Speaker’s Biography

James W. Pennebaker is the Regents Professor of Psychology and Executive Director of a university-wide educational initiative called Project 2021 at the University of Texas at Austin. Pennebaker’s earliest work examined the psychology of physical symptoms. The symptom research ultimately led to his discovery of expressive writing which found that writing about emotional upheavals improved physical health and immune function. More recent studies have explored natural language. He finds that everyday word use is related to personality, deception, status, group dynamics, and emotional states. He is now working with his university’s senior administration to rethink 21st century education models. Author or editor of 10 books and over 300 scientific articles, Pennebaker has received several university and international awards for his research and teaching. His most recent books are The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us (Bloomsbury, 2011) and Opening Up by Writing it Down (Guilford, 2016).

Afternoon Colloquium (For AL/TESOL Faculty and Students) 1:30-3:00 pm

Title: Using words to understand people

The words people use in everyday language reveals far more than most of us realize. Surprisingly, the most psychologically meaningful group of words is almost invisible and includes pronouns, articles, prepositions, and other function words. A number of research findings using computerized text analysis will describe how function words can tell us about people's emotional state, status, honesty, personality, the ways they think, and the cultures they have grown up in. More recently, text analytic methods have informed educational strategies to shift group discussions and social dynamics. Practical and theoretical implications of function word research will be discussed.

Evening Lecture (Open to the Public) 4:30-6:00 pm

Title: The health and psychological effects of translating emotional experiences into words

Thirty years ago the first study on expressive writing was published. Almost 50 students were asked to write about either the most traumatic experience of their lives or about superficial topics for four days, 15 minutes a day. Those who wrote about traumas showed improvements in
physical and psychological health. Over 400 expressive writing studies later, we are beginning to understand how and why writing about emotional experiences can influence the ways people think, feel, and function. Analysis of expressive writing essays points to the importance of perspective switching and the construction of a narrative. The roles of putting emotional experiences into words in influencing working memory, sleep, and social functioning will be discussed.

Recommended Readings


Recommended books
