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Tryna?

Tryna [CHRY-nuh] verb

Origin: Bushwhackin' through Maine

1. To be interested in a non-committal way

2. To be absolutely interested

EX: "Tryna poke some smot?"

Antonym: not-too

-Tri Nu¹ "Frat Word of the Week", February 27, 2012

Introduction

For the average person, *tryna* is a reduced form of *trying to* produced in casual speech. However, a closer look at its usage among the Stanford Greek community reveals that the word has developed to take on new meanings which *trying to* does not convey. Even those who claim to have encountered the word before coming to Stanford claim that their current comprehension and production of the word is different. While *tryna* is still sometimes said in place of *trying to*, its meaning can vary and tends to have more to do with general interest or desire than making a genuine attempt to do something. According to the above definition, one can be *tryna* without being fully committed to accomplishing the task at hand. *Tryna* can also carry an implied habitual activity when used between close friends in certain contexts and does not always appear with a complement, while *trying to* requires a stated action as its complement. In a 2004 study on the patterns of use for the address term *dude*, Kiesling explains that using the word in conversation, "encodes the speaker's stance to his or her current addressee(s)," and that, "the term is used mainly in situations in which a speaker takes a stance of solidarity or camaraderie, but crucially in a nonchalant, not-too enthusiastic manner" (Kiesling 282). In the same way that *dude* is used as a tool for creating this "cool solidarity" between interlocutors, the strongly

¹ The fraternity name and names of fraternity members have been changed.

contextual nature of *tryna* as it is used among the Stanford Greek community indexes an understanding of shared meaning within the community.

Methods

To determine how *tryna* is used and how it is different from *trying to*, I analyzed a corpus of usages taken from personal e-mails and Google chat logs. I also drew from my own experience and intuitions as a *tryna*-user. Because preliminary research showed that *tryna* is frequently attributed to Tri Nu fraternity, I also conducted interviews with nine fraternity members in which I asked the following questions:

- Define *tryna* and use it in a sentence.
- How is its meaning different from “trying to?”
- Who uses *tryna*? Who doesn’t?
- Where do you use it? Is there anyone you try not to use it?
- Where did *tryna* come from?
- If you have heard it used elsewhere (not at Stanford), does the Stanford usage differ at all from other usages you’re familiar with?

The information gained from these interviews is used to test hypotheses developed from corpus data as well as to shed some light on the origins of the word and its social meanings. To get an idea of how the word has developed and evolved since being introduced at Stanford, I ask those who claim to have used the word before coming to Stanford to comment on the ways the word is used now that it was not previously. The information gained these various sources helps to characterize *tryna* as a multiple-use, context-specific expression that conveys both desire and shared understanding.

Results

The Tryna Corpus

Tryna appeared over 140 times in archived e-mails and chat logs from January 2010 to present. Despite access to e-mails sent as early as 2005, *tryna* did not start showing up until 2010. Based on these e-mails, its usage seems to be increasing with time. The word was used an average of 2.75 times per month in 2010, 6.25 times per month in 2011, and 11.43 times per month in 2012 thus far. The percentage of total e-mails per month as calculated from January 2010 through February 2012 can be seen in Figure 1.

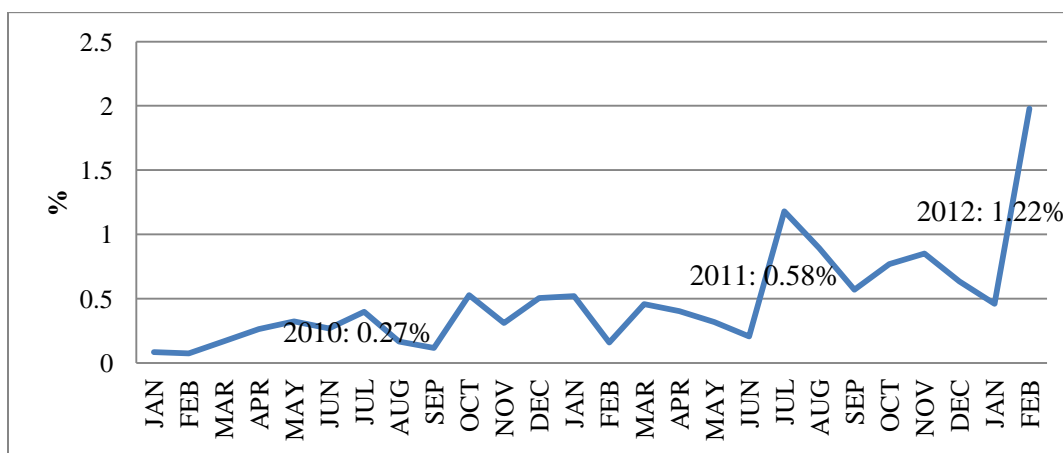


Figure 1: Percent of E-mails and Google Chat Logs Containing *Tryna* Jan 2010-Feb 2012

As hypothesized previously, not every usage found could be replaced by *trying to* and retain its intended meaning. In fact, as illustrated in Figure 2, only 35 instances (25% of *tryna* e-mails) seemed to be taking the place of *trying to* and were paired with explicit objects while the remaining 108 uses referenced general interest or eagerness to participate in a social activity, either explicitly stated or implied. Of these 108 usages, 28 were embedded in questions that attempted to determine an individual or group's level of interest. I have chosen some specific examples in order to illustrate the various ways *tryna* is used and the possible meanings of each.

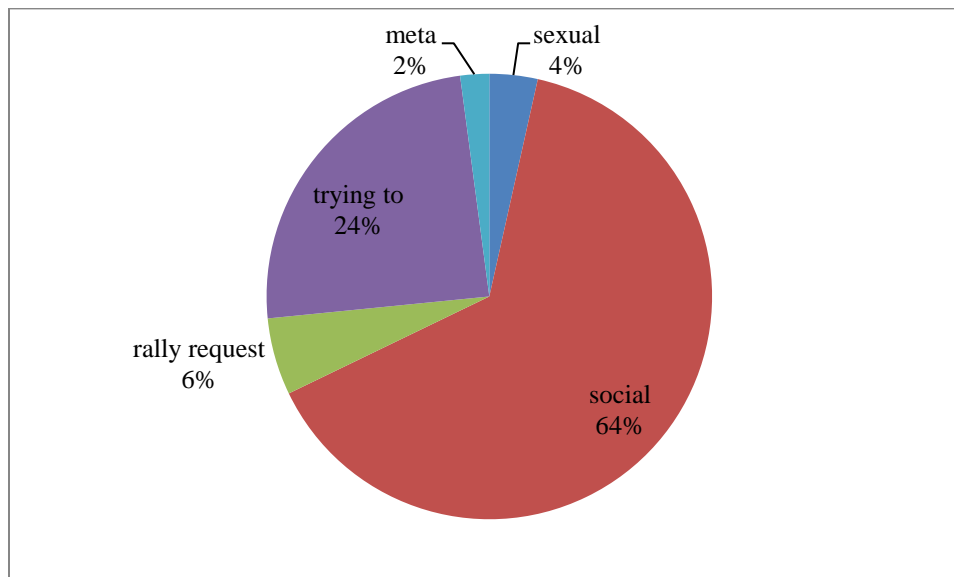


Figure 2: Uses of Tryna in E-mails and Google Chat Logs Jan 2010-Feb 2012²

Expressing and gauging interest level

Tryna is most frequently used to express personal interest in participating in a particular activity (typically social) or to attempt to gauge others' interest in an activity. For example, the introductory e-mail for a summer e-mail list states, "Feel free to send out an email if you're tryna [drink], cook dinner, something funny happened to you, blah blah." The implication is that the list can be used as a tool for gauging others' interest in participating in said activities with you. You would not necessarily be actively trying to make concrete plans to do something in order to send such an e-mail. Another e-mail sent to the same list later that summer asks, "Is anybody tryna do a Lil Wayne vs. Eminem power hour anytime soon?" If this person had said *trying to* rather than *tryna*, this would be an inquiry about whether anybody was actively in the process of planning and organizing such an event. However, by using *tryna* the necessity of an active effort is eliminated, and the question becomes more about gauging general interest in participating in such an event rather than previous effort. If they had instead asked, "Does anybody want to..."

² "Rally request" refers to e-mails sent out attempting to find a specific item of clothing needed for a costume, i.e. "Tryna Miss White it up, but I have a pretty good dress for Miss Scarlet." (sent out before a "Clue" themed event)

this would be a different request altogether. The use of *want to* would seem to suggest that the requestor was personally interested in arranging such an event and was looking for others to join him in putting it on. By using *tryna* instead of *want to* the sender of the e-mail removes his own interest from the equation and is merely trying to determine others' interest in the event regardless of his own involvement. Stanley clarifies this distinction, saying, "It's a way of asking if someone wants to do something with you, but the reason it's unique is that, I guess, just the way it comes out is like, 'I'm asking you to something, but all the pressure's on you.' Instead of just being like, 'Do you want to go get pizza?' I say, 'You tryna get pizza?' like, it's all on them. It takes all the pressure off me." To summarize, while *trying to* inquires about the effort of the e-mail recipients and *want to* suggests an effort made by the sender of the e-mail, *tryna* eliminates effort by either party and makes it merely a question of interest without effort.

When *tryna* is used to assess interest in activities which the addressee would clearly not have made any previous effort to accomplish due to a lack of previous knowledge, the focus on interest rather than effort is further illuminated. An e-mail requesting a ride from the airport asks, "Anyone tryna pick me up from SFO tomorrow aat [*sic*] about 1:30?" Clearly, none of the recipients of the e-mail would have been *trying to* pick the requestor up from the airport because they were unaware of the need for a ride before receiving the e-mail. Similar questions gauging interest in specific events also frequently appear as, "Tryna?" without an object. I found nine usages of this form, eight of which were paired with a forwarded description of some event, either as the subject line or as the only added body text.³ These indicate that the sender is attempting to gauge others' interest in attending the event or perhaps to encourage others to join them in the activity being described. A recipient of such an e-mail could claim that they were

³ The only other instance of the type "Tryna?" was the opening line of a Google chat conversation from a friend with whom I frequently walk to class sent just before class time.

tryna do that activity regardless of whether or not they had heard of the event previously or made plans to attend. Unlike *trying to*, previous intentions and effort are not important; to be *tryna* only requires an interest in participating in a given activity or event.

Expressing commitment and desire

Despite the non-committal implications of *tryna* when used to gauge or express interest in an activity, *tryna* can be modified by intensifiers, capitalization, and exclamation points to assert commitment. When discussing choice rankings for housing a friend writes, “FloMo is at the top. Literally above row houses. We’re tryna that hard.” Similarly, someone requesting a Stanford ID to get her friend into a football game wrote, “I’m so tryna find a way to smuggle him into this game and show him how Stanford does it!” Other intensifiers paired with *tryna* included “def⁴ tryna” and “really tryna.” Even a simple declarative sentence paired with details of an upcoming concert, “I’m TRYNA,” asserts the sender’s eagerness to attend. In these usages, *tryna* behaves almost like an adjective; to be *tryna* is to be eager to accomplish a desired activity.

When *tryna* is used in reference to a person without making reference to any activity, it can imply that someone is *tryna* “hook-up.” An e-mail discussing plans to organize a group date states, “I know [potential date]’s been TRYNA all over [girl],” meaning that this potential date has been expressing romantic interest in this particular girl. In such cases without an explicit activity, the general interpretation is that whoever is being described as *tryna* is attempting to initiate some sort of romantic and/or physical relationship regardless of whether they have previously made any attempts to initiate contact with the other person. This sexual connotation will be further discussed in the section on the social meaning of *tryna*.

⁴ Abbreviated form of definitely

Origin and development from the Tri Nu perspective

As discussed in the methods section, the general consensus among the Stanford students I interviewed is that *tryna* originated in the Tri Nu fraternity. It continues to be used frequently among this group. As the “Frat Word of the Week” suggests, several members of Tri Nu believe the word to have been introduced by one particular member, Kyle, from Maine. Kyle recalls hearing the word for the first time during his junior or senior year of high school (~2007) said by a friend from New Jersey. He suggested that the word might have started on the East Coast, a perception shared by several of his fraternity brothers who are also from the East Coast. A Google Trends search of *tryna* reveals that the top seven states that use *tryna* are all in the Northeast,⁵ however even those fraternity brothers who came from as far south as Florida claim to have heard it used before coming to Stanford. Members from elsewhere in the U.S. (Minnesota, Colorado, Texas) claim that they did not hear it until they came to Stanford, and some not until they joined the fraternity at the end of their freshman year. However, even those who claim to have heard and used *tryna* before coming to Stanford report that the meanings and uses of the word have changed since arriving at Stanford.

Development and evolution of tryna

When asked about whether the word has changed since arriving at Stanford, many of those interviewed seemed to believe that the way *tryna* is used at Stanford is more dynamic and unique than how it is typically used elsewhere. Those who were familiar with the word before coming to college frequently started out by saying that *tryna* is no different from *trying to*, but when asked about how the word has been adopted and put into use at Stanford, they seemed to go back on this original intuition. This could be because they originally started using the word at

⁵ 1. Rhode Island 2. New Jersey 3. New York 4. Pennsylvania 5. Maryland 6. Connecticut 7. Massachusetts

home in place of *trying to* and have started applying the word to a greater variety of contexts since arriving at Stanford. Aaron, who claims to have heard and used the word frequently growing up in D.C., says, “I just think of it as the same way you would say ‘let me’ vs. ‘lemme.’ I mean, It just sort of combines into one word. But, I think, the way we’ve adopted it, you wouldn’t really say, ‘I’m trying to!’⁶ It wouldn’t really function. I guess you could say, ‘I’m trying to hook up with someone,’ but it just sounds sort of weird. It just doesn’t quite apply to as many situations. You have to be ‘trying to...’ something as opposed to *tryna* you can just be *tryna*.”

When discussing the way *tryna* differs from *trying to*, Brewer explains, “Trying to, I feel like, is you’re, like, putting forth an effort, and you don’t really know if, like, the outcome is gonna be, like what you want, but you’re like putting forth an effort, where, like, *tryna* is, like, more of a commitment sort of thing, like, ‘Yeah, I’m tryna. I’ll do that,’ or, like, ‘Are you tryna go to the movie,’ like, asking you if you’re, like, actively interested in something.” Kyle summed it up by saying, “[Tryna is] not as much of an active expression. It’s more, ‘I am down, I would look forward to doing that, I want to do that,’ but you’re not, like, physically, like, exerting effort necessarily. It’s like expressing a desire.”

A few *tryna*-users mentioned being misunderstood or misinterpreted when using the “Stanford version” of the term outside of school. Brewer mentions his father’s confusion surrounding Brewer’s usage of the term. “If I ever said it in front of my dad, my dad would be like, ‘What are you talking about? Why are you *trying to* do something; just *do* it!’ Yeah, you know, ‘I’m tryna go to the movies,’ ‘So, you *are* going to the movies?’” Misunderstandings like these illustrate how the Stanford usage has developed from the original meaning of *trying to* to

⁶ Said in a falsetto

something more-closely resembling “interested in.” Kyle summed it up by saying, “We have kind of a bizarre usage, you know. I’m *tryna*. Am I *trying to*? No. Would I *like to*? Yes, I would like to.” This distinction goes along with my original intuitions and the corpus data that *tryna* has developed its own interest-based meaning which deviates from the meaning of “trying to.”

The fraternity brothers also discussed a couple of usages of *tryna* that seem to be unique to Tri Nu. The first is a way of expressing a strong desire by exclaiming “Trynaaa!” in a falsetto, usually in response to an inquiry about one’s interest in participating in an activity. In a group interview with four members, when one would use this falsetto version of *tryna*, the others would break out in a chorus of falsetto *trynaaaa!*’s in response. Stanley explained that this is an emphatic way of expressing that you want to participate in a particular task. You might imagine asking a group of Tri Nus if they are planning on drinking on a Friday night and receiving such a response. This pronunciation eliminates the non-committal connotation of *tryna* and asserts desire, similar to the way others outside of Tri Nu assert their desire by using intensifiers along with *tryna* like “so tryna” or “tryna that hard.”

In a 2007 study on the use of falsetto as a stylistic variable, Podesva offers several possible social meanings for its usage. By producing *tryna* in a falsetto tone in order to communicate emphatic interest or agreement, the Tri Nus seem to be using falsetto as a tool for indexing expressiveness. Just as Heath uses a falsetto to express surprise or excitement, *tryna* can be said in a falsetto to assert genuine excitement about an event. Because *tryna* can convey any level of willingness from a passing interest to a strong desire, the use of falsetto can emphasize one’s commitment to engaging in a particular activity.

The negated form of *tryna*, according to the Tri Nus, is *not to*⁷ as in “not only am I not *tryna*, I’m trying *not to*.” This is another usage which I had not previously encountered in my own experience or in the corpus data. The corpus did contain several negative uses of *tryna*, but every negative form in the corpus appears as “not *tryna*.” It seems that “not *tryna*” is a negation of the form expressing desire, so while *tryna* means you are interested, to be *not tryna* is to be uninterested. An e-mail discussing possible plans states, “If you’re not *tryna* I understand though,” meaning, I understand if you’re not interested. Just like the use of falsetto intensifies *tryna* to take it from “interested in a non-committal way” to “definitely interested,” pairing a falsetto tone with the negated form “not too” takes the negation from “not really interested” to “really not interested.” If someone were to ask, “Is anyone *tryna* go to Safeway right now?” a Tri Nu might respond by saying, “Not to!” in a falsetto to emphatically state his disinterest. However, as Stanley and others hypothesized, “that is definitely just in [Tri Nu]. No one would expect anyone else to understand what that [falsetto pronunciation and negation] meant.”

Discussion: Social Meanings

The Stanford-specific connotations of *tryna* as well as the in-group Tri Nu uses demonstrate the deeper social meanings of the word beyond its contextual meanings. Because the correct interpretation of these meanings in any given context relies on your previous understanding of *tryna*’s use, the act of using it not only asserts your in-group membership, it assumes that your listener shares the same intuitions about the word that you do. Stanley, discussing how the word is used among the Greek community, said, “It’s like our niche dictionary word that, like, we kinda understand and everyone else, like kinda gets it, but not really.” In other words, someone who has not previously heard *tryna* can assume that it means

⁷ According to Tristan, this form requires a falsetto

trying to and get an idea of what the *tryna*-speaker is intending, but only someone who is part of the community of *tryna*-users would be able to understand the more subtle implications that *trying to* does not convey. Like *dude*, *tryna* is “an in-group term that indicate[s] solidarity,” (Kiesling 284).

The context of no context

The activity serving as the object of *tryna* can be unstated when the word is used between close friends and implied based on shared experiences and common ground. Kyle explains, “It’s kind of become a term that is used with, like, certain habitual activities, for sure, that you would do with your friends, you know. ‘Tryna?’ could mean a number of things, but if you and I normally partake in something, all I would have to say is *tryna* and you usually would know what I’m referring to.” Derek shares this intuition about the implied content, saying, “It’s so much more contextual than ‘trying to.’ Like, *trying to* you have to say ‘Are you trying to...’ whatever, but like *tryna* is, like, way more applied. The meaning could be a lot different based on who you’re talking to.” Beyond the mutual understanding of the word itself, this use takes it a step further by making the assumption that whoever you’re talking to has the same activity in mind, so it doesn’t need to be mentioned explicitly. This indirect referencing of shared understanding further indicates camaraderie and solidarity between speakers.

Despite these uses without an explicitly stated activity, there is also a default implied activity when none seems salient. Every Tri Nu interviewed referenced this meaning with the example sentence, “Oh, yeah, she’s *tryna*.” Tristan explains, “When you use it as more of an adjective it has a sexual connotation. The actual activity is left to your own imagination.” Aaron and Jordan attempted to clarify the different between these two usages without context in the following conversation:

Jordan: If you just said, “She’s tryna,” that would seem to be like “Oh, she’s tryna hook up.”

Aaron: Agreed, but if you had said something about going to a movie earlier or something like that, then you’d be like, “Oh, Lydia’s tryna,” like, “Yeah, Lydia’s tryna go to a movie.”

Jordan: But your default just would be, if you were like, “Oh, Lydia’s tryna,” you’d be like, “Ohh, werrrd⁸...”

This implied sexual connotation aligns with the definition of desire or willingness, but in this case it is referencing a willingness to participate in sexual activities, either in general or with a specific person. Perhaps the activity is not explicitly stated in such uses because it is not the specific activity which is important but rather the willingness or level of promiscuity that is being highlighted. The actual extent of contact is yet unknown and is thus left up to the imagination. It is unclear why this is the default interpretation for instances of *tryna* without a stated activity, but perhaps this was the original use indicating willingness to participate in sexual activities which has since been applied to indicate willingness to participate in other activities.

Conclusion

It is clear that to get the full effect of using this word, it must be used within the community that can appreciate and understand these meanings. In this way, the Greek community and other “social circles” which are known for using the word assert their “in-group” status through proper use and comprehension of others’ uses. In a way it functions like *dude* in creating solidarity between users of the word and asserting one’s self-perception as a member of the in-group of *tryna*-users. The specific meanings which have developed within the Stanford

⁸ Tri Nu “Frat Word of the Week,” February 20: “1. A statement of agreement, 2. A statement of “Yes, I am interested.” EX: “I’m thinking about going to blaze some nugget in the UQ, you tryna?” “Werd, let’s do it.”

Greek community serve to further separate this particular community from other *tryna*-users elsewhere, such as the East Coast.

Further research would have to be done in order to determine exactly who at Stanford understands which meanings of *tryna* and which meanings are not as widely understood or recognized. It might also be helpful to take a closer look at the specific members of Tri Nu which seem to be the most frequent *tryna*-users to get a better idea of the style being performed in this community. Finally, further study of the sexual uses and connotations of *tryna*, such as how its meaning varies when used by males or females to describe members of the same or opposite sex, might help to develop an understanding of how gender and sexuality is discussed within the community of *tryna*-users.

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