing of time, 2) quick updating about each other’s life, 3) a good visit, more than just an update but not too in-depth, 4) somewhat in-depth discussion, and 5) a very in-depth and intense discussion. The nature of the interaction significantly correlated with the adaptation summary measure ($r = .26, p < .01$) and with the factors of personalization ($r = .34, p < .001$), other centering ($r = .20, p < .05$), and diffusion ($r = .29, p < .001$) but not with information massaging.

Participants were provided with four choices to describe the purpose for the interaction: talk just for talk’s sake ($N = 61$), to accomplish some task (such as gaining information for a project) ($N = 17$), to facilitate some social objective (such as talk at a party or sports activity) ($N = 18$), and to facilitate the relationship (become better acquainted or resolve a personal problem) ($N = 70$). Analysis of variance found no significant difference ($p < .05$) across these four purposes for overall content adaptation or information massaging. Personalization did vary across the four purposes [$F (3, 166) = 3.15, p < .05$, partial eta$^2 = .06$] with post hoc analysis showing significantly more adaptation through personalization when the purpose was to facilitate the relationship ($M = 5.12, SD = .99$) compared to the purposes of talking for talk’s sake ($M = 4.58, SD 1.28$) or facilitating social objectives ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.18$). The four purposes varied in other-centering [$F (3, 166) = 2.862, p < .05$, partial eta$^2 = .05$] with more other decentering occurring when the purpose was to facilitate the relationship ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.07$) than
meeting task goals ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.94$) or social objectives ($M = 4.61, SD = 1.18$) but not when just talking for talk’s sake. Similarly, diffusion differed [$F(3, 166) = 5.47, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$] among the four purposes but with the only significant post hoc difference being greater adaptation by diffusion when facilitating the relationship ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.24$) compared to talking for talk’s sake ($M = 3.55, SD = 1.32$).

To investigate the impact of other people’s presence on content adaptation, participants indicated whether other people were within hearing distance of the conversation. More content adaptation occurred when other people were not within hearing distance ($N = 101, M = 52.61, SD = 9.23, t(160) = 2.15, p < .05$) than if they were ($N = 61, M = 49.21, SD = 10.63$). In the absence of ease-droppers, respondents indicated more personalization ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.17, t(160) = 2.01, p < .05$) and more diffusion ($M = 4.253, SD = 1.267, t(160) = 2.94, p < .01$) than when others were within listening distance ($M = 4.55, SD = 1.18; M = 3.65, SD = 1.40$, respectively). The amount of information massaging and other-centering was not significantly affected by the presence of others within hearing distance.

To examine potential differences between males ($N = 39$) and females ($N = 127$), a series of t-tests were conducted. Women reported significantly higher overall adaptation ($M = 52.39, SD = 9.15$) than men ($M = 48.10, SD = 11.12; t(164) = 2.43, p < .05$). Women had higher ratings for personalization ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.10; t(164) = 2.15, p < .05$) than men ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.32$). Women’s use of other-centering ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.07$) was also significantly higher than men’s ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.20; t(164) = 2.95, p < .01$). No significant differences were found for information massaging or diffusion. No significant differences were found based on the sex of the respondent’s partner (female partners, $N = 64$; male partners, $N = 96$). A two-way analysis of variance between respondents’ sex and partners’ sex also found main effects for respondent’s
sex but not partner’s sex. The analysis identified a significant interaction effect \[ F(1, 160) = 6.04, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04 \] indicating greater content adaptation by females \( (M = 53.33, SD = 9.64, N = 76) \) than males \( (M = 45.15, SD = 11.55, N = 20) \) when the partner was male then when the partner was female. Among the four factors, a significant interaction effect was found only for personalization \[ F(1, 160) = 5.22, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03 \] with greater difference between adaptation by female respondents \( (M = 5.00, SD = 1.08, N = 76) \) than male respondents \( (M = 4.10, SD = 1.33, N = 20) \) when the partner was male. The basis for the above differences rests in males and female respondents adapting fairly equally to female partners but males adapting less than females when their partners were male. However, this effect appears mediated by the closeness of the reported relationships and the nature of the interactions. The level of closeness and nature of the interaction for males interacting with females and females interacting with other females were not significantly different. However, females \( (N= 76) \) reported a significantly closer relationship \( (M = 6.07, SD = 1.34; t(94)= 3.11, p < .01) \) with their male partner than males \( (N= 20) \) did \( (M = 5.00, SD = 1.45) \) with their male partners, as well as more in-depth interaction with their male partner\( (M = 3.32, SD = 1.12; t(94) = 3.28, p < .01) \) than males with male partners \( (M = 2.35, SD = 1.35) \).

**Discussion**

All twelve adaptation types were found to significantly differ from the neutral point, indicating prevalent content adaptation during conversations with topical adaptation/self-disclosure and the use of personal referencing being the most prominent ways individuals adapt. An exploratory factor analysis showed the twelve adaptation items coalescing around four factors that were labeled, Information Suppression, Personalization, Other-Centering, and Diffusion. The items in these factors and the bivariate correlations among the items provide insight as to
how individuals might adapt their content to others. For example, as the reported amount of shared personal information increased, there was less limiting of information and less avoiding topics, and an increase in using references to information known about the partner, word choice, use of examples/analogies, and elaboration. All of these relationships fit with what might be expected to happen as we share personal information about ourselves with others. Word choice was significantly related to all the other adaptation items but most strongly related to the use of specific examples and analogies ($r = .59$). Word choice appears to play a central and universal role in content adaptation. In choosing a certain topic to discuss or not discuss, in making references to information about the other person or mutual acquaintances, word choice appears to constitute one of the ways of accomplishing these other adaptations. Of the 132 correlations in the twelve by twelve matrix, two-thirds were significant, indicating strong interaction among the types of adaptation identified in this study. However, the amount of shared variance was low indicating that the twelve items were assessing varying strategies for adapting content. Future research might focus on identifying additional forms of content adaptation and expanding the multidimensional conceptualization of content adaptation identified in the factor model generated in this study. One issue affecting the factor model is the meaning of participant’s reactions to negatively phrased items. Responses to these items might actually reflect positive adaptation and not just the absence of the negative strategy. For instance, indicating strong disagreement with the statement, “I choose not to share certain information about myself” might reflect the respondent actually engaging in increased sharing of information.

This study posited that people adapt content in reaction to some cue or stimulus. Four such cues or “adaptation activators” were studied: knowledge of a partner’s personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes; 2) the nature and history of the relationship; 3) the partner’s mood, state of
mind, and behavior during the interaction; and 4) the location and the circumstances occurring around the interaction. The four adaptation activators were similar in their amount of overall adaptation (the sum of the twelve items), the use of adapting through information massaging (avoiding topics and limiting information), and in adapting through diffusion (elaborating and reducing slang/sarcasm). However, only Participants reported more personalization (sharing information, using specific examples and words) in response to the nature and history of the relationship than the other three activators. The relational history and the partner’s personality had a greater impact on the use of adaptation through other centering (raising certain topics and referencing information about the partner) than did the location or context. In general, pre-existing information about the relationship and partner seem to have more impact on content adaptation than the more immediate information contained in the partner’s particular mood or the location and circumstances surrounding the interaction. This result suggests that individuals enter interactions with some pre-disposition to adapt content more than adapting to on-going elements of the interaction.

The independent variables of closeness of the relationship, how well respondents knew their partners, the nature of the interaction, the purpose for the interaction, the presence of other listeners nearby, the sex of the respondents, and the sex of the partners were all examined for their relationships to content adaptation. No significant correlation was found between the combined adaptation scores and closeness or how well the partner was known, nor was there any differences in the combined score and the purpose for the interaction. The overall score did increase as the nature of the interaction increased in depth, and was stronger in the absence of other people being within listening distance. Women reported more overall content adaptation than men but no such difference was found for the sex of the partner. More content adaptation
was found between female respondents and their male partners than between male respondents and their male partners; however, the female-male relationships were significantly closer than the male-to male relationships. So the sex difference might be attributed to the closeness of the relationship rather than the sex of the interactants.

Adaptation through information massaging, the factor that accounted for the most variance in the factor analysis, did not vary in response to any of the above independent variables suggesting that topic avoidance, limiting information, and not sharing personal information occurs during most interactions regardless of other influences. Adaptation through diffusion was stronger in the more in-depth interactions, when the purpose for the interaction was to facilitate the relationship compared to talking for talk’s sake, and in the absence of other listeners. In essence, more elaboration and reduction of slang and sarcasm occurred when participants engaged in in-depth relational discussions which are likely not to occur where other people can eavesdrop. Adaptation through other centering (using references related to the partner and raising certain topics) occurred more during in-depth discussions and when the purpose was to facilitate the relationship compared to accomplishing task or social goals. Women reported more content adaptation through diffusion than men. Adaptation through personalization (consisting of raising certain topics, using certain examples/analyses, and choosing certain words) related to more of the independent variables than the other three factors. Higher levels of personalization were found in closer relationships, in intense and in-depth discussions, when the purpose was to facilitate the relationship compared to talking for talk’s sake or social objectives, in the absence of nearby listeners, for women compared to men, and between females with male partners compared to males with male partners. In summary, the nature of the interaction occurring in
private particularly when interacting to facilitate the relationship has a greater impact on content adaptation than does the closeness of the relationship or knowledge of the partner.

One challenge in exploring content adaptation is relying on self-reports rather than observation. However, only the participants know what information they have chosen not to share, or what words they have specifically chosen as a form of adaptation. One methodology that might avoid these limitations in the future is the use of video-recall in which respondents watch a replay of their conversation and are prodded to recall and record the thoughts they had. Despite the limitations of the current study, the limited number of significant differences suggests that individuals adapt their content as a matter of general conversational protocol rather than in response to particular independent variables. Indeed, the significant difference between each item and the neutral point provides some support for this contention. A number of variables impacted content adaptation but while the impact was significant, it was not overwhelming, suggesting that content adaptation is a normal and consistent part of all everyday interactions rather than something that is only evoked occasionally in response to specific stimuli or conditions.
Bibliography


Table 1. Twelve Item Content Adaptation Questionnaire

Four sets of items were created by following each of the twelve statements with one of the following adaptive activators phrases: A) my partner’s personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes, B) my partner’s mood, state of mind, and behavior during the interaction, C) the nature and history of our relationship, and D) the location and the circumstances occurring around our interaction. The items were randomly ordered on the questionnaire.

**Topical adaptation/disclosure**

1. I openly shared personal information including my emotional state in direct response to …

2. I intentionally raised certain topics for discussion because of …

**Explanatory or elaborated adaptation**

3. I explained more and elaborated on certain comments because of …

4. I limited the amount of specific information I choose to share because of …

**Adaptation by withholding information**

5. I choose not to share certain information about myself because of …

6. I intentionally avoided certain topics for discussion because of …

**Examples and analogies**

7. I specifically used certain examples and analogies because of …

8. I altered the kinds of illustrations and stories I shared because of …

**Adapting vernacular/language**

9. I reduced my usual amount of sarcasm, slang, and joking in response to …

10. I choose to use certain words because of …

**Personal referencing**

11. I referred to mutually known people, activities, etc. because of …

12. I frequently included references to information I knew about my partner in response to …
Table 2.

*Rank Order Of Adaptive Items By Deviation From The Scale Midpoint*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>from Midpoint</th>
<th>t (df = 165)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Shared personal information</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Referenced mutually known people</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>10.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Referenced information known to partner</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>9.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Intentionally raised certain topics</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.89</td>
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<td>7. Used certain examples and analogies</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>5.38</td>
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<td>3. Explained more and elaborated</td>
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<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>4.73</td>
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<td>10. Choose to use certain words</td>
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<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.56</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Less than the Mean of 4.0</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Choose not to share personal information</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.84</td>
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<td>4. Limited the amount of specific information</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-5.02</td>
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<td>6. Avoided certain topics</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-3.23**</td>
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<td>9. Reduced sarcasm, slang, and joking</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-3.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Altered illustrations and stories</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-1.94*</td>
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*T values are significant at p < .001 except as noted where ** p < .01, * p < .05*
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<td>11. Referenced mutually known people, activities…</td>
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Percent of Variance Explained: 21.8 16.0 15.8 11.9
Reliability of highlighted items using Cronbach’s alpha .83 .64 .68 .52

Values above .60 are highlighted and reported as the loaded items for each factor.
Table 4.  **Signification Correlations among the Twelve Adaptation Items (N = 166).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Shared personal information (emotional state)</th>
<th>2. Intentionally raised certain topics</th>
<th>3. Explained more and elaborated on comments</th>
<th>4. Limited amount of specific information</th>
<th>5. Choose not to share certain information about myself</th>
<th>6. Intentionally avoided certain topics for discussion</th>
<th>7. Specifically used certain examples and analogies</th>
<th>8. Altered the kinds of illustrations and stories</th>
<th>9. Reduced usual amount of sarcasm, slang, &amp; joking</th>
<th>10. Choose to use certain words</th>
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<td>Explain &amp; elaborate</td>
<td>Limited information.</td>
<td>Not share about self</td>
<td>Avoid topics</td>
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All correlations below .21 * p < .05. All correlations above .20, * p < .01.