

THE ART OF CONVERSATION: HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE SUCCESSFULLY?

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Every day we talk with people. But have you ever wondered how two people with completely separate minds manage to understand each other? To have a successful conversation, you must understand the language that the other person is using and produce language that your conversational partner can understand, otherwise communicating can become difficult. One thing that human speakers do to make sure that the other person understands them is to copy the language that their conversational partners use, such as their word choices. This is called alignment, and it increases the likelihood of two people having a successful conversation or doing well on a shared task. Scientific experiments have shown that alignment is an important feature of human communication that occurs in multiple situations. In this article, we explain three different types of alignment that speakers use and describe how language scientists study alignment.

CONVERSATIONAL PARTNER

The person you are talking with when having a conversation, such as your friend, parent, or teacher.

ALIGNMENT

When people in a conversation copy elements of each other's language to make it easier to understand each other.

ALIGNMENT: AN IMPORTANT FEATURE OF CONVERSATION

Having conversations with other people is something that most of us do every day. We do it so often that it usually feels very easy and natural. However, have you ever stopped to think about what is involved in a conversation between you and someone else? How can two people with completely separate minds understand each other so easily?

The goal of a conversation is for you and your **conversational partner** to share your thoughts and ideas with each other. To have a successful conversation, you must understand the language of your conversational partner and produce language that your conversational partner can understand. This is not easy! You must make sure you talk and listen at the right times. You must think of all the words, sounds, and sentences you want to say, while listening to what your partner says. You must also choose words, sounds, and sentences that you think your partner can understand. One thing people do to make this easier is to copy the language that their conversational partner has already used in the conversation. This is called **alignment** and it is a behavior commonly used by humans to make conversations easier and more successful [1].

Knowing about alignment will help you understand how humans communicate and what is important when you are communicating with your friends. For example, alignment can help you and your friends finish a task or a game quicker and better! In the following sections, we are going to describe different types of alignment, explain how language scientists investigate alignment, and explain why alignment is an important feature of conversation.

WHAT TYPES OF ALIGNMENT ARE THERE?

Alignment occurs when someone re-uses any aspect of language that their conversational partner has recently used in the conversation. Alignment happens all the time: You have probably used alignment in conversations without even noticing! Alignment is particularly useful when a conversation becomes a bit tricky to understand. There are at least three types of alignment that language scientists know about (Figure 1).

Alignment of Word Choice

Let us imagine that two friends, Theo and Lucy, are from two different English-speaking countries: Lucy is from the United States of America (USA) and Theo is from the United Kingdom (UK). In these two countries, people sometimes use different words to mean the same thing, such as saying "popsicle" (USA) or "ice lolly" (UK). If Lucy uses the word "popsicle" in a conversation, this may sound odd to Theo because he would normally say "ice lolly," but he might still know what

Figure 1

Types of alignment used in conversation. The green text shows what Person 2 (Theo) may say if he is aligning his language with what Person 1 (Lucy) has already said in the conversation. The red text shows what Theo may say if he is not using alignment.

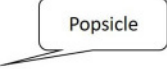



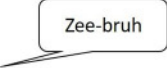



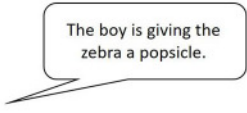



Type of alignment	Person 1 (Lucy)	Person 2 (Theo)
Word choice		  
Pronunciation		  
Word order		  

Figure 1

Lucy means because he has heard it in movies. When it is Theo’s turn to talk, Theo may choose to say the word “popsicle,” even though this is not the word he would normally use, because he wants to make sure that Lucy understands him. This is word choice alignment, which is also sometimes called **lexical** alignment. Theo is adapting which words he uses to increase the likelihood of having a successful conversation with Lucy.

LEXICAL

Related to the words of a language.

Alignment of Pronunciation

In addition to copying each other’s word choices, Theo and Lucy may start copying each other’s pronunciation. For example, if Lucy pronounces the word zebra with an American pronunciation (“zee-bruh”), Theo may pronounce it the same way when speaking with Lucy, even though he would usually say it with a British pronunciation (“zeb-ruh”).

Alignment of Word Order

Lucy and Theo may also copy each other’s word orders. For example, if Lucy says, “The boy is giving the zebra a popsicle,” Theo may use the same word order when speaking next. He might say “The girl is feeding the horse the apple,” even though he could use a different word order to say the same thing: “The girl is feeding the apple to the horse.”

When you are talking with your friends, it is likely that you use some, if not all, of these types of alignment. Using alignment is a very easy way to make conversations easier and communication more successful. This copying behavior also helps speakers produce language faster, which can be important for keeping the conversation flowing. Alignment can be something speakers decide to do, or they can do it without knowing they are doing it. We said previously that Theo could choose to use the word “popsicle” to help Lucy understand him. However, if he frequently talks with Lucy, Theo may start using

Figure 2

An experiment to study word choice alignment. The scientist and the participant take turns describing pictures. If the participant is using alignment, they will copy the scientist's word choice for objects that have multiple possible names, for example by using the word "bunny" instead of "rabbit."

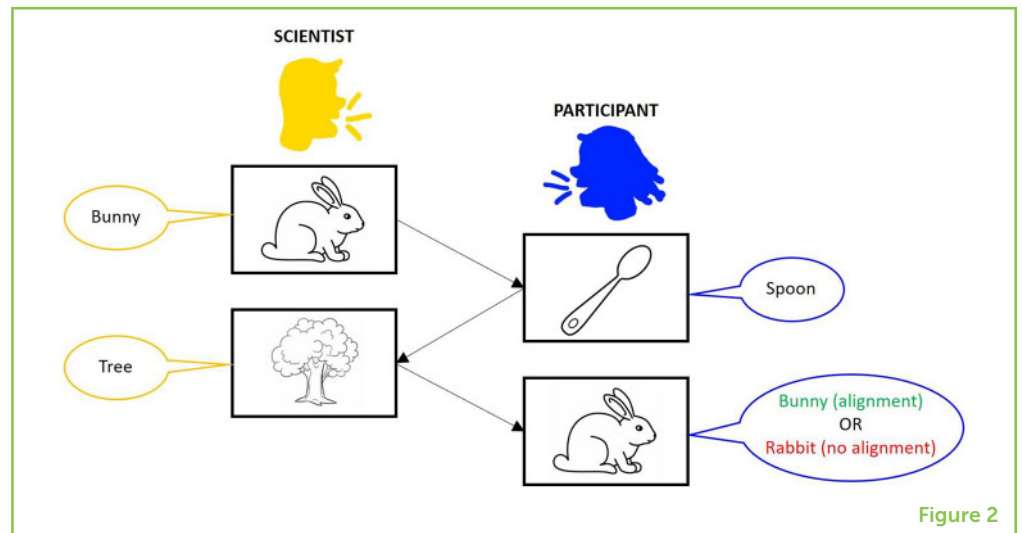


Figure 2

the word "popsicle" more often than "ice lolly," without realizing he is doing it.

HOW DO LANGUAGE SCIENTISTS STUDY ALIGNMENT?

Language scientists study alignment to examine communication in humans and to find out how we understand each other. In alignment experiments, scientists might invite a person, called the participant, to play a picture-description game [2]. In this game, the participant and the scientist, who is acting as the participant's conversational partner, take turns describing various pictures. The scientist does not tell the participant that they are interested in alignment because they want to study how the participant produces language when talking normally. Instead, the participant is told that the aim of the game is to find matching pictures. The scientist changes how they describe their pictures in the game to see how their changes influence the participant's picture descriptions, but the participant is unaware of this.

For example, in a word choice alignment experiment, the participant and the scientist describe pictures of different objects. Some of these pictures would have two possible names, such as "bunny" and "rabbit." On their turn, the scientist describes their picture using the word "bunny." A few pictures later, the participant is shown the same picture. If the participant also describes the picture using the word "bunny" (instead of "rabbit"), then this shows that the participant is aligning their word choices with the scientist (Figure 2).

WHY IS ALIGNMENT IMPORTANT?

Studies like the one we described reveal lots of interesting things about how people use alignment to help communication in conversations.

For instance, language scientists have found that alignment is widespread: it occurs in many different languages and different speakers (including young children and language learners), as well as in lots of different types of conversations (face-to-face interactions, phone calls, text messages) [2, 3]. This shows that alignment in conversation is a very natural and normal thing to do.

Speakers in conversations are even more likely to use alignment when they must work together to complete a shared task or game [4]. For example, conversational partners might complete a shared task quicker or get a higher score in a game if they use alignment when talking together. This shows that alignment is a critical tool for successful communication. But remember, for alignment to work, it is important to listen properly to your conversational partner and not talk over them!

CONCLUSIONS

You now know lots about how we use alignment in conversation. You know about three different types of alignment (word choice, pronunciation, and word order), you know that scientists often use picture-description games to study alignment, and you know that humans use alignment to help conversations to be understood better and to successfully complete tasks. This means that you are ready to look out for alignment in everyday conversations!

Here are a few ideas. If you have a friend whose family talks with a different regional accent, pay attention to when your friend is talking to you, compared to talking with their family. Does your friend pronounce some words differently or use different words for the same thing depending on who they are talking to? You could also conduct your own mini alignment experiment. To do this, find an object that can be described using two different words (such as rabbit/bunny or couch/sofa) and have a conversation with your friend about this object using one of the words. Pay attention to whether your friend copies your word choices: if they do, they are showing alignment! What you discover from these experiments, as well as what you have learned from this article, will increase your understanding about how humans communicate with each other.

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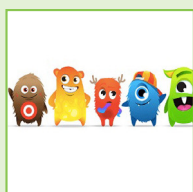
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As a bilingual speaker of French and English, I am interested in how people learn to comprehend and produce foreign languages. For example, I have worked on how people learn to produce foreign sounds or how they learn to build sentences in a foreign language. One of my aims is to use that knowledge to understand how best to teach foreign languages. I am currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Warwick (UK), and I have previously studied psychology and linguistics in Canada, Austria, and Croatia. In my free time, I like singing, exercising, and cooking. *marion.coumel@york.ac.uk



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