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The Power of Linguistic Similarity for Unlocking Cooperation - Evidence from Syntax and Pitch Experiments

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Abstract

How can we judge if conversation partners will be good cooperation partners in other tasks? A recent proposal is that low-level linguistic similarity such as subconsciously matching others' language use may be a signal of cooperativeness. To elucidate the mechanisms behind this relationship, we conducted two experiments, in which we found that conversation partners that matched the participants' syntax and pitch were perceived as more cooperative and were chosen more often as cooperation partners. Our findings further suggest that the sheer act of adapting to someone's linguistic production was not as crucial for choosing cooperation partners, even if it involved an initial cognitive investment. Rather, the decisive factor was sharing someone's linguistic preferences and thereby indicating group membership. This may have important implications for understanding cooperation partner choice and for understanding the (co-)evolution of language and cooperation, which both are traits that are particularly prominent in humans.