Liberals, compromisers, and accented speakers: Social influences on syntactic alignment

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Work in sociolinguistics and elsewhere has debated the mechanism(s) responsible for the tendency of speakers to become similar to interlocutors at a variety of linguistic levels (e.g. Babel 2010, Giles & Powesland 1975, Trudgill 2008). This paper explores the role of social factors in syntactic priming, an alignment phenomenon in which speakers re-use syntactic structures they were recently exposed to (Bock, 1986). Psycholinguistic research has characterized syntactic priming as a fully automatic process (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) and has identified a variety of structural factors related to the prime and target that predict the strength of priming in production (see Chang et al., 2006; Reitter et al., 2011). At the same time, research in social psychology has attributed syntactic priming to social factors, e.g., imitating as a means of managing interpersonal distance (Balcetis & Dale, 2005). This study tests the degree to which priming of dative structures (Double Object give me that vs. Prepositional Object give that to me) is influenced by speaker accent, ideological similarity between participants and speakers, and participants’ conflict management styles.

The accents used were standard-sounding White American, standard-sounding African American and Mandarin-accented English. These three speakers were recorded reading political diatribes with either conservative or liberal biases and containing 10 instances of ditransitives, either all DO or all PO. Participants then described ten line drawings (generously provided by Bob Slevc, and tested in previous priming studies), four of which were designed to elicit descriptions containing DO or PO structures. Finally, participants answered questions about themselves (demographic background, political affiliations, conflict management style, similarity to speaker) and about their social evaluations of the speaker of the diatribe (Zahn & Hopper, 1985). The 242 participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and were paid $2.

Mixed logit regression (with maximum random effect structure; predictors scaled) (Jaeger, 2008; Johnson 2009) revealed that the priming effect was larger for PO primes than for DO primes ($\beta=.84, p<.01$), corroborating the known inverse frequency effect whereby less frequent structures prime more than higher frequency structures. A main effect of accent was found, but only for DO primes: participants showed greater priming after listening to the White American speaker ($\beta=-1.14, p<.001$), and less priming after listening to the non-native accented speaker ($\beta=-.95, p<.01$), with responses to the African American speaker falling in between. Self-rated compromisers showed significantly greater priming, but only after hearing PO primes ($\beta=.81, p<.01$). This compromise effect was driven by responses to the African American speaker, with compromises showing marginally weaker priming for the White American ($\beta=-.67, p=.06$) and significantly weaker priming for the non-native accented speaker ($\beta=-.76, p<.05$). Interestingly, self-rated liberals showed greater priming for PO structures spoken by a White American than by the other speakers ($\beta=1.55, p<.02$).

Analysis is ongoing, but these results indicate that social perceptions and individual factors mediate syntactic alignment. Further, these results suggest that alignment on the lower frequency PO structures is sensitive to ideological and interpersonal characteristics of the respondent, while alignment on DO structures is modulated by characteristics of the prime talker.