CDM: Paper Review

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Paper

Doyle, G., Goldberg, A., Srivastava, S., and Frank, M. C. (2017). Alignment at work: Using language to distinguish the internalization and self-regulation components of cultural fit in organizations

Review

This work introduces a directed, dynamic measure of cultural fit based on linguistic alignment: the tendency of dialogue participants to adapt to each other's style of language. The authors aim to investigate whether various levels of alignment (namely, lexical and referential alignment) can serve as predictors of employment outcomes. This work can be situated in a linguistic tradition which considers alignment as a socially-driven phenomenon of communication accommodation (Giles, 2008).

In order to more accurately measure cultural fit, the authors propose a linguistic proxy for disentangling the mechanisms of internalization and self-regulation, allowing for a deeper understanding of enculturation dynamics. Specifically, the authors explore individuals' base rate of word use (a more passive process, which is believed to carry information on the degree of internalization), and how this 'typical' behaviour might differentiate from their word usage in response to interlocutors, i.e. alignment (where active adjustments of one's behaviour could signal self-regulation). The authors measure these changes in word use by use of the WHAM (word-based hierarchical alignment) framework. They find that particularly, pronoun usage can be an informative predictor of the degree of internalization and self-regulation exhibited by individuals, reporting a significant relationship between pronominal alignment and middle- and long-term employment outcomes. The authors also investigate the predictive power of lexical and referential alignment in isolation - while both boast performance above chance, the latter outperforms the former for predicting both voluntary and involuntary departures. Based on these promising findings, the authors argue that future work should consider extending the conventional lexical alignment with referential alignment for a 'more complete analysis.'

The choice of approximating the concepts of self-regulation and internalization by observing changes in base rate and alignment usage bears novelty, and the proposed method for measuring these processes seems sound. I also welcome the auxiliary analysis between lexical and referential alignment - based on their findings there, it seems that extending the notion of alignment with referential parameters is indeed fruitful. However, their analytical account on *why* referential alignment appears to be useful beyond lexical alignment could have been more rigorous - the authors do not seem to provide any intuition, other than repeatedly mentioning that referential alignment 'may reflect a deeper and more accurate representation of social structure' - which seems fair, given the results, but is not particularly convincing otherwise. Another minor point is that much of the analysis seems to revolve around pronoun usage. While pronoun use belongs to the domain of referent language, it does not - to my understanding - encompass it as a whole. In this respect, re-framing their contributions as incorporation of pronominally-driven alignment would have perhaps been more appropriate. Finally, the authors occasionally use different terms interchangeably, despite some debatable equivalency; (*'referential alignment parameters'* ≈ *'semantic parameters'?*). Such imprecise use of terminology can be misleading and at times made the work less clear.

References

Howard Giles. 2008. Communication accommodation theory. In L. A. Baxter and D. O. Braithewaite, editors, Engaging theories in interpersonal communication: Multiple perspectives, pages 161–173. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

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