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# Speaking to the 'beat' of your conversation partner gives mutual connection

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Credit: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

In a conversation between two people, it is not only what you say that matters, and whether you interrupt the other speaker, but also, at times, whether you say something to 'the beat' of the conversation partner. Being in sync with somebody is therefore not merely an expression, it is a genuine sign of mutual connection (affiliation) in spoken conversation. That is the conclusion of linguist Anne van Leeuwen in her doctoral thesis titled "Right on time: synchronization, overlap, and affiliation in conversation." She defended her doctoral thesis on Friday 15 December

at Utrecht University. Her research was funded from the NWO Talent Scheme (Vici of Prof. Jos van Berkum).

Anne van Leeuwen tried to determine whether the timing of a conversation between speakers influenced their relationship. Examples are interruptions or a long period of silence during a conversation. If the conversation between two people proceeds easily and smoothly, then you know exactly when you have to nod and when it is your turn to speak. You feel understood by and connected with your conversation partner. But a conversation can also contain uneasy periods of silence or moments when both speakers start to talk at once. That can lead to a feeling of remoteness and neither conversation partner feeling understood.

Van Leeuwen says, "For example, we knew that if people walk together, they rhythmically adjust their pace to each other. This harmonisation gives rise to a feeling of mutual connection. If something goes wrong in the rhythmic harmonisation between people, then this immediately has an effect on how that interaction proceeds, as well as on the relationship between those people. Could something similar happen during conversations?"

A temporal relationship between two speakers describes the timing of elements in the conversation, such as the duration of silent periods or the amount of overlapping talk. For example, speakers can be in sync, placing their first 'beat' such that it matches the speaking rhythm of the previous speaker.

Van Leeuwen investigated this in experiments during which adult study subjects listened to manipulated sound fragments in which the timing between speakers was very subtly manipulated. Meanwhile, the researcher asked the study subjects about their impression of the conversation, i.e. the degree of mutual connection ('affiliation') between

the speakers. During the conversation, however faltering it was, she measured the activity of their facial muscles. Facial muscle activity gives a good impression of a positive or negative feeling, even when this happens unconsciously.

The conclusion was that speakers who overlapped with 'the turn' of the previous speaker were considered less affiliating. In addition, Van Leeuwen observed the expected effect of synchronisation but only if the speaker was too early in relation to the rhythm of the previous speaker.

Provided by Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

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