Almost everyone I speak to understands what it means to ‘click’ with someone,” explains Beth Richardson, as we sit down to talk about her research. “But until recently we had little idea of how this manifests in dialogue, or what impact it really has on our interactions.”

Richardson is one of a new wave of researchers examining the process and consequences of verbal ‘clicking’ in interaction. Overwhelmingly she and others have found that clicking, or mimicking another’s use of language, is a positive thing. It breeds cooperation, liking, trust, and even better interaction outcomes.

Take, for example, Rick van Baaren’s study of waitress tipping. He compared the amount of tips waitresses normally received to the amount they received when they deliberately repeated what patrons said when ordering. Tips almost doubled when waitresses mimicked their patrons’ language. A single, simple repetition delivered cold, hard cash.

For her part, Richardson has spent three years at Lancaster...
University examining how verbal mimicry works within interviews. Using a range of different scenarios, she’s explored the role of mimicry in encouraging information exchange and unprompted self-disclosure. She’s even explored whether or not it is possible to elicit cooperation by purposefully mimicking, an idea that presumably owes its genesis to van Baaren’s waitresses.

"Often the problem for interviewers is not that people are trying to conceal information, but that they don’t recognize the importance of providing the information in the first place" explains Richardson. "Most interview training suggests that the trick is to ask the right question. That advice is spot on. But it can be tricky when what you’re interested in is unknown to you.” Richardson’s findings suggest that verbal mimicry might be one of the things that can help elicit such unknown information.

Her first study in this area examined the far more austere interactions of police interviews. With help from a Canadian colleague, Richardson got hold of a set of Canadian police interviews and started to examine the language used by
interviewer and suspect. “I knew that I wanted to study the process by which people come to confess, but doing so wasn’t straightforward. By examining verbal mimicry it was possible to cut through the complexity of words and exchanges to a higher level of coordination between the parties.”

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At this point Richardson produces a graph—see Fig. 1 below—that might be attributed to the floor of the London Stock Exchange. “The path toward confession is never smooth,” jokes Richardson, as she gestures at the ebb-and-flow of lines across the horizontal axis. “What you see here is two gradually dividing forms of mimicry. The positive slope is the change in verbal mimicry that occurs with confessions. It’s the verbal mimicry side of clicking. The other, level slope, is associated with no confession.”

Critical to the differences in these slopes is who matches whose language. Confessions occur when suspects increasingly match the language of their interviewer. They tend to match in the way that they describe issues—typically achieved through auxiliary verbs and prepositions—and they match in their point of reference—as suggested by similar use of personal pronouns. In non-confessions, the balance of who matches who oscillates back and forth with no clear direction.

Interestingly, a similar finding was reported a few years ago by Paul Taylor, a colleague of Richardson at Lancaster, and his co-author, Sally Thomas. They examined the dialogue of hostage negotiations and how this related to incident outcome. Negotiators who were successful at convincing the perpetrator to surrender typically managed to maintain high degrees of verbal mimicry across the incident. By contrast, when negotiations were unsuccessful, the periods of high mimicry were punctuated by periods of cross-talk and low mimicry. In these incidents, the negotiator and perpetrator never managed to find the same wavelength on which to build a resolution.

In June 2010, encouraged by the findings of her first study, Richardson set out to determine what causes and inhibits mimicry. In one study she had pairs complete a task in which a ‘director’ guided a ‘follower’ to a location on a map. An omission on the follower’s map created a difficulty for the pair that could only be resolved by sharing information. Did verbal mimicry facilitate journey completion? In a second set of studies Richardson had pairs negotiate a scenario where

![Fig. 1. Turn-by-turn verbal mimicry difference score (LSM) as a function of interrogation outcome. Positive values indicate a suspect mimicking the interrogators’ language style. Negative values indicate an interrogator mimicking a suspects’ language style.](image-url)
the best outcome could only be achieved when each trusted their counterpart to not take advantage of their cooperation. Did verbal mimicry facilitate that exchange? In a third study, Richardson had pairs discuss personal stories for a set period of time; a scenario that loosely resembled a vetting interview. Was mimicry effective at generating self-disclosure?

The answer to each of these questions is a qualified ‘yes.’ The occurrence of verbal mimicry was associated with more information sharing, cooperation, liking and self-disclosure in many of Richardson’s interactions, and this wasn’t affected by gender or physical appearance. This was true even in competitive situations where one person held all the cards. As verbal mimicry increased so the other party was willing to cooperate on those terms.

There were, however, two important exceptions. When the nature of the interaction was cooperative, in the sense that those involved had no competing agendas, verbal mimicry backfired when one person took a dominant role. The power asymmetry created by the dominance tended to get mimicked, which only served to eschew what should have been the natural, informal cooperation of an equal-basis relationship. Sometimes it is more effective to appear as though you are not leading the interview.

The second exception mirrors the findings of the police interrogations. When the interaction was hostile, with competing agendas and distinct roles, the use of mutual verbal mimicry caused a stalemate. Competitive interactions tend to resolve only when one person concedes to the other. In the absence of one mimicking the other the interaction went back-and-forth, just like the no confession interrogations.

Richardson’s explanation for both of these exceptions is that they are ‘schema-inconsistent’ scenarios. By this she means that the person’s behaviour is inconsistent with what
is expected in such an interaction. This appears to trigger—perhaps even subconsciously—suspicion in the observer. A feeling of unease that stalls cooperative encounters and provokes an unwillingness to concede in competitive encounters.

“mimicry provides a useful way to gauge the nature of relationships”

If mimicry is linked to cooperation—the two exceptions notwithstanding—it represents a potentially useful way of gauging the nature of relationships. It may, for example, be used to identify periods of low cooperation in an interview. A post-interview review of mimicry may flag sticking points that need to be revisited. It may also help interviewers identify and refine their approach to difficult periods of interaction. Similarly, mimicry may be used by investigators who want to learn more about the relationships among gang members. Here the most useful insights will come from monitoring the changing patterns of mimicry over time.

Arguably the most interesting possibility, however, is that people can be trained to mimic in a way that generates cooperation. This is the question Richardson was drawn to answer during the final stages of her project. Her first study of this possibility borrowed an experimental set-up used extensively in cognitive science. Pairs sat opposite one another with a pile of picture cards by their side, and a second set of cards laid out in front of them. Each member of the pair then took turns describing what was on the uppermost card, while the listening member searched for that card on the table. By manipulating what one member said (they were conscious of the experiment’s true purpose), Richardson showed that it is possible to elude mimicry by changing language use.

“So,” recalls Richardson, “I had data that would convince the scientists, but not those from investigative practice. I needed to demonstrate that it was possible, through mimicry, to gain cooperation and information from somebody in a context where doing so may have negative implications for that person.”

She finally showed this in a series of mock interactions where outcome was tied intimately to the extent to which people shared information and acted cooperatively. “I trained my interviewer, Steven, to mimic key aspects of a person’s behaviour whenever he could. When utilising this strategy, he eluded...”

“it appears possible to elude mimicry by changing language use”
The Good Stranger

Richardson can train people to mimic, then she can, in effect, train people to act in a way that encourages cooperation. However, before this goes mainstream there are some unanswered questions. Chief among these will be whether or not people can deliberately mimic when under pressure, or while having to think about tasks more complex than a simulated negotiation. "I would expect experience to help things considerably" suggests Richardson, "and we have developed software that helps people practice their mimicry. But, ultimately, it's an unanswered question."

In the lab where Richardson works, another application of verbal mimicry has been implemented in software. As Taylor explained, "while face-to-face matching appears a difficult task, matching the language somebody uses online, in a forum or through email, is comparatively easy because an individual has time to formulate his or her response. It becomes possible to tweak an email response to increase the degree it mimics the sender's message. We've developed software that integrates with Outlook to help people achieve this."

There is a second, less obvious implication of this work. If people mimic different types of behaviour, it is possible that inadvertent use of particular language by an interviewee may shape the response given by an interviewee. This becomes quite important when a statement is being assessed for its veracity. Those people suffering from depression elevate their use of personal pronouns within their language during particularly dire times. Contrast that with liars, who typically reduce their first person pronoun use as they try to distance themselves from their deceit.

Computer software allows researchers to assess mimicry by measuring the use of these special types of words. The software calculates the extent to which two people use each of the categories of function words and creates a similarity score known as Language Style Matching (LSM). When people use function words in a similar way, they get a high LSM score. When they are not mimicking one another, they get a low LSM score. This measure is typically used with face-to-face dialogue, but the possibilities are much greater. Instant messaging, online forum interactions, tweets, are all potential candidates for such analysis.

How is Verbal Mimicry Measured?

What exactly happens when we click? What does verbal mimicry look like? These are questions that are key to doing valid research. But they are also questions that are important for practice. If research can get a good handle on what mimicry is, then it may be possible to reverse engineer the phenomenon and train people to recognise mimicry occurring. They may even be able to learn to use it strategically.

In research, verbal mimicry is measured as the extent to which two people use the same proportion of nine types of function word. A function word is something that is devoid of content and can be used no matter what is being discussed. They include pronouns (e.g., I, you), adverbs (e.g., very, well), and conjunctions (e.g., but, therefore). They are important because they occur largely outside of our awareness and with a high frequency (typically around 55% of what we say), and they reflect much of our inner thoughts and feelings. People suffering from depression elevate their use of personal pronouns within their language during particularly dire times. Contrast that with liars, who typically reduce their first person pronoun use as they try to distance themselves from their deceit.

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