

Functions of pause in Italian television news and task-oriented dialogue

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Pauses have a number of different forms and functions in spoken discourse. In this talk, I will look at three types of pauses – silent pauses, breath pauses, and filled pauses – occurring in two speaking styles in Italian. Our primary focus will be on two key functions of pauses, namely the marking of syntactic and prosodic structure and the signaling of hesitation.

In the first part of the talk, I investigate to what extent pauses play a role in structuring Italian news discourse. To do so, I examine the frequency, duration, and syntactic position of breath pauses, silent pauses, and filled pauses occurring within and between news items in Italian regional news broadcasts. Findings show that, *within news items*, breath pauses are the longest and most frequently occurring type of pause. Breath pauses occur in clause-final, clause-medial, and phrase-medial position, and no effects of syntactic position on pause length are observed. This suggests that pause placement relates more to a physiological need to breathe (see Grosjean & Collins, 1979) than to the marking of syntactic structure. *Between news items*, pauses are much longer than within news items, and have both a structural and physiological role – to signal a new topic in the news broadcast (structural), and to give the news anchor time to breathe before resuming speech (physiological).

In the second part of the talk, I present work in progress on two markers of hesitation in Roman Italian task-oriented dialogue, namely filled pauses and prolongations (i.e., markedly lengthened segments within a lexical word). I investigate their form, relative frequency, and distributional characteristics in Italian. Initial results suggest that Italian speakers produce prolongations more frequently than filled pauses (see also Savino & Refice, 2000), in contrast to other languages (cf. Eklund, 2001; Betz et al., 2017). The prototypical hesitant prolongation involves a word-final vowel. These results are linked to Italian syllable structure, and provide evidence for language-specific characteristics of hesitation.

References:

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