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Linguistic distance, social distance, and convergence in dialogue

Evidence from phonetic imitation studies has shown that listeners adapt their speech to be more similar to that of a speaker they have prior exposure to. Furthermore, the extent of convergence appears to be modulated by listeners' perceptions of speaker characteristics such as the attractiveness of their voice, or the typicality of their accent. Both social and cognitive explanations have been proposed: convergence could be motivated by the listener wanting to increase their similarity to a socially well-positioned individual, or by automatic processes that detect speech characteristics like typicality or distinctiveness. I present some pilot work that extends this logic to the structural domain, asking whether listeners' adaptation of syntactic forms they produce depends on their perceptions about their interlocutor's social proximity and linguistic competence.

We use structural priming as a measure of listeners' convergence with their interlocutor. Structural priming has been a useful tool for probing abstract syntactic representations in large part due to its implicit nature, which has led some researchers to liken it to implicit procedural learning. We compared priming in conversations between (i) pairs of native speakers of the same dialect, (ii) native and non-native speakers, and (iii) native speakers of two dialects of the same language, to assess to what extent interlocutor characteristics influence convergence or divergence of syntactic forms in dialogue.