

Syntactic alignment in conversation. A psycholinguistic study in a cooperative setting

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Syntax has long been in the scope of linguistic research and its study can be traced back as far as to 5th century BC (Fortson 2004). Its importance was also marked by theoretical work in the field in the 20th century (e.g. Chomsky 1957). However, not until recently has the attention been drawn towards syntax in interaction.

One of the major breakthroughs was Garrod and Pickering's (2004) discovery of syntactic alignment in dialogue which states that interlocutors mirror each other's sentence structure automatically. Alignment also extends to other levels of representation; as a result, this mechanism facilitates production and comprehension. Basing on this discovery, a plethora of other psycholinguistic studies has been conducted, e.g. examining social influence on syntax (Balcetis and Dale 2005, Weatherholtz et al. 2014) and the correlation between syntax and the perception of the interlocutor (Schoot et al. 2016). These studies were conducted for foreign languages and little investigation has been carried out into syntactic alignment in Polish (Świeczkowska and Woźny 2014); however, the Polish study was on the alignment in conversation in general.

The present study applies a novel method of investigating language in communication, which is a Dialogue Experimentation Toolkit (DiET). DiET is a text-based chat tool developed by Mills and Healey (2013). What distinguishes DiET from other chat clients is the possibility of introducing pre-defined modifications into conversation. The other tool applied in the study is the maze-game, which is widely applied in psycholinguistic study of conversations (Garrod and Anderson 1987; Garrod and Pickering 2004, 2006; Mills and Healey 2013). The study proposed for the conference examines syntactic alignment in Polish with the use of a Dialogue Experimentation Toolkit. The cooperative context is included by asking the participants to finish a task: to indicate the position of three "fields" on each other's mazes.

The research has shown that interlocutors tend to mimic each other's sentence structure. For instance, they opt for the same lexical choices to refer to the same entities. Furthermore, participants also align in terms of sentence, for example, by omitting the verb altogether or using the same arguments for the same verbs. However, there were participants who used their own terms to refer to entities and did not align to their interlocutors. Nevertheless, the pairs managed to complete the task successfully.

References

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