Come & Go: partial inversion

The correct use of the verbs **come** and **go** causes problems for speakers of Portuguese. Depending on the context, **come** and **go** indicate a direction opposite to the corresponding words in Portuguese. There is a partial, context dependent inversion, of the direction indicated by **come** and **go**. Incorrect use and possible resulting problem is shown in Figure 1. Correct use is shown in Figure 2. The arrows indicate where Julie's boss thinks Julie is going because of her answer.
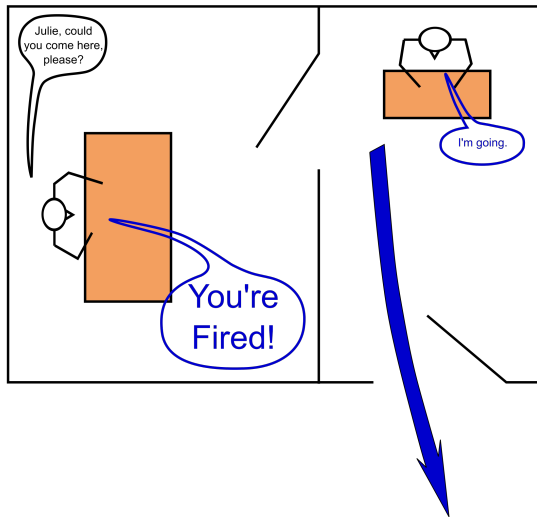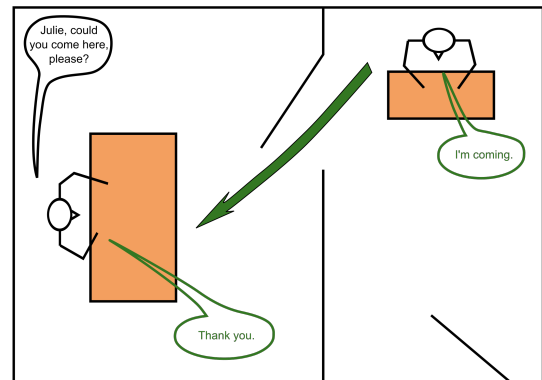
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Figure 1: I'm going. You're fired.

Figure 2: I'm coming. Thank you.

This context dependent inversion of **come** and **go** is probably result of the fact that Portuguese has a preposition indicating *there where you, the listener, are*, while English doesn't have a preposition with this meaning. When responding to a request to come, one communicates *there where you are* by placing oneself in the place of the person who made the request. As a result, in these cases, the direction indicated by **come** and **go** are inverted in comparison to their Portuguese equivalents.

Answering **I'm going** means *I'm moving to a place where neither of us is* (See Figure 1). Answering **I'm coming** means *I'm moving to the place where you, who made the request, are* (See Figure 2).

Not applying this context dependent inversion correctly in English can cause that a person who makes a request thinks the request is refused. This can lead to unpleasant situations, like in Figure 1 or the less drastic but still unpleasantly confusing example below.

Peter	Hi, Sue. We are at The Jolly Wizard to celebrate Daniel's birthday. Do you want to **come**?
Sue	Oh, that's nice. I'm **going**.
Peter	What do you mean? You say it's nice and then you say you're **going**? Why?
Sue	Oh? ... Well ... I really like that idea of you guys, to celebrate Daniel's birthday at The Jolly Wizard ... I am **going**.
Peter	Ah! ... I don't understand you. You say you think it's a good idea, that it's nice, as if you would want to **come** ... and then you say you are **going**. It makes me wonder ... why you aren't **coming** ... and where is it that you are **going**?

Peter is confused because Sue does not use the context dependent inversion. She does not say *I'm coming*. Peter understands she will not move to where he and the others are. She is not placing herself in Peter's situation. By saying *I'm going*, Sue communicates she is moving to another place than the place where Peter and the others are. That is why Peter is confused and disappointed.

With the following response, Sue would have avoided the problem. Peter would have understood right away.

Sue:	Oh, that's nice. I'm **coming**.
Peter:	Good. See you in a bit.

The idea of placing oneself in the situation of the other also helps to find out which word to use when referring to a place where none of the speakers is at the time of requesting or suggesting. This can happen for instance when making an appointment and deciding where to meet.

The following ways of making suggestions are all possible but they have different connotations.

Yesterday I met Julie. She wants to **go** to the open-air museum. Do you want to **go** with us?
> (We all move in the same direction with a connotation of each on ones own initiative.)

Yesterday I met Julie. She wants to **go** to the open-air museum. Do you want to **come** with us?
> (We are going and want to take you with us. We all move in the same direction with a connotation of the initiative is ours and you accompany us.)

Yesterday I met Julie. She wants to **go** to the open-air museum, tomorrow, after we finish painting her study. That will be around two. If you wish you can meet us there so the there of us can **go** together. When do you think you can **come**?
> (In the afternoon, I and Julie are already there, at Julie's so before the three of us move from Julie's to the museum, you will be moving in my direction. That is why the word **come** is used in the last sentence.)

In cases like these, the problem of mixing up **come** and **go** can be avoided by using alternatives like the following.

When do you think you can arrive.

When do you think you will be there.

They are common expressions for such cases.

Bring, Take, Get

The same context dependent inversion happens with ***bring***, which means *come and have something or somebody with oneself* and ***take***, which means *go and have something or somebody with oneself*.

Hi Susan. The fountain pen you've lost is with me. I found it just after you left. Tomorrow, when I come to work on the project, I'll ***bring*** it with me.

(A)   Can I use your computer this afternoon.

(B)   I'm sorry but that won't be possible. I have to ***take*** it with me and drop it off for maintenance when I go to work.

In cases when it is necessary to go somewhere in order to come back with someone or something, the verb ***get*** is used.

(A)   All day I have been working on this report and only now I see I ran out of staples. I only have time to finish improving this section or to buy staples before taking it to my client. Not both.

(B)   Don't worry. I can go to the stationer and ***get*** you some staples so you can work on improving that section.