

The role of shared labels and shared experiences in representational alignment

Kushin Mukherjee*, Siddharth Suresh*, Xizheng Yu, and Gary Lupyan

Corresponding Author: kmukherjee2@wisc.edu
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

Successful communication is thought to require members of a speech community to learn common mappings between words and their referents. But if one person’s concept of CAR is very different from another person’s, successful communication might fail despite the common mappings because different people would mean different things by the same word. Here we investigate the possibility that one source of representational alignment is language itself. We report a series of neural network simulations investigating how representational alignment changes as a function of agents having more or less similar visual experiences (overlap in “visual diet”) and how it changes with exposure to category names. We find that agents with more similar visual experiences have greater representational overlap. However, the presence of category labels not only increases representational overlap, but also greatly reduces the importance of having similar visual experiences. The results suggest that ensuring representational alignment may be one of language’s evolved functions.

1. Introduction

Imagine two learners of English trying to learn the meanings of “car” and “truck”. Some theoretical views describe this process as one of mapping: a word-form is mapped onto the previously existing conceptual categories of CAR and TRUCK (e.g., Fodor, 1975; Snedeker et al., 2004; Pinker, 1994; Bloom, 2002). Alternatively, encountering these labels can help people discover that there is a distinction worth learning and privilege this distinction because it is (apparently) useful in the speech community (Booth & Waxman, 2002; Waxman & Markow, 1995; Xu, 2002; Pomiechowska & Gliga, 2019; Wojcik et al., 2022; Lupyan & Lewis, 2017). In either case, for people to mean similar things by these words would seem to require that the words activate roughly similar semantic representations. For example, if for one

¹*Equal contribution

person a car is more similar to a truck than to a motorcycle, while for another it is the reverse, we might expect rather severe confusion.

So how do our conceptual representations become aligned such that word meanings can be (more or less) shared? One source of alignment is our shared biology. For instance, the human ear is typically sensitive to a specific range of frequencies and people have roughly similar profiles of sound discrimination (Pumphrey, 1950). This biological commonality ensures that when one person talks about a specific sound (e.g. a sound of a car honking) or tone within this range, another person, barring auditory impairments, will have a similar sensory experience of that sound. Another is shared learning mechanisms - Humans have common cognitive constraints and categorization tendencies that shape how we form concepts. For example, there is little risk of someone's meaning of a 'car' being only blue cars viewed from the side, as this would violate basic principles of human categorization (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978; Shepard, 1994). Another is shared experiences—while each individual's life journey is unique, there are many experiences that are broadly shared. Thus it is possible that human conceptual representations are aligned throughout the process of learning language and it is this alignment that makes linguistic communication possible in the first place. But another possibility is that alignment is achieved—in part—through language itself (Lupyan & Bergen, 2016; Casasanto, 2015; Dingemanse, 2017). On this view, rather than being just a device for conveying our thoughts, language provides an interface between minds (Clark, 1998; Gentner & Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Gomila, Travieso, & Lobo, 2012; Lupyan & Bergen, 2016).

In a prior study, Suffill, van Paridon, and Lupyan (under review) tested the role of language in the conceptual alignment of novel shapes, which could be grouped into two categories based on visual features alone. To test the contributions of verbal labels distinct from perceptual learning towards conceptual alignment, they measured how similarly different participants grouped the shapes in 3 conditions — a baseline condition that relied on the similarity of participants' visual perception, a no-label condition where participants were first familiarized with the category structure of the shapes without labels, and a language condition where they were exposed to incidental nonsense labels for each category. Exposure to labels led to more categorical representations of the concepts (shapes), which in turn led to greater alignment between participants as indicated by more similar sorts.

Here, we build on these findings and prior computational simulations that have hinted at the importance of language in aligning representations of visual concepts (Roads & Love, 2020; Steels, Belpaeme, et al., 2005). Similar to Roads and Love (2020), we explore how learning from multiple signatures of categorical information, feedback from a labeling and a match-to-sample task, affects how the stimuli are represented and the extent to which the representations of different agents (neural networks) are aligned.

Unlike studies with human participants, simulating learning in artificial agents allows us to keep all the learning parameters constant while manipulating the prior perceptual experiences of each agent. Thus, unlike

in human behavioral experiments, using neural network model-based agents allows us to examine representational alignment between agents that vary in the overlap of their ‘perceptual diets’ and who are trained with or without category labels.

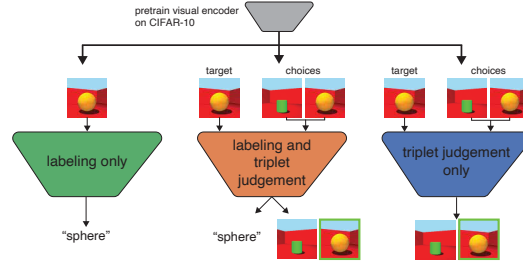


Figure 1. Overview of the 3 task conditions each pre-trained model was fine-tuned on.

1.1. Dataset

We leveraged two image databases for our tasks. The first was the CIFAR10 dataset consisting of 60,000 images belonging to 10 object categories. These data were used to pre-train each neural network using the SimCLR unsupervised learning framework (Chen, Kornblith, Norouzi, & Hinton, 2020) so that the networks had some prior visual knowledge (just as human participants do) before being fine-tuned on our experimental dataset and training conditions.

For our main experimental manipulations, we used the Deepmind 3D Shapes dataset (Kim & Mnih, 2018). This dataset consists of 480,000 rendered images of spheres, cubes, cylinders, and capsules varying in size, orientation, and color of the target image and background elements. In our experiments, we kept the color of the background elements constant to simplify learning.

We sampled from this subset of images to create 3 datasets with varying degrees of overlap with each other. Each dataset had 120 images in total with 30 images per shape category randomly sampled from the set of all possible images. We refer to the 3 datasets as **dataset A**, **dataset B**, and **dataset C**. Datasets A and B had 50% overlap in their data, datasets B and C had 33% overlap in their data, and datasets A and C had 0% overlap in their data.

2. Methods

We used `PyTorch` to train neural network models to perform three tasks on the 3D shapes dataset. The three tasks were: (1) labeling the shapes of objects (spheres, cubes, cylinders, or capsules), (2) a match-to-sample triplet similarity judgement task analogous to that used by Suffill et al. (2022)

and (3) a combination of (1) and (2). Models were first pre-trained on the CIFAR10 dataset and were then ‘fine-tuned’ on the 3D Shapes dataset. Models were trained on one of the three different 3D shape datasets, each of which overlapped with the remaining two to varying degrees. For example, 50% of the images in the first dataset were also present in the second dataset. This allowed us to measure alignment between two models as a function of the overlap in their training as well as whether the training included labels.

2.1. Model Architecture and Pre-training

Each model consisted of a simple convolutional encoder consisting of 3 convolutional layers followed by 3 linear ‘dense’ layers that projected to a 64-dimensional hidden layer. We pre-trained 10 variants of this encoder using the CIFAR10 dataset. Pre-training continued until the validation accuracy was greater than 85% and the mean change in accuracy across epochs was less than 2%. This ensured that all models were trained to a similar criterion before fine-tuning on the 3 task conditions.

2.2. Training on the Experimental Materials

We fine-tuned each of the 10 pre-trained models on the 3 tasks below using each of our training datasets — A, B, and C. For each pre-trained model we also fine-tuned a *second* model on dataset A so as to have 2 models that had 100% overlap in training data but different fine-tuning initializations. Thus each of the 10 pretrained models was used to further train 12 models (3 tasks \times 4 datasets). 20 images were held out of each training set and used as a validation set to track network training.

Label condition. In this condition, a 3-layer decoder network took the latent representations from the pre-trained CIFAR10 encoder as input and was tasked with predicting the correct shape label for a given input image. This model was trained on a binary cross-entropy loss on the class logits. Each model was fine-tuned for 1000 epochs, which allowed the validation loss to stabilize.

Triplet Judgement condition. In this condition, the hidden layer of the pre-trained encoder projected to a single linear layer with ReLU activation. We trained the model with a triplet loss objective using the outputs from this layer in the following way. On each iteration, 3 images would be provided to the model — a ‘target’ image and two ‘choice’ images. One of the choice images would be exactly identical to the anchor and the other option image would be a random image from one of the three other shape categories. The model’s task was to guess which image matched the target image based on the cosine similarities of the latent representations. This model was trained for 1000 epochs, allowing the validation loss to stabilize.

Label and Triplet condition. In this condition, the pre-trained models were tasked with both providing the label for the ‘anchor’ image as well as performing the triplet judgement task. Both losses were equally weighted and once again the models were trained for 1000 epochs until the validation losses stabilized.

3. Results

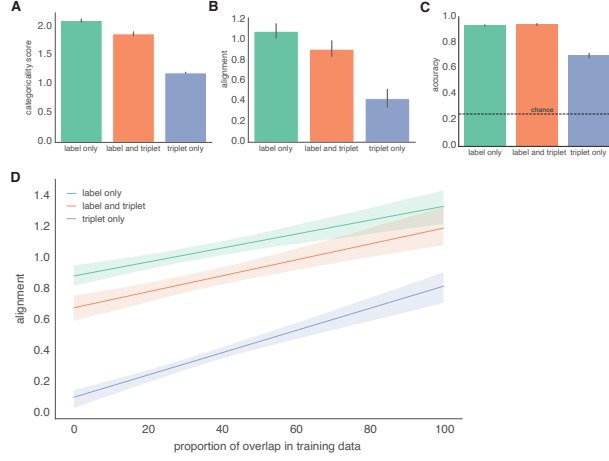


Figure 2. (A) Mean categoricity of learned representations, (B) mean conceptual alignment between pairs of models in each training condition, and (C) mean labeling accuracy in each training condition. (D) The effect of data overlap and task on representational alignment.

All results were computed with respect to a set of 480 validation images that were not shown to the networks during training. The validation set consisted of 120 images belonging to each of the 4 shape categories.

Categoricity. The categoricity of the learned representations is the extent to which the networks learned to represent each kind of shape as a distinct category. We quantify categoricity using the activation pattern of the encoder’s final hidden layer. Categoricity is defined as follows: $Categoricity = \log\left(\frac{distance_{between-category}}{distance_{within-category}}\right)$, where distance refers to the cosine distance between the activation vectors, and a category consists of, e.g., all the spheres included in the validation set.

Networks trained on only the labeling task showed the greatest of categoricity ($M=2.11$, $sd=.08$) followed by networks trained on both labeling and the triplet task ($M=1.87$, $sd=.10$). The models trained on only the triplet task showed the least amount of categoricity ($M=1.20$, $sd=.03$), all p ’s < .001.

Alignment Alignment is a measure of how similar the representational geometry of a common set of items is across pairs of agents, i.e., neural networks. We operationalized alignment as the log-transformed multiplicative inverse of the Procrustes disparity between the activation vectors from the final encoder layer for the validation images between any given pair of networks. The more similar the representational geometry between the networks the *higher* this alignment value. Pairs of models that

were trained on only labeling showed the highest alignment ($M = 3.05$, $sd = .73$). Models trained on both tasks showed an intermediate amount of alignment ($M = 2.58$, $sd = .79$). Finally, models trained on only the triplet judgement task, i.e., with no category labels, showed the least alignment ($M = 1.67$, $sd = .55$), all p 's $< .001$. As in the experiment reported by Suffill et al. (under review), categoricity completely mediated the effect of task on alignment. When included as a predictor, the task-associated differences in alignment disappeared (t 's < 1).

Classification Accuracy We also tested each model on how accurately it could classify the validation images with the correct category label. The triplet-condition models, never trained with labels, could not be expected to produce correct labels and indeed were at chance. To give these models the best possible opportunity to map their learned representations to the correct labels, we fit logistic classifiers using their activation vectors as input and the category labels as output and evaluated using 5-fold cross-validation. We took the mean accuracy on the held-out folds as the labeling accuracy. Networks trained on labels only ($M = .93$, $sd = .01$) and labeling and triplet judgements ($M = .94$, $sd = .02$) had similarly high performance. Performance of the models trained on only the triplet judgement task was much lower ($M = .70$, $sd = .05$), $p < .001$, but well above chance ($p < .001$) showing that it is possible to learn a mapping function from the network's latent states to the labels, albeit not nearly to the same level of accuracy as when the training included labels.

Overlap in 'perceptual diets' To test whether greater amounts of overlap in the training data led to more aligned representations and if this effect varied as function of training task, we fit a linear regression model predicting alignment from the proportion of overlap in training data, the training task, and their interaction. As clearly shown in Figure 2 D., increasing overlap led to greater alignment ($p < .001$). Even with complete overlap in perceptual experience, however, the use of labels continued to have greater alignment. Moreover, decreased overlap impacted alignment between models trained without labels significantly more than either label or label-and-triplet models (p 's $< .01$).

4. General Discussion

In a series of simulations we found that training artificial agents on a category learning task with labels led to more categorical representations of concepts relative to a condition with no labels. Additionally, pairs of agents trained with labels showed more conceptual overlap relative to pairs trained without labels. We found that the effect of task on alignment was mediated by the effect of categoricity, which suggests that training with labels induced more categorical representations, which in turn led to greater alignment of agents' representations. In summary, our results highlight the role language might play in aligning our representations of the world so as to facilitate effective communication despite sometimes vast differences in individual experiences (Enfield & Kockelman, 2017).

References

- Bloom, P. (2002). *How children learn the meanings of words*. MIT press.
- Booth, A. E., & Waxman, S. (2002). Object names and object functions serve as cues to categories for infants. *Developmental psychology*, 38(6), 948.
- Casasanto, D. (2015). All concepts are ad hoc concepts. In *The conceptual mind: New directions in the study of the concepts* (pp. 543–566).
- Chen, T., Kornblith, S., Norouzi, M., & Hinton, G. (2020). A simple framework for contrastive learning of visual representations. In *International conference on machine learning* (pp. 1597–1607).
- Clark, A. (1998). Magic words: How language augments human computation. *Language and thought: Interdisciplinary themes*, 162–183.
- Dingemans, M. (2017). On brain-to-brain interfaces, distributed agency and language. In N. J. Enfield & P. Kockelman (Eds.), *Distributed agency* (pp. 59–66). Oxford University Press.
- Enfield, N. J., & Kockelman, P. (2017). *Distributed agency*. Oxford University Press.
- Fodor, J. (1975). *The Language of Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gentner, D., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003). Language in mind: Advances in the study of language and thought.
- Gomila, A., Travieso, D., & Lobo, L. (2012). Wherein is human cognition systematic? *Minds and Machines*, 22, 101–115.
- Kim, H., & Mnih, A. (2018). Disentangling by factorising. In *International conference on machine learning* (pp. 2649–2658).
- Lupyan, G., & Bergen, B. (2016). How language programs the mind. *Topics in cognitive science*, 8(2), 408–424.
- Lupyan, G., & Lewis, M. (2017). From words-as-mappings to words-as-cues: The role of language in semantic knowledge. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 34(10), 1319–1337.
- Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct*. William Morrow & Co.
- Pomieczowska, B., & Gliga, T. (2019). Lexical acquisition through category matching: 12-month-old infants associate words to visual categories. *Psychological science*, 30(2), 288–299.
- Pumphrey, R. (1950). Upper limit of frequency for human hearing. *Nature*, 166(4222), 571–571.
- Roads, B. D., & Love, B. C. (2020). Learning as the unsupervised alignment of conceptual systems. *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 2(1), 76–82.
- Rosch, E., & Lloyd, B. B. (1978). Principles of categorization.
- Shepard, R. N. (1994). Perceptual-cognitive universals as reflections of the world. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 1, 2–28.
- Snedeker, J., Gleitman, L., et al. (2004). Why it is hard to label our concepts. *Weaving a lexicon*, 257294.
- Steels, L., Belpaeme, T., et al. (2005). Coordinating perceptually grounded

- categories through language: A case study for colour. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 28(4), 469–488.
- Suffill, E., van Paridon, J., & Lupyan, G. (2022). Verbal Labels Increase Conceptual Alignment. In *Joint Conference on Language Evolution* (pp. 691–698).
- Waxman, S. R., & Markow, D. B. (1995). Words as invitations to form categories: Evidence from 12-to 13-month-old infants. *Cognitive psychology*, 29(3), 257–302.
- Wojcik, E. H., Zettersten, M., & Benitez, V. L. (2022). The map trap: Why and how word learning research should move beyond mapping. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 13(4), e1596.
- Xu, F. (2002). The role of language in acquiring object kind concepts in infancy. *Cognition*, 85(3), 223–250.