

Science Proves Clever Pickup Lines Actually Work

So brush up on your Shakespeare and Ryan Gosling memes, guys.

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Turns out getting an MFA in poetry, while bad for your pocketbook, could be great for your love life. A recently published study suggests that women consider men more attractive in a heterosexual "courtship context" when they use pickup lines that incorporate witty metaphors and clever turns of phrase, as opposed to more straightforward expressions.

Not only does this mean that men should consider leafing through a copy of Neruda's *Love Poems* every so often, but the study's authors also believe their findings might be evidence that this kind of language evolved to keep our species going.

Scientists based in China showed 124 heterosexual female college students photos of male faces paired with compliments using either "metaphoric" or "literal" language, and asked the women to rate the attractiveness of the men shown. Each of the women also provided the researchers with information about whether they were single or in a relationship, and at what stage of their menstrual cycles they were. In the published report, the researchers write, "This preliminary study aimed to explore whether language usage could influence mate selection, which could support the possibility that language evolution has been driven by sexual selection."

Overall, the researchers found that women rated the male faces as more attractive when they were paired with "novel metaphorical compliments" (one clunky example used in the study was "Your eyes are morning dew") than with literal compliments ("Your lips are so sexy").

Interestingly, those women who were in relationships were more likely to prefer novel metaphorical compliments during ovulation, while single women were found to prefer such pickup lines during the luteal phase (the phase directly after ovulation).

This makes some intuitive sense. If a man hints at his attraction to a woman in a way she finds particularly clever, he might be seen as smarter and, unconsciously, in possession of good genes worthy of being passed down. The study's authors refer to an existing hypothesis, explored in *The Mating Mind* by psychologist Dr. Geoffrey Miller, that suggests humor, music, art, and literature evolved through sexual selection as ways to express creativity and intelligence—highly desirable traits in a mating partner.

"Undisputedly," the study's authors remark, "linguistic ability is part of cognitive intelligence."

But also, on a more conscious level, a savvy compliment or pickup line shows that a potential partner can read the room, so to speak. Even a deft use of meme-speak can demonstrate a deep understanding of internet culture, which is a kind of social currency when interacting with potential partners at bars or parties. "A playful meme uses certain in-jokes and social codes," says Moira Weigel, the author of *Labor of Love*, a history of dating in America. "That definitely is a big part of flirtation, seeming more socially intelligent and aware."

"Women and men tend to value forms of flirtation that are indirect," Weigel continues. "You always prefer the person who makes a clever joke to the person who's like, 'I think you look nice. I would like to sleep with you. Would you like to sleep with me?'" It suggests a mastery of a certain kind of contextual cues."

Weigel likens swapping clever jokes that rely on memes and other elements of internet culture to the age-old image of a knight picking up a lady's handkerchief. "It's a kind of social ritual we have," she says. "To use it ironically or playfully shows that you understand the code. It shows your social intelligence."