

Concepts in (inter)action: lexical alignment in office hours' consultations

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Abstract. In 1966, Condon & Ogston noted the presence of synchrony in speech and body motion during natural interactions. After their pioneering work, decades of research have shown that speakers coordinate at different semiotic levels (Oben & Brône, 2016), whether these are linguistic or nonlinguistic. This study discusses lexical alignment, understood as the presentation of a referent or object using the same terms (Brennan & Clark, 1996), in teacher-student dialogue. While some scholars explain the repetition of lexical choices through the alignment of linguistic representations (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), others conceive it as a “shared conceptualization” (Brennan & Clark, 1996, p. 1482) between speakers. Building upon research on lexical alignment in second language dialogue (Costa et al., 2008), we studied the phenomenon in office hours' consultation involving 27 Spanish undergraduate students, who were on an ERASMUS grant in different European countries (Ireland, England, Sweden, and The Netherlands)¹. The analysis of the interactions, which were held in English, shows the relevance of lexical alignment in educational settings, where teacher and students are constantly negotiating pedagogical content. In this sense, understanding lexical alignment as partner-specific conceptualizations appears to be a useful explanation for teacher-student interaction.

Keywords: interactive alignment, lexical alignment, teacher-student interaction

1 Lexical alignment

During interaction, speakers may refer to a common object using similar labels. When siblings are talking about their father, for example, they could use an umbrella of terms: “dad”, “daddy”, “that dude”, and so on. Previous scholars have noted multiple factors that could explain this common practice in conversation, such as informativeness or availability (Vogels, 2014). However, Brennan & Clark (1996) argue that a historical explanation, which takes contextual factors into consideration,

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can provide a better understanding of lexical alignment. More than the formal repetition of a lexical item, lexical alignment would display a joint conceptualization between speaker and addressee. According to Brennan & Clark (1996), “When people refer to an object in conversation, we have proposed, they establish a conceptual pact, a temporary agreement about how they and their addressees are to conceptualize that object.” (p. 1491).

This interactional approach places partner-specific conceptualizations at the centre of dialogue (Oben & Brône, 2016). Speaker and addressee, however, do not always have a symmetry in dialogue. There can be asymmetry in interaction, when there are differences between participants in the form of beliefs, goals, and/or power (Paxton & Dale, 2013). There is also asymmetry in different social roles that speakers take, for example, during psychotherapy sessions (Ramseyer & Tschacher, 2008) or during classroom interactions. Second language dialogues, which involve native (L1) and nonnative (L2) speakers, could also be a form of asymmetrical dialogue, since one of the participants does not have the linguistic proficiency of L1 speakers. In spite of these difficulties, the role of interactive communication in second language learning is indisputable, due to linguistic transfer between both L1 and L2 speakers. Lexical alignment fulfills an important function for L2 speakers, as it allows them to foster their language learning (Costa et al., 2008).

Starting from the assumption that contextual factors modulate lexical alignment, this study looks into the phenomenon in naturally-occurring interactions between teacher and student. The objective was to identify the instances of lexical alignment during these dialogues and understand the specific functions of alignment in this setting. At the same time, the research looks into a) the directionality of lexical alignment, that is, if the student copies the teacher or the teacher copies the student and b) the temporality of alignment, that is, if the instance of alignment occurs in a simultaneous or consecutive manner.

2 The study

2.1 Methodology

The study resorts to secondary data of office hours’ consultations. The data were originally obtained between April and November 2012 by the research project leaders (MacArthur, et al., 2015). Each video-recording presents a dialogue between a Spanish undergraduate and a lecturer in different European universities (Ireland, England, the Netherlands, and Sweden). The Spanish undergraduates were part of the Erasmus exchange program. All conversations were held in English.

The instances of lexical alignment were annotated in each video using the software ELAN (Wittenburg, et al., 2006). Following Pickering & Garrod (2004), the label of “prime” was used the first time a lexical item was introduced and the label of “target” reflected the repetition of such a lexical choice. The pairs of prime and target were identified throughout the video, providing information about who expressed those lexical items. The annotation also specified the temporality of the lexical alignment instances, that is, if they happened simultaneously, in consecutive or in later stages of the conversation.

2.2 Results

Preliminary results show that lexical alignment is pervasive in teacher-student interaction. Findings appear to indicate that sessions with more space for students to ask questions and elaborate on different subjects, also exhibit higher instances of alignment.

Preliminary results display important nuances of alignment when it comes to temporality. Non-consecutive instances of lexical repetition reflected common topics that were discussed during the consultation. These usually related to concepts (e.g. “the operating profits”) or aspects of the course (e.g. “the assessment” or “the exam”). The latter could help in maintaining a common ground during interactions. Furthermore, consecutive instances of alignment mainly appeared in two situations: 1) by incorporating a word or concept that had previously appeared in a question or initiation or 2) by immediately repeating the lexical item that was pronounced by the teacher or student. Lexical alignment allows participants to express agreement and mutual understanding, similar to the conclusions presented in Schegloff (1996).

This research on L1-L2 dialogue could serve as the basis for future studies to determine if higher instances of lexical alignment can be found in L1-L1 dialogue. At the same time, future research could analyze if the style of the teacher (e.g. if s/he promotes collaborative dialogues) modulates lexical alignment.

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