

The Influence of Accent Prestige on Lexical and Syntactic Alignment in Dialogue

Hanna-Sophia Shine^{1,2} & L. Robert Slevc¹ - University of Maryland¹, Harvard University²

When people converse, they often converge on multiple linguistic levels; a phenomenon referred to as linguistic alignment (or accommodation or entrainment). Alignment emerges naturally and quickly in diverse settings [e.g., 1-4], but why does it occur? The *Interactive Alignment Model* (IAM) argues that alignment is an automatic process that eases comprehension and is subject to communicative pressures (e.g., noisy environment, more alignment) [5]. In contrast, *Communication Accommodation Theory* (CAT) posits that alignment between a speaker and their interlocutor reflects their social attitudes toward one another and is subject to the influence of sociocultural factors [6,7]. Here, we contrast these theories by assessing how an interlocutor's perceived prestige and understandability (manipulated via the interlocutor's foreign accent) influence lexical and syntactic alignment in a cooperative dialogue task. If alignment reflects a desire for affiliation (as per CAT), then alignment should be greater with interlocutors with high- compared to low-prestige accents. In contrast, if alignment reflects communicative pressures (as per IAM), then alignment should be greater with interlocutors with low-prestige (and more difficult to understand) accents compared to high-prestige accents.

Study 1a. In a norming study to assess perceptions of accent prestige, 109

Native-English-speakers ranked recordings of six foreign-accented English speakers on characteristics related to perceived prestige and comprehension. **Results** showed differences in the overall mean rankings between the six accents (see Fig1 for prestige and comprehension rankings). **Study 1b.** This pre-registered study investigated the degree of lexical and syntactic alignment of native English speakers engaged in simulated conversations with foreign-accented English speakers (pre-recorded accented individuals who differed maximally in their prestige rankings from Study 1a). We predicted that the degree of alignment would differ when engaging with the “low prestige” speaker (Cantonese) compared to the “high prestige” speaker (British). While our accented speaker choices have limitations (i.e., high-prestige is confounded with native speaker status), we intentionally continued with this design as we felt it maximized the likelihood that we would be able to detect an effect. In this novel task, participants (preliminary $N = 52$; pre-registered target $N = 192$) were told they would narrate short stories with partners: on each trial, they heard a sentence from their partner and then viewed and described the next scene in the story. The process would repeat with the story developing as they continued (e.g., the same characters appear throughout, coherent narrative, etc.). Each story contained 8-11 lexical primes (e.g., “serpents” instead of “snakes”) and 10 syntactic primes (prepositional- v. double-object datives); each participant co-narrated 2 stories with each partner. **Preliminary Results** showed significant lexical alignment, which differed according to the interlocutor's accent ($p < .001$; Fig2a): participants were significantly less likely to use the atypical terms introduced by the Cantonese-accented speaker compared to the atypical terms introduced by the British-accented speaker. In contrast, syntactic alignment (ME of prime type $p < 0.001$; Fig2b) was unaffected by the partner's accent (no significant prime-type by accent interaction). **Conclusions:** The social prestige of an interlocutor's accent can affect the degree of lexical alignment—people aligned more with a higher prestige speaker—in line with CAT and the view of lexical alignment as a “conceptual pact” [4]. In contrast, participants' degree of syntactic alignment was *unaffected* by the prestige of the interlocutor's accent, suggesting that syntactic alignment may be relatively more automatic (but cf. [8]), in line with IAM.

Study 1a:

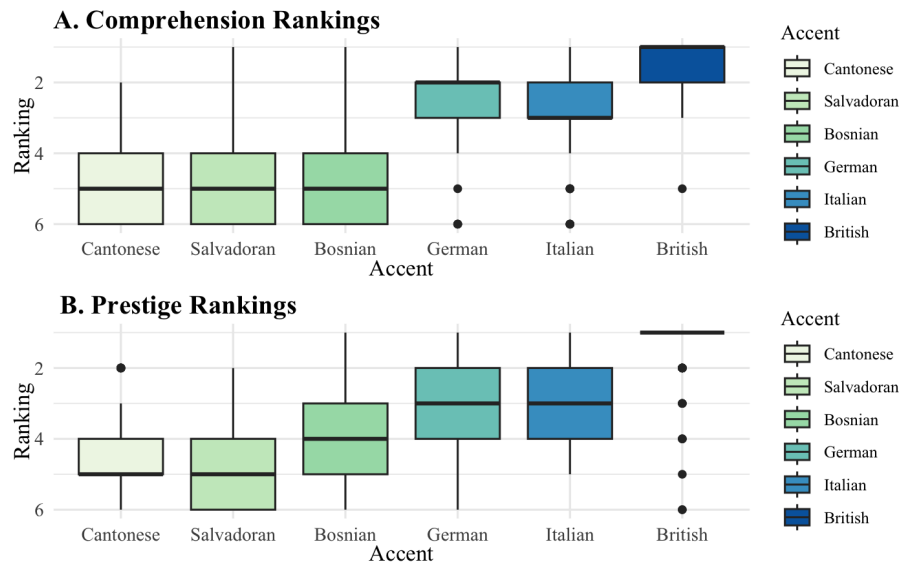


Fig1. The rankings of each accent for (A) comprehension and (B) prestige in Study 1a (on a 6-point scale: 1 = highest and 6 = lowest). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of accent type on overall mean rank across items ($F(4.33, 450.05) = 116.694, p < .0001, \eta^2[g] = .529$).

Study 1b:

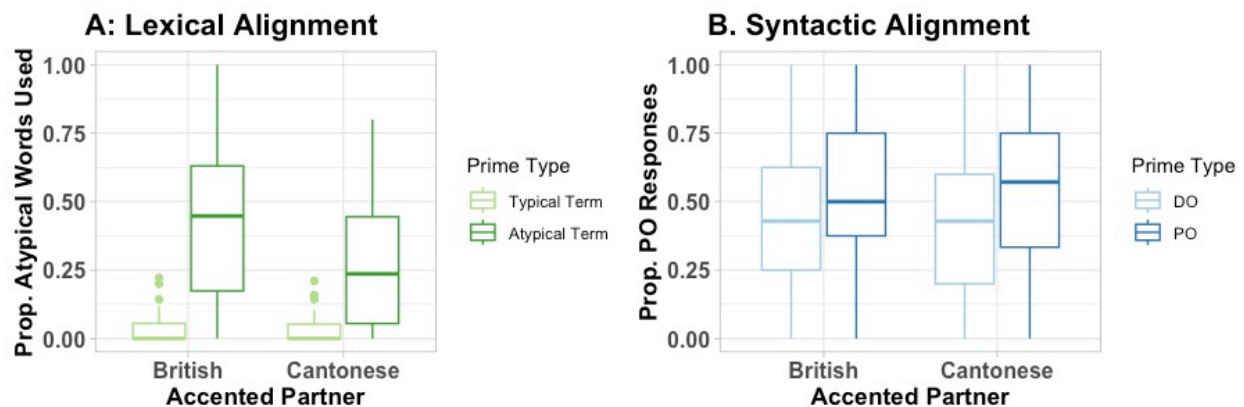


Fig2. Preliminary results ($N = 52$) for the degree of alignment in Study 1b. (A) Lexical alignment was greater with the high-prestige British-accented interlocutor compared to the lower-prestige Cantonese-accented interlocutor (a significant *prime type* by *accent* interaction; $b = 1.29, SE = .41, Z = 3.12, p < .01$). (B) Syntactic alignment was significant ($b = .67, SE = .19, Z = 3.59, p < .001$) but did not interact with the interlocutor's accent ($p = .65$).

References

[1] Fusaroli et al. (2012), [2] Brennan & Clark (1996), [3] Bock (1986), [4] Bock (1989), [5] Pickering & Garrod (2004), [6] Giles et al. (1973), [7] Giles & Ogay (2007), [8] Weatherholtz et al. (2014)