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Matching perspectives: co-constructing knowledge in academic discourse.

Abstract:
Collaborative activity is a fundamental human trait, readily manifest in the way interactants coordinate their physical activity (e.g. Bråten 2007). Intellectual collaboration is no less important, but far subtler in its manifestations, unless people deliberately set out to solve a given problem together. However, intersubjective co-construction of knowledge is far more pervasive than that: all dialogic interaction involves a degree of ‘perspective matching’ between interactants. That is, speakers coordinate not only the physical aspects of their speech (speech rates, voices, etc.), but also lexis and grammar (see, e.g. Mauranen 2012), in ways that are familiar from sociolinguistics (‘dialect levelling’; see e.g. Trudgill 1986, 2011) or social psychology (Gallois et al. 2005). If we connect these findings with the fundamental observation that other humans are the most important environment for the brain (Hari 2007), it seems clear that the individual cognition is crucially shaped in interaction with its social environment, i.e., with other people (cf. Hari, Sams & Nummenmaa 2016). Intellectual collaboration is nevertheless harder to observe and pin down in its subtler manifestations than physical collaboration or joint task management, or even collaborative problem-solving. One way of tracking down collaborative intellectual activity linguistically is by looking at discourse reflexivity, or metadiscourse, ‘discourse about discourse’ (Mauranen 2010, forthc.) in dialogic interaction. This paper looks into instances of collaboratively constructing new knowledge in academic discussions with multilingual participants. It is suggested that co-constructing knowledge is common practice and thus comparatively unremarkable, and that it consists in matching speaker perspectives.

References:


