

Turn-Taking and Backchannelling in Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Dialogue management is one of the most fundamental skills of human communication. It plays an essential role in the acquisition, transmission and evolution of language. Previous investigations have highlighted the remarkable similarity of dialogue management across a wide range of different languages, cultures and settings, focussing mainly on the shared preference for rapid, short-gap turn-taking. Backchannelling (BC; producing listener signals such as “mmhm”, “okay”) is a closely related phenomenon that is less well investigated, but can be presumed to play a similarly important role. Given the fact that Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is at its core a disorder of social communication, it is surprising that very little is known to date about dialogue management in speakers with ASD. In this talk, I will present results from a study investigating the turn-taking and backchannelling behaviour of German adults with and without ASD engaged in semi-spontaneous dialogue (Map Tasks).

Overall, the timing of turn-taking was very similar across groups (and to results reported in previous research), with a clear preference for short gaps and a correspondingly low number of long gaps and overlaps. However, a closer look at the data reveals that the behaviour of the ASD group did in fact differ from that of CTRs, but only in the earliest stages of dialogue and not for all dyads. Results for BCs similarly reveal subtle differences which are most pronounced in the early stages of dialogue. The CTR group produced a higher rate and a greater variety of backchannels, while also showing a clearer preference for mapping specific intonation contours to specific types of BC.

I will discuss the relevance of these experimental findings to the notion of the universality of turn-taking in human spoken interaction and to conceptions of communication (deficiencies) in ASD. I will also propose a link between the relatively subtle group-level differences demonstrated here and subjective judgements of “oddness of speech” in ASD, which are vaguely defined but nevertheless feature prominently in not only previous research but also diagnostic assessment.