

Social position as a constraint on linguistic alignment

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Abstract

During conversation, individual speakers become part of a larger conversational system. This is observable in interpersonal coordination, variously described as alignment, synchrony, convergence, and complexity matching. While this coordination is ubiquitous, the degree of coordination varies greatly between conversations, interlocutors, and group-level goals. There is growing interest in understanding the constraints that operate at the level of the conversational system. We explore how social distance, the status and demographic differences of conversation partners, constrain linguistic alignment. To do this, we leverage the CANDOR dataset (Reece et al., 2022), which contains 1656 approximately half-hour ZOOM conversations between strangers and a large battery of follow-up questions regarding their conversation, personality, and demographic information including perceptions of status. In this exploratory study, we use recurrence analysis to examine how various coordinative behaviors, particularly lexical and syntactic alignment, are influenced by the social distance between conversation partners. Experimental follow-ups are discussed.