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## **An Exploratory Study on the Use of *I Love You* in the American Context**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the use of the English locution *I love you* in the American context. The data were collected through a focus discussion group and a survey questionnaire. 120 college undergraduate students from a large public American university participated in the study with 28 attending the focus discussion group and 92 completing the survey questionnaire. The findings indicated that the use of *I love you* is a daily phenomenon. It can be used across a variety of different relationships, in a variety of different modes, during a variety of different occasions, and with a variety of different meanings. The theoretical justification and explanation for Americans' high frequent and varied use of *I love you* were tentatively probed. The results from this study delineated a preliminary ethnography of how *I love you* is used in the American context, which can help EFL teachers and learners understand it more thoroughly, translate it more accurately, and use it more appropriately.

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language involves far more than just targeting surface linguistic forms and rules (Byram, 1997; LoCastro, 2003; Pishghadam, Hashemi, & Bazri, 2013; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Wierzbicka, 1991). It is now widely acknowledged that pragmatic rules for language use have to be addressed in order to enhance learners' pragmatic competence and cross-cultural communication skills since lack of pragmatic knowledge and understanding of culture embedded in language will inevitably result in learners' pragmatic failures in real-life communication with native-speakers of English (Thomas, 1983). However, insufficient resources to obtain the information related to pragmatic rules for language use often make teachers and learners feel frustrated in spite of the fact that pragmatic competence and cross-cultural communication abilities are incorporated and highlighted in the curricula and the syllabus. This is especially true for teachers and learners in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, where English is not the language of the surrounding culture and exposure to native speakers of English is limited. Insufficient resources are in part due to the challenge and the difficulty to present a systematic description and explanation of pragmatic rules for language use since they are often subtle, implicit, and invisible. As Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) pointed out,

Pragmatic rules for language use are often subconscious, and even NSs [native speakers] are often unaware of pragmatic rules until they are broken (and feelings are hurt, offense is taken, or sometimes things just seem a bit odd). (pp. 1-2)

A case in point is the lack of clearly presented pragmatic rules regarding how *I love you* is used. The English locution *I love you*, variously termed or described as “a loaded phrase”, “little honeyed words”, “the sweetest words”, “the L bomb”, “the hardest words”, “the magic words”, “an embodiment of utmost affection”, “a sign of long-term devotion”, “the most potent words”, “the most coveted word combination”, or “the most powerful

words”, is made of three words with the longest one only consisting of four letters. Syntactically, it is a simple sentence, yet it is complicated in terms of its wide variety of pragmatic uses and semantic meanings. Native English speakers' response to these three words may be happy or sad or even angry, depending on who said it, how it is said, where it is said, and when it is said. As Drotar (2014) expounded:

These three words, when strung together, are probably the most emotionally moving in the English language. Delivered correctly, they can make you feel better than you could ever imagine, and when delivered incorrectly they can completely destroy a relationship beyond repair. They have started wars and ended lives. They carry an enormous amount of feeling and power. (para. 1)

This complexity poses special challenges for EFL teachers tasked with explaining the various meanings culturally attached or embedded in *I love you* as well as for EFL learners to use it appropriately in different social contexts. As an attempt to address these challenges, the present study probes into the use of *I love you* in the American context.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

With the intent to explore the uses of *I love you* in the American context, the present study is anchored in pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics that is concerned with how people use language in real-life situations. As defined by Crystal (2008), pragmatics is:

the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. (p.379)

In the context of EFL teaching and learning, pragmatic studies have yielded the following important implications:

- a) Language proficiency alone is not sufficient in effective communication since knowing linguistically how to say *thank you*, for instance, does not

automatically match with the pragmatic knowledge of when to say *thank you*, how often to say *thank you*, and whether any additional action is called for (Hinkle, 2013).

- b) Learning of culture needs to be an integral part of language learning and education because culture crucially influences the values of the community, everyday interaction, the norms of speaking and behaving, and the socio-cultural expectations of an individual's roles (Hymes, 1996).
- c) The inseparable connections between a culture and its language uses should be a key characteristic of effective instruction in all language skills, and the teaching of pragmatics should be considered as an essential part of the language curriculum (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hinkle, 2013).
- d) Pragmatic knowledge should be teachable (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

### 2.1. Use of *I Love You* in the United States

It has been reported that *I love you* is much more frequently used in the United State than in any other country over the world, with about 75 percent of Americans saying it at least once each day (see China News Network, 2000). The locution *I love you* is also listed at 59 among the top 250 most frequently used English phrases in some informal online English learning guides (see Baidu Library, 2011), and the word *love* ranks 401 among the 5,000 most frequently used words in contemporary American English (Davies & Gardner, 2010). Further demonstrating the term's ubiquity, it can be noticed that *I love you* is the title or part of the title for songs, albums, singing groups, rock bands, concerts, dances, movies, TV comedy specials, dramas, games, poems, paintings, novels, short stories, foundations, stores, crafts, festivals, and even a notorious computer virus of 2000 (see also Wikipedia, 2012). It can also be observed that Americans will say these three words not only between couples, lovers, significant others, and family members, but also when speaking to people they have barely met. A case in point is that *I love you* is everywhere on Facebook and it is freely tossed around between and among "friends". Some people worry that *I love you* is overused, cheapened, and abused by throwing it out too easily, freely, and

frequently. As a consequence, it may lose its meaning and intrinsic value, and become a cliché (McAlmont, 2014). However, some other people argue that *I love you* is underused. One argument goes that if we use more *I love you* between and among ourselves, there will be less hatred and negativity in our society and in this world. In guides to parents, a frequent advice is that parents should never forget to say *I love you* to their children of all ages and say it daily together with hugs and kisses even when children act as if they are too grown up for that (Joshi, n.d.). Overused or underused? This really depends on one's perspective and attitude. Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that *I love you* is both overused and underused. It is said way too much, but it is also never said enough. In Boeshaar's (2011) words, "I love you. ... they are the three most abused and underused words in the English language" (p. 237).

### 2.2. Use of Equivalent Love Expressions in EFL Learners' First Languages

In EFL contexts, equivalent love expressions in learners' first languages are often completely different in meanings and usage (Bugaya & Delevi, 2010; Dewaele, 2008). The People's Republic of China is an excellent example in point. In a sharp contrast to the American context, use of *I love you* (*wo ai ni*) is a rare phenomenon in China, even though current trends indicate that use of the term has been increasing among younger people. In fact, many people, especially those from older generations, may have never said it once in their lifetime. Chinese values hold that direct and open verbal declaration is considered shallow and frivolous, and that only uncivilized or unsophisticated folks are loud, boisterous, and direct. Conversely, an indirect style of communication is considered civilized and sophisticated since actions speak louder than words. Being indirect and reading other's minds are generally considered as the norm for everyday interaction in Chinese culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

It is interesting to notice how indirect ways of saying *I love you* are appreciated in China. May 20 is now unofficially considered as the Chinese Internet Valentine's Day simply because the numbers 5-2-0 are the near homophones of *wo ai ni* (*I love you*). In

another example, following a national initiative to boldly speak out your love to parents, many schools have organized students to wash their parents' feet publicly as a way to "speak out" *I love you* to their parents. In our own experience, as teachers of English in China, we often try to avoid the explanation and practice of the locution *I love you* even though it appears in the textbook we are teaching. We do not want to embarrass ourselves or our students.

### 2.3. Previous Studies on the Use of *I Love You*

In spite of its popular usage, there is a lack of systematic studies showing how Americans use *I love you* in different social contexts with different meanings. The use of *I love you* can be found, however, to be a subject of inquiry in a few studies on the communication of love and commitment in romantic relationships, its emotional weight in multilinguals' languages, pragmatic leave-taking, and cross cultural differences in using *I love you* (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Brantley, Knox, & Zusman, 2002; Dai, 2007; Dewaele, 2008; Harrison & Shortall, 2011; Kline, Horton, & Zhang, 2008; Seki, Matsumoto, & Imahori, 2002; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006, 2011).

In an effort to find the gender difference in using *I love you*, Brantley et al. (2002) got 147 never married undergraduates at a large southeastern university to complete an anonymous 29 item questionnaire designed to assess gender differences pertaining to when and why they told new partners *I love you*. Their findings indicated that male students were significantly more likely than female students to report saying *I love you* sooner in the relationship. In a different study, Ackerman et al. (2011) took an evolutionary-economics approach based on the belief that women and men may have different potential costs and benefits from professing love. Through multiple studies in which they collected data from actual couples, they found that although most people believed women were more likely to say *I love you* first, it was actually men who said it first by a two-to-one ratio. A third similar study was conducted by Harrison and Shortall (2011) among 172 college students. Their findings were consistent with both Brantley et al.'s (2002) and Ackerman et al.'s (2011) finding that men

said *I love you* earlier than women did, a possible indication that men also fell in love earlier than women.

Considering the emotional weight of *I love you* in multilinguals' languages, Dewaele (2008) investigated the perceived emotional weight of *I love you* in multilinguals' different languages. A total of 1459 adult multilinguals, speaking a total of 77 different first languages, filled out an online questionnaire with open and closed questions linked to language behavior and emotions. His findings showed that most of the participants felt *I love you* was strongest in their L1, and that the perception of the weight of *I love you* was associated with self-perceived language dominance, context of acquisition of the L2, age of onset of learning the L2, degree of socialization in the L2, nature of the network of interlocutors in the L2, and self-perceived oral proficiency in the L2.

In her study on the nature of leave-taking and its pragmatic applications in Mandarin Chinese, Dai (2007) showed that a common component of conducting a leave-taking over the telephone involved a social ritual to close a conversation. Such a ritual included an optional *love you* to politely close a conversation over the phone in the United States. *Love you* in this context did not mean the same thing as *I love you*. Instead, it functioned as a way to bid farewell.

Approaching the problem from the perspective of cross-cultural differences, Seki et al. (2002) investigated conceptualizations and expressions of intimacy in Japan and the United States. Their questionnaire asked respondents to describe when, where, and how they expressed intimacy in the specified relationship and to explain what intimacy meant to them in those relationships. Their findings indicated substantial differences between Japanese and American respondents. While Americans preferred openness and expressiveness, Japanese placed more emphasis on such psychological feelings of intimacy as appreciation, understanding, ease, and bond. In another recent study, Kline et al. (2008) compared love expressions between Americans and East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans). They found that Americans used more physical contact to communicate love and used more direct verbalizations than

did East Asians. Their findings also showed that East Asians were more likely than Americans to believe that caring, helping out, and being there for one another were associated with love, while Americans were more likely to believe that going out together was associated with love.

Also from the perspective of cross-cultural differences, Wilkins and Gareis (2006) studied the use of *I love you* across different cultures. 77 students who took undergraduate communication courses completed an online survey. Among 77 participants, 26 are international students, who spoke 18 different first languages. They found that frequent use of *I love you* was common in relationships of lovers and from parents and grandparents to their children and grandchildren. In contrast, *I love you* was rarely if ever used between work/professional colleagues, neighbors, siblings, cousins, or from grandchildren to their grandparents. Their findings also showed that females were more likely to say *I love you* across all relationship types, and wanted to hear *I love you* more often than men. Their findings further indicated that the English declaration *I love you* was used more often than a second language equivalent for those who spoke more than one language. In a subsequent study, Wilkins and Gareis (2011) compared love expression used in the United States and Germany. Their findings showed that when relationships were ranked according to overall use of the declaration *I love you*, American and German patterns were identical in the following order: lovers, spouses, parents/children, grandparents/grandchildren, children/parents, grandchildren/grandparents, friends, siblings, cousins, and acquaintances. However, when compared with their German counterparts, Americans used the locution *I love you* much more frequently across most relationships.

To sum up, the use of *I love you* has been investigated in a few studies from the perspectives of social psychology, pragmatic use of languages, and intercultural communications. However, a systematic description on how Americans use *I love you* is still absent in the research literature. As a remedy for this absence, the present study is intended to present a systematic description showing how Americans use *I love you*.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the journalism maxim commonly known as the “Five W’s” (with an unnamed H) - Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How (see Harcup, 2009) – has been adapted to serve as a guide for us to collect data and to develop the central research question: who says *I love you* to whom, when, where, why, how and with what meaning in the American context? The related specific research questions include the following:

1. Who uses *I love you*?
2. To whom does one say *I love you*?
3. Why does one say *I love you*?
4. When and where does one say *I love you*?
5. How does one say *I love you*?
6. How often does one say *I love you*?
7. How does one reply to *I love you*?
8. What does it mean to say *I love you*?
9. To an English-Spanish bilingual, which language carries more emotional weight in saying *I love you*?
10. What is the gender difference in using *I love you*?
11. What is the difference in using *I love you* among different age groups?
12. What is the difference in using *I love you* among college students with different majors?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were 120 undergraduate students from a large public university located in south Texas, close to the U.S.-Mexico border. They were recruited from five different classes. Ethical approval was obtained from the university committee. Every participant gave his or her informed consent before taking part. Convenience sampling was used because of the empirical nature of this study.

The participants were divided into two groups, with the first group, consisting of 28 students from a language and culture class, attending a one-hour focus group discussion. The second group consisting of the remaining 92 participants from four different linguistics classes completed the survey questionnaire. Among these 92 participants, 53 were female and 39 were male; 71 were bilingual and 21 were monolingual; 50 considered English as their first language, 23 regarded Spanish as

their first language, and 19 deemed both English and Spanish as their first language; and 70 were in the age group of 20-29, 19 were in the age group of 30-39, and 3 were in the age group of over 40. Their majors varied from Education, English, Spanish, theater, communication, psychology, pre-law, communication disorders, and speech pathology to nursing, biology, biochemistry, and computer science.

### 3.2. Procedures

All procedures for this study were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. A 40-minute focus discussion group was organized to ask participants about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the use of *I love you*. We specifically required them to reflect and discuss their own experience in using *I love you* regarding to whom, when, where, why, how, how often, and with what meaning. The baseline data were generated and collected from this focus discussion group.

A survey questionnaire was designed and developed based on the baseline data we collected from the focus discussion group as well as on some of the findings from the previous studies (see Appendix I). The data derived from the survey questionnaire were evaluated by constructing frequency distributions to display the relative percentage for each response. Cross-tabulations were constructed

to examine inter relationships between two or more variables and explore whether an independent variable such as gender, age, or major had any effect on dependent variables.

## 4. Results

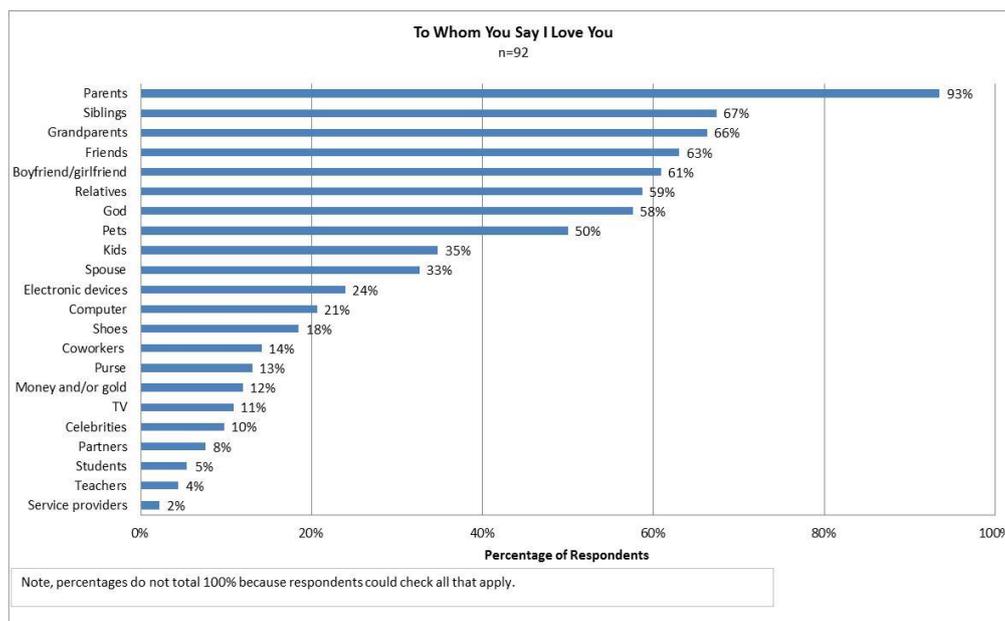
The survey responses and cross-tabulations based on these responses presented the following findings to answer the research questions of this study.

### First Research Question: Who Uses *I Love You*?

As expected, responses to the question *Do you use I love you* revealed that every participant used *I love you*.

### Second Research Question: To Whom Does One Say *I Love You*?

As shown in Fig. 1, participants used *I love you* to address a wide range of addressees. A majority of them used it when speaking to parents (93%), followed by siblings (67%), grandparent (66%), friends (63%), boyfriend/girlfriend (61%), relatives (59%), and God (59%). They also used it towards pets (50%), kids (35%), spouse (33%), electronic devices (24%), computer (21%), shoes (18%), coworkers (14%), purse (13%), money and/or gold (12%), TV (11%), celebrities (10%), partners (8%), students (5%), teachers (4%), and service providers (2%).



**Figure 1**  
*To whom You Say I Love You*

In addition to the above listed audience, participants reported in the 'other' section that they said *I love you* also to: material things that make them feel good about themselves, such as clothes, truck, and automobile (such as their own Cadillac), books, bed, writing, songs, myself, and anything they find to be funny.

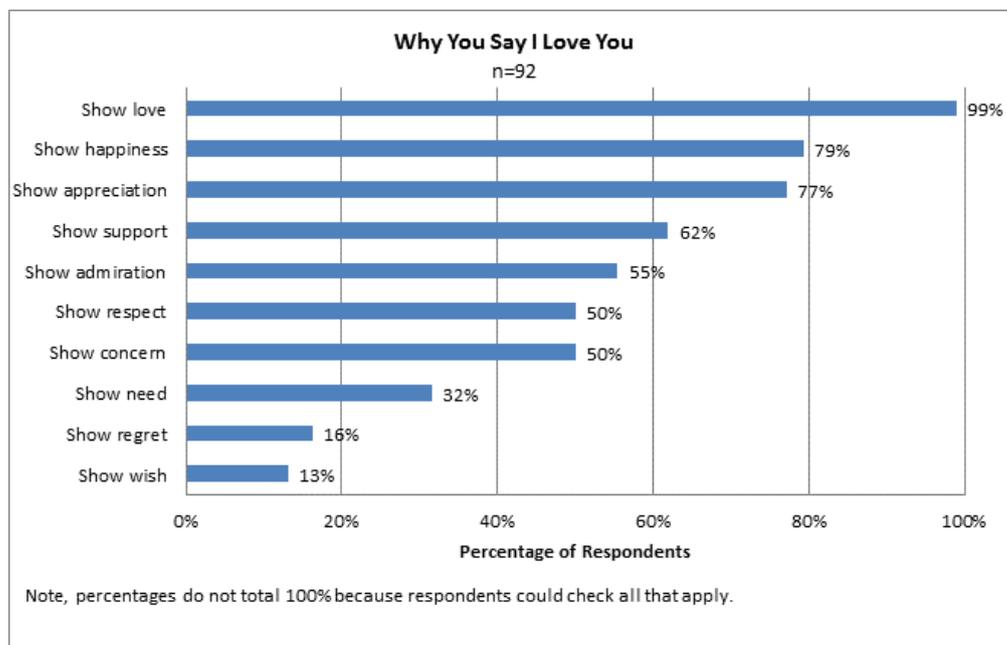
It appears that love can be grouped into the following 6 different types based on the targeted audience with some crossing different types:

1. Romantic love (boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, partners)
2. Family love (parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives, pets, kids, spouse, partners)

3. Friendship love (friends, coworkers, students, teachers, service providers)
4. Godly love (God)
5. Celebrity love (celebrities)
6. Like-it-a-lot love (electronic devices, computer, shoes, purse, money and/or gold, TV, truck, car, bed, writing, songs)

### Third Research Question: Why Does One Say *I Love You*?

As illustrated in Fig. 2, responses to the question about the reasons for saying *I love you* revealed that most participants used it to show love (99%), happiness (79%), appreciation (77%), support (62%), and admiration (55%). They might also use it to show respect (50%), concern (50%), need (32%), regret (16%), and wish (13%).



**Figure 2**  
*Why You Say I Love You*

It is interesting to notice that *I love you* can be used to show need. During our focus group discussion, one participant specifically mentioned that her teenage daughter would always use *I love you* whenever she needed some special favor or help from her.

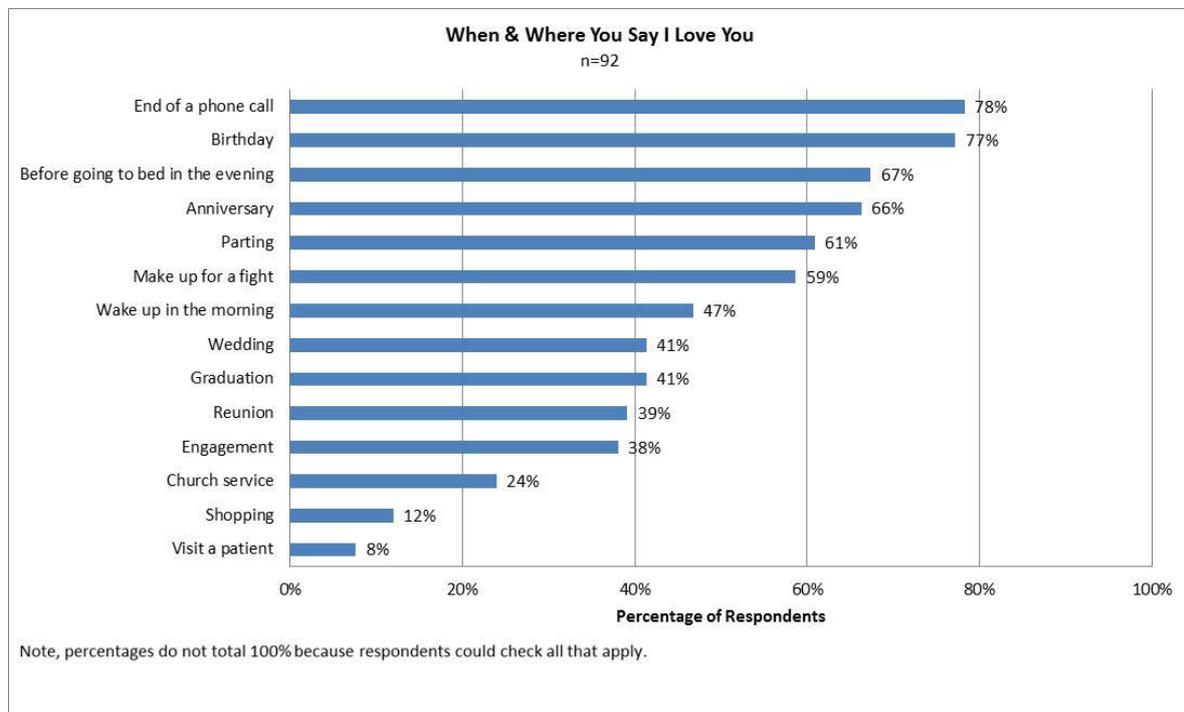
### Fourth Research Question: When and Where Does One Say *I Love You*?

As shown in Fig. 3, responses to the question about when and where respondents use *I love*

*you* revealed that a majority of participants used it in such occasions like ending a phone call (78%), birthday (77%), before going to bed in the evening (67%), anniversary (66%), parting (61%), and making up for a fight (59%). Some participants also used it in such occasions like waking up in the morning (47%), wedding (41%), graduation (41%), reunion (39%), engagement (38%), church service (24%), shopping (12%), and visiting a patient (8%).

It appears that the most frequent occasion to use *I love you* among our participants was at the end of a phone call. As one participant

elaborated, “every time I talk to my husband or my mom it’s always an *I love you* before hanging up”.



**Figure 3**  
*When & Where You Say I Love You*

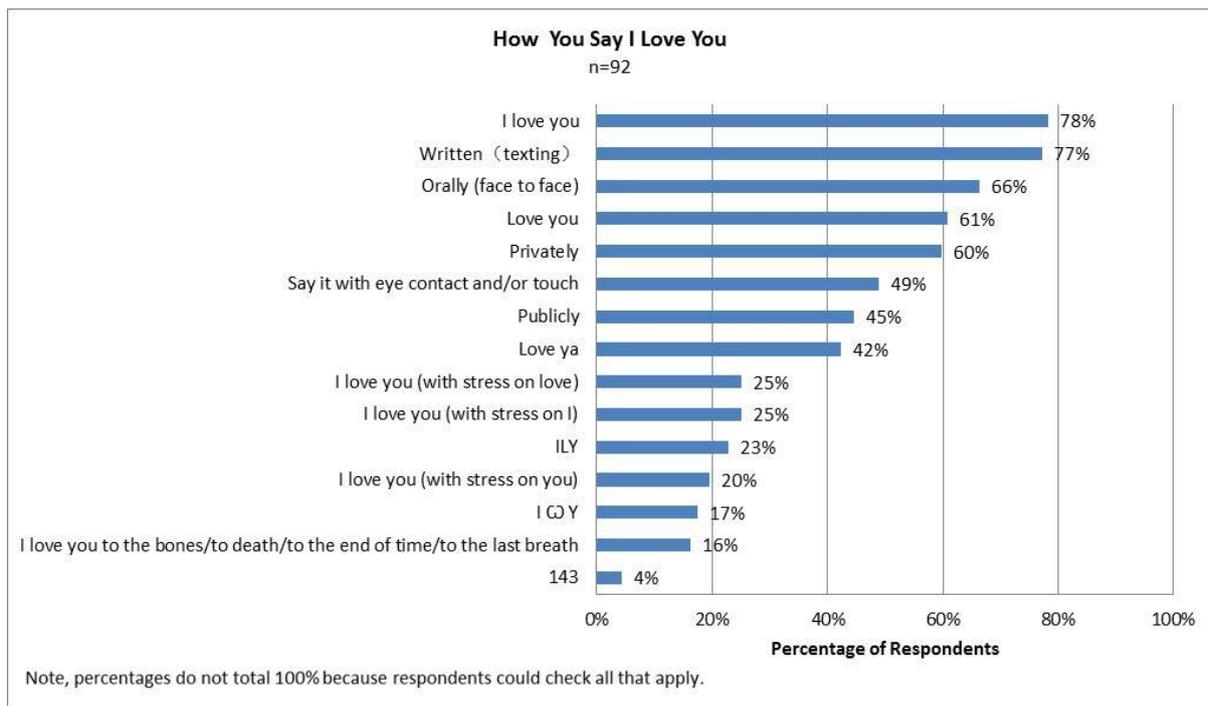
Apart from the above occasions, participants reported in the ‘other’ section that they would also use *I love you* in the following circumstances:

- When my girlfriend was in Spain she called to say she missed me. She wanted to hear me say it.
- During pregnancy, I would say it to my baby in the belly.
- After a family discussion.
- When I am hanging out with my boyfriend.
- When there is no conversation going on.
- Before school.
- Just when I feel love.
- At random times.
- When I feel it.
- When I did something wrong, I wanted to make an apology to my parents.

#### **Fifth Research Question: How does one Say I Love You?**

As indicated in Fig. 4, responses to the question about how to use *I love you* revealed the following ranking sequence: I love you (78%), written (texting) (77%), orally (face to face) (66%), love you (61%), privately (60%), say it with eye contact and/or touch (49%), publicly (45%), love ya (42%), I **love** you (25%), I love you (25%), ILY (23%), I love **you** (20%), I♥Y (17%), I love you to the bones/to death/to the end of time/to the last breath (16%), and 143 (4%).

It is interesting to notice from this sequence that written (77%) is more frequent compared with orally expressing it (66%); and privately saying it (60%) is more frequent compared with publicly declaring it (45%). In this instance, the data seems to suggest that in spite of the frequency of use of the term, people are actually nervous or embarrassed when saying “I love you”.



**Figure 4**  
*How You Say I Love You*

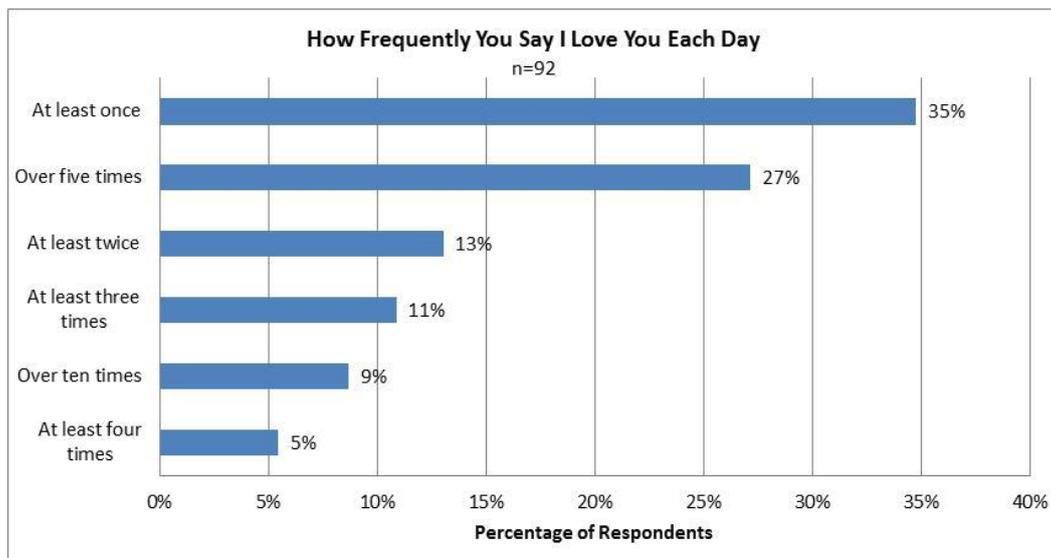
Besides the above listed ways of saying *I love you*, participants reported in the 'other' section that they also expressed it in the following ways:

- I less than 3 you (written as *I <3 u*. In the IM (instant message.), <3 is the symbol for heart).
- I luff ju.
- I lover you (A cool way of saying *I love you* to your friends. Somewhat different from *I love you*, more like *I heart you*).
- Te amo (Spanish equivalent of *I love you*).
- Te quiero mucho (Spanish equivalent of *I love you*).
- I love you with an asterisk.
- I love you to the moon and back.
- When saying *I love you* to my dog, I always say it with a squeaky voice.

#### **Sixth Research Question: How often does One Say *I Love You*?**

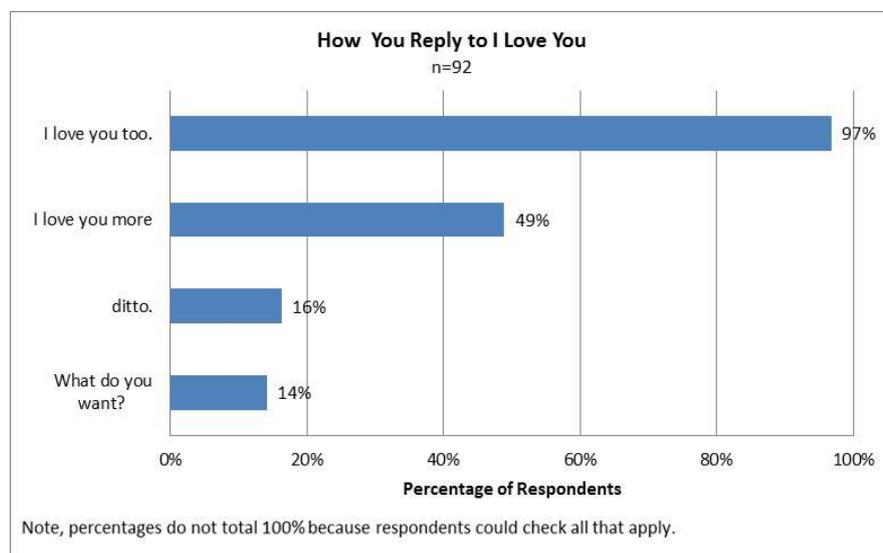
As presented in Fig. 5, responses to the question about the daily frequency of using *I love you* revealed the following ranking sequence: at least once (35%), over five times (27%), at least twice (13%), at least three times (11%), over ten times (9%), and at least four times (5%).

The finding here clearly shows that use of *I love you* is a daily phenomenon. Among 92 participants, 59 (64%) would use it one to four times on a daily basis, while 33 (36%) would use it over five times every day.

**Figure 5***How Frequently You Say I Love You Each Day***Seventh Research Question: How does One Reply to *I Love You*?**

As demonstrated in Fig. 6, responses to the question about how to reply to *I love you*

revealed the following ranking sequence: I love you too (97%), I love you more (49%), ditto (16%), and what do you want (14%).

**Figure 6***How You Reply to I Love You*

Other than the above listed ways of replying to *I love you*, participants reported in the 'other' section that they also replied to it by using the following:

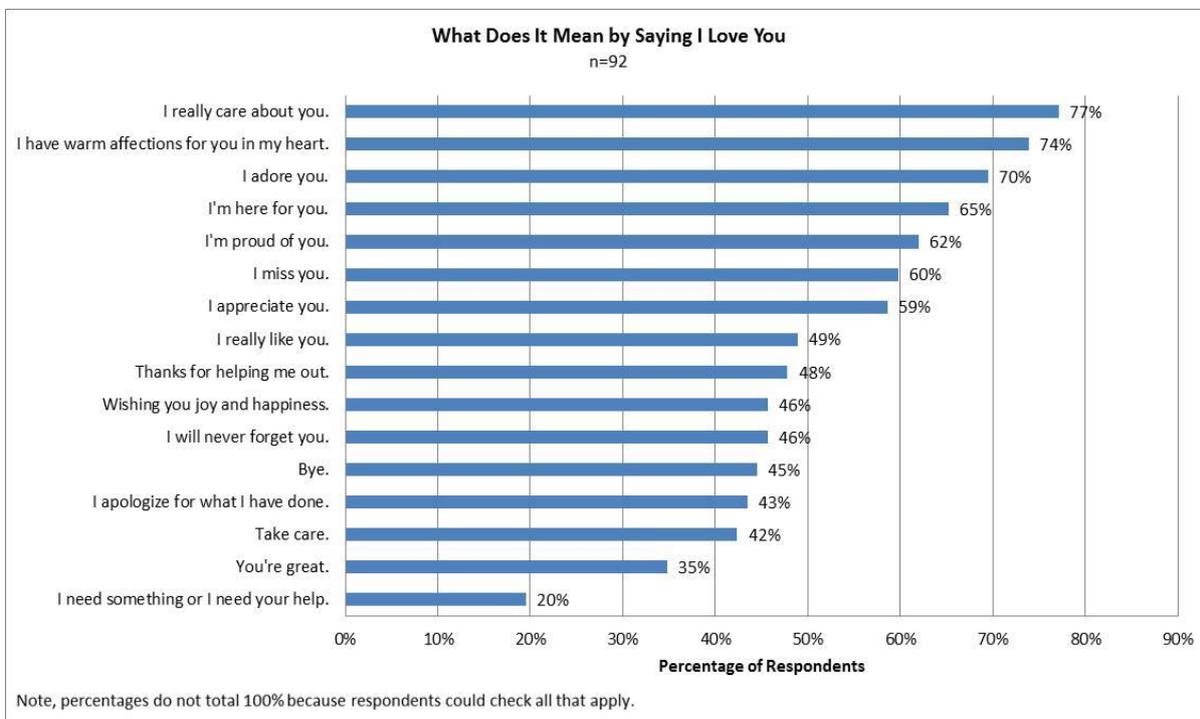
- Insert a kiss emoticon in the text message.
- Luff ju too.
- Ok.
- That's cool.
- I have grown fond of you.
- Love you much.
- Love you back.
- I L 2.
- Me too!

- Te amo (Spanish equivalent of *I love you*).
- Just a smile.
- Love you too.
- Love ya too.

It is interesting to note that, participants would consider *I love you too* is a more appropriate response compared with *love you too* and *love ya too*, especially when they are in marriage relationships or serious romantic relationships. During our focus group discussion, one participant explained that she would be very upset and tell her boyfriend to add *I* if he just replied with *love you too*. For her, *love you too* was not clear at all and *love ya too* was even worse. “Who loves me, my mom, dad or your mom or dad, or any other person?”

**Eighth Research Question: What does it Mean to Say *I Love You*?**

As revealed in Fig. 7, responses to the question about the meaning implied in *I love you* revealed the following ranking order: I really care about you (77%), I have warm affections for you in my heart (74%), I adore you (70%), I’m here for you (65%), I’m proud of you (62%), I miss you (60%), I appreciate you (59%), I really like you (49%), thanks for helping me out (48%), wishing you joy and happiness (46%), I will never forget you (46%), bye (45%), I apologize for what I have done (43%), take care (42%), you’re great (35%), and I need something or I need your help (20%).



**Figure 7**  
*What does it Mean by Saying I Love You*

In addition to the above listed meanings that are implied by saying *I love you*, participants reported in the ‘other’ section that they also use it to imply the following:

- Thank you for being there when I need you.
- No meaning. It might be just out of habit sometimes. For instance, it’s weird that I still use *I love you* to my former husband

to end our phone calls though I definitely don’t love him anymore.

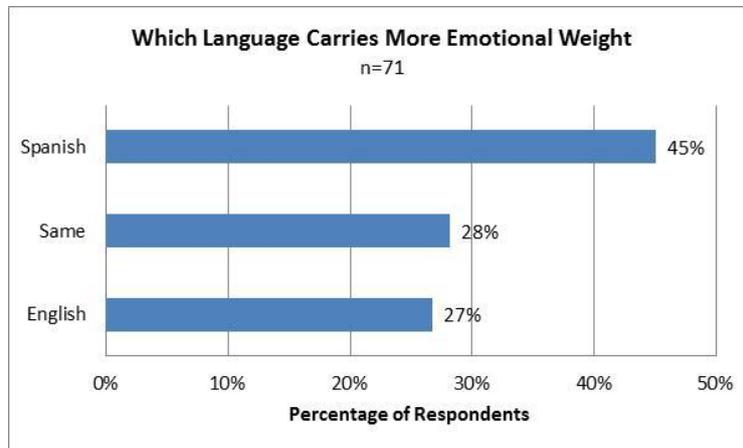
- I want to have sex with you.

**Ninth Research Question: To an English-Spanish Bilingual, Which Language Carries More Emotional Weight in Saying *I Love You*?**

As displayed in Fig. 8, responses to the question about emotional weight carried in the

language revealed that more participants chose Spanish (45%) compared with English (27%). A considerable number of participants (28%)

did feel that both English and Spanish carried the same emotional weight.



**Figure 8**  
*Which Language Carries More Emotional Weight in Saying I Love You*

**Tenth Research Question: What is the Gender Difference in Using I Love You?**

Findings that were statically significant with a p-value of .05 or less were reported in tables and further analyzed.

Chi-square tests were used to determine the relationship across gender with other variables.

**Table 1**  
*Gender Difference in Saying I Love You to Whom*

	Female (n = 59)	Male (n = 39)	X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
<b>To Whom</b>				
Boyfriend/girlfriend	51% (27)	74% (29)	5.172	< 0.05
Siblings	77% (41)	54% (21)	5.652	< 0.05
Friends	87% (46)	31% (12)	30.266	< 0.001
Relatives	81% (43)	28% (11)	25.96	< 0.001
Coworkers	23% (12)	3% (1)	7.464	< 0.05
Students	9% (5)	0% (0)	3.891	< 0.05
Celebrities	15% (8)	3% (1)	3.997	< 0.05
God	77% (41)	31% (12)	19.969	< 0.001
Shoes	28% (15)	5% (2)	8.01	< 0.05
Purse	23% (12)	0% (0)	10.155	< 0.01

As shown in Table 1, males use *I love you* significantly more often towards their girlfriends compared with females in using it towards their boyfriends. In contrast, females, compared with males, tend to use *I love you* much more frequently towards their siblings, relatives, coworkers, students, celebrities, God, shoes, and purse.

More frequent use of *I love you* towards celebrities may indicate that there are more female celebrity super fans than male.

Using *I love you* towards shoes and purse may be something uniquely related to women.

It is also interesting to notice that females generally use *I love you* much more frequently. However, they are more cautious and conservative in using this locution towards their boyfriends. This may in part support Harrison and Shortall’s (2011) finding that “women may not be the greater ‘fools for love’

that society assumes and ... a pragmatic and cautious view of love has adaptive significance for women” (p. 727). Often women do not say it early in a relationship because they fear scaring off a commitment-

shy male. Men say it early in a relationship because they think that this is what the woman wants to hear; thus, it can be a trading strategy to get what they want from her.

**Table 2**  
*Gender Difference in Why Saying I Love You*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
Why			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
Show concern	66% (35)	28% (11)	12.863	< 0.001
Show respect	62% (33)	33% (13)	7.522	< 0.01
Show need	45% (24)	13% (5)	10.969	< 0.001
Show admiration	64% (34)	44% (17)	3.845	< 0.05
Show happiness	96% (51)	56% (22)	21.736	< 0.001
Show support	72% (38)	49% (19)	5.034	< 0.05

As shown in Table 2, females, compared with males, use *I love you* significantly more

frequently in showing concern, respect, need, admiration, happiness, and support.

**Table 3**  
*Gender Difference in When & Where Saying I Love You*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
When & Where			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
Graduation	51% (27)	28% (11)	4.791	< 0.05
Birthday	87% (46)	64% (25)	6.566	< 0.05
Shopping	19% (10)	3% (1)	5.673	< 0.05
Before going to bed in the evening	81% (43)	49% (19)	10.742	< 0.01
Church service	36% (19)	8% (3)	9.79	< 0.01

As shown in Table 3, females like to use *I love you* in those occasions like graduation, birthday party, shopping, before going to bed

in the evening, and church service. In sharp contrast, males tend to use *I love you* significantly less in those occasions.

**Table 4**  
*Gender Difference in Daily Frequency of Saying I Love You*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
Daily Frequency			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
At least once	23% (12)	51% (20)	8.124	< 0.01
Over five times	38% (20)	15% (5)	7.048	< 0.01
Over ten times	15% (8)	0% (0)	6.447	< 0.05

Table 4 shows clearly that females use *I love you* much more frequently compared with males. While there is no male use of *I love you*

over ten times on a daily basis, a considerable number of females (15%) can be classified in that category.

**Table 5**  
*Gender Difference in How to Say I Love You*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
How			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
Love ya	53% (28)	28% (11)	5.579	< 0.05
I love you	36% (19)	10% (4)	7.848	< 0.01
I love you	34% (18)	13% (5)	5.356	< 0.05
I love you	30% (16)	5% (2)	8.966	< 0.01
ILY	30% (16)	13% (5)	3.847	< 0.05
Say it with eye contact and/or touch	58% (31)	36% (14)	4.59	< 0.05
I ♥ Y	28% (15)	3% (1)	10.359	< 0.01
Publicly	55% (29)	31% (12)	5.216	< 0.05

As shown in Table 5, females would more frequently employ various modes to declare *I love you*. Compared with males, more females

like to say it publicly and say it with eye contact and/or touch.

**Table 6**  
*Gender Difference in Saying I Love You with Different Meanings*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
Meanings			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
I'm proud of you	75% (40)	44% (17)	9.689	< 0.01
You're great	47% (25)	18% (7)	8.457	< 0.01
I appreciate you	74% (39)	38% (15)	11.433	< 0.001
Thanks for helping me out	60% (32)	31% (12)	7.893	< 0.01
I miss you	75% (40)	38% (15)	12.8	< 0.001
I apologize for what I have done	53% (28)	31% (12)	4.45	< 0.05

As shown in Table 6, females are significantly more likely to use *I love you* to express the meanings of "I'm proud of you", "you're

great", "I appreciate you", "thanks for helping me out", "I miss you", and "I apologize for what I have done".

**Table 7**  
*Gender Difference in Replying to I Love You*

	Female (n = 53)	Male (n = 39)		
Response			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
I love you more	58% (31)	36% (14)	4.59	< 0.05
What do you want?	21% (11)	5% (2)	4.521	< 0.05

The data shown in Table 7 demonstrates that more females use "I love you more" as a response to *I love you*. More frequent use of "what do you want?" as a response may show that females are more sensitive in figuring out the subtle meanings of need and help in the locution *I love you* declared by their children and significant others.

#### **Eleventh Research Question: What is the Difference in Using *I Love You* among Different Age Groups?**

Among 92 participants who completed the survey questionnaire, 70 were in the age group of 20-29, 19 were in the age group of 30-39, and 3 were in the age group of over 40. Since there were only 3 participants in the age group of over 40, the three age groups were lumped together into two categories: the age group of 20-29 and the age group of over 30.

**Table 8**  
*Age Difference in Saying I Love You to Whom*

	<b>20-29</b> (n = 70)	<b>Over 30</b> (n = 22)		
<b>To Whom</b>			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
Spouse	24% (17)	59% (13)	9.227	< 0.01
Kids	24% (17)	68% (15)	14.219	< 0.001

Table 8 shows that the age group of over 30 would use *I love you* significantly more frequently towards their spouses and kids. This is understandable since more members in the older age group have got married and had kids.

#### **Twelfth Research Question: What is the Difference in Using *I Love You* among Different Majors?**

Among 92 participants who completed the survey questionnaire, their majors varied from education, English, communication, psychology, pre-law, communication disorders,

speech pathology to nursing, biology, biochemistry, and computer science. For the convenience of this study, these different majors were lumped together into two categories: humanities (education, English, Spanish, theater, communication, psychology, pre-law, communication disorder, speech pathology) and science (including nursing, biology, biochemistry and computer science). As a consequence, 53 participants belonged to the category of humanities with 43 females and 10 males, and 39 participants were grouped into the category of sciences with 10 females and 29 males.

**Table 9**  
*Difference in Saying I Love You among Undergraduates with Different Majors*

	<b>Humanities</b> (n = 53)	<b>Sciences</b> (n = 39)		
			X <sup>2</sup> (1)	p-value
Address computer	13% (7)	31% (12)	4.228	< 0.05
Daily use over 5 times	42% (22)	8% (3)	12.983	< 0.001

As shown in Table 9, participants majoring in sciences use *I love you* significantly more frequently to address a computer. But on the whole, participants majoring in humanities tend to use *I love you* considerably more frequently across various relationships and occasions.

## **5. Discussion**

This study has explored how the English locution *I love you* is used in the American context. The results have revealed the following American characteristics in using *I love you*:

- Use of *I love you* is a daily phenomenon.
- *I love you* can be used to address different audience ranging from lovers, gods, and pets, to cars and purses.
- *I love you* can be used to express different meanings varying from “I have warm affections for you in my heart”, “I’m

proud of you”, “I’m here for you” to “I apologize for what I have done” and “bye”.

- *I love you* can be expressed in different modes: verbally or written, publicly or privately, and directly or indirectly.
- *I love you* can be used in different occasions alternating from parting, when at a wedding, to ending a phone call.

The findings from this study can lend support to the following conclusions drawn from previous studies:

- Females tend to use *I love you* more than males (Wilkins & Gareis, 2006).
- Females are more cautious and conservative in using *I love you* in romantic relationships (Ackerman et al., 2011; Brantley et al., 2002; Harrison & Shortall, 2011).

- The locution *I love you* carries more emotional weight in one's L1 (Dewaele, 2008).
- *Love you* can prompt a way to bid farewell (Dai, 2007).

It can be observed, however, that the following findings are quite contrary to what have been documented in the research literature:

- The findings from this study indicate that most participants (67%) would use *I love you* to their siblings. This is not consistent with what proposed by Wilkins and Gareis (2006), that *I love you* is rarely if ever used between siblings.
- The findings from this study reveal that not only *Love you*, but also *I love you* can be used to express the meaning of "bye". This is not in agreement with what suggested by Dai (2007), that only *Love you* can prompt a way to bid farewell.

Americans' high frequent use of *I love you* can in part be justified by the fact that the United States is a low context culture, where open and direct approaches are encouraged, and "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" because of the lack of shared contexts (Hall, 1998, p. 61). In contrast, many EFL learners are from high context cultures, where internal meanings are preferred to be embedded deep in the information, and people are often expected to be able to read between the lines and to understand the implicit and unsaid information contained in the message (Hall, 1976). As a natural consequence, direct and open verbal declaration like *I love you* is not encouraged since it is considered shallow and frivolous.

From the perspective of pragmatics, various uses of *I love you* in the American context can in part be explained by the speech act theory, which attempts to explain how words can be used not only to present information but also to perform various speech actions (Austin, 1962). According to Searle (1969), to understand language, one must understand the speaker's intention since language is an intentional behavior and should be treated like a form of action. Searle (1976) has further introduced the notion of indirect speech act, where the speaker communicates with the hearer more than he or she actually says by

way of relying on their mutual shared background information. In the light of perspectives from indirect speech act, *I love you*, apart from its direct function to make a statement, can function as an indirect speech act performing advice in the meaning of "take care", apology in the meaning of "I apologize for what I have done", compliment in the meaning of "you're great", request in the meaning of "I need your help", invitation in the meaning of "I want to have sex with you", farewell in the meaning of "bye", and gratitude in the meaning of "thanks for helping me out".

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, there are some noteworthy limitations. One limitation of the present study is that it involves only a small number of participants. As a result, findings from this study have to be interpreted with caution. Further research with a larger population will extend the generalizability of these findings. Another limitation of this study is its lack of sampling balance in participants' age groups, gender, and undergraduate majors. A third limitation lies in its restricted sampling location. Consequently, the "American" context in this study should be more accurately understood as south Texas close to the U.S.-Mexican border. In spite of these limitations, the present study does present a preliminary ethnography of how *I love you* is used, which can help EFL teachers and learners understand it more thoroughly, translate it more accurately, and use it more appropriately.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Survey Questionnaire Form

Thank you for taking the time to complete and submit this survey questionnaire. Your insight and information are very valuable to us in studying the use of *I love you*. Specifically we want to find out who says *I love you*, to whom we say *I love you*, why we say *I love you*, when and where we say *I love you*, how we say *I love you*, how often we say *I love you*, and what we mean by saying *I love you*. Please note that the results of this survey will be anonymous and will be reported in the aggregate. Your sincere co-operation will be greatly appreciated.

#### About yourself

-Are you a bilingual?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

-Gender:  
Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

-First language(s):  
English \_\_\_\_\_ Spanish \_\_\_\_\_  
Both English & Spanish \_\_\_\_\_

-Major: \_\_\_\_\_

-Age: 20-29 \_\_\_\_\_ 30-39 \_\_\_\_\_  
Over 40 \_\_\_\_\_

#### Who

Do you use *I love you*?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

#### To whom you say *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Spouse
- Boyfriend
- Girlfriend
- Kids
- Siblings
- Friends
- Relatives
- Coworkers
- Teachers
- Students
- Service providers
- Partners
- Celebrities
- God
- Pets
- Shoes
- Purse
- TV
- Computer
- Electronic devices
- Money and/or gold
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

#### Why you say *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- Show love
- Show concern
- Show respect
- Show appreciation
- Show need
- Show admiration
- Show happiness
- Show support
- Show regret
- Show wish
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### When & Where you say *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- Parting
- Graduation
- Birthday
- Shopping
- Anniversary
- Make up for a fight
- Before going to bed in the evening
- End of a phone call
- Wake up in the morning
- Visit a patient
- Engagement
- Wedding
- Church service
- Reunion
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### How frequently you say *I love you* each day

Check one:

- At least once
- At least twice
- At least three times
- At least four times
- Over five times
- Over ten times.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### How you say *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- I love you
- Love you
- Love ya
- I** love you
- I love** you
- I love **you**

- 143
- ILY
- I love you to the bones/to death/to the end of time/to the last breath
- Say it with eye contact and/or touch
- I♥Y
- Orally (face to face)
- Written (texting)
- Privately
- Publicly
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### With what meaning implied when you say *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- I have warm affections for you in my heart.
- I adore you.
- I will never forget you.
- I'm proud of you.
- I really like you.
- Take care.
- You're great.
- I appreciate you.
- Thanks for helping me out.
- I really care about you.
- I need something or I need your help.
- I miss you.
- I'm here for you.
- I apologize for what I have done.
- Wishing you joy and happiness.
- Bye.
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### Response to *I love you*

Check all that apply:

- I love you too.
- I love you more.
- What do you want?
- Ditto.
- Other.

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**If you are an English-Spanish bilingual, which language carries more emotional weight when you say *I love you***

English \_\_\_\_\_ Spanish \_\_\_\_\_ Same \_\_\_\_\_