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Say as I say: Alignment as a multi-componential phenomenon

Converging evidence from an ever-increasing number of experimental and observational studies suggests that people converge many aspects of their language (and other behaviour) when they interact. What is less clear is *why* such alignment occurs, and the function that it plays in communication. Discussions of individual instances of alignment have tended to appeal exclusively to one of three explanatory frameworks, focusing on social relationships between interacting agents, strategic maximisation of mutual understanding, or automatic linguistic priming behaviours. Each framework can satisfactorily explain some observed instances of alignment, but appears inadequate to explain others. I will argue that alignment behaviours are best characterised as multi-componential, such that all three kinds of mechanism may potentially and simultaneously contribute to the occurrence of alignment, with the precise contribution of each depending upon the context and aspect of language under observation. However, evidence from studies of typically developing children and speakers with Autistic Spectrum Disorder suggest that a tendency to align language may be in some sense ‘wired in’ at a very basic level, and that both the ability to suppress this reflex and the ability to strategically exploit alignment for social or communicative ends may be later acquired and superimposed on top of this basic and reflexive tendency.