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Kill or tap? Left or right? Preliminary results from a study on dialogue differences in task oriented and spontaneous conversations

Abstract:
The phonetic structure of Danish seems to pose a problem for language learners, both L1 and L2 (Bleses Basbøll, & Vach, 2011, Gooskens et al., 2010). A high amount of vocalic sounds and a tendency to reduce consonants result in a highly vocalic sound structure that makes it difficult to segment word boundaries (Basbøll, 2005). However, adult native speakers do not seem to show any evident impairment in language use and understanding. A possible explanation is that compensatory conversational mechanisms (e.g. repair, backchannel, etc.) might be used to mitigate the opaque sound structure.

To test this hypothesis, we contrasted Danish with Norwegian, a phonotactically similar language, but with a lower degree of e.g., consonantal reduction. We focused on three conversational mechanisms: backchannel, other initiated repair and interactive alignment.

We expected to observe differences between the use of conversational features in the two languages, but also between different conversational situations.

We collected 2 10-minute task-oriented and 2 10-minute spontaneous conversations from each of 40 Norwegian and 40 Danish pairs of adult native participants. The two task-oriented conversations differed, with one focusing on making a joint decision and the other on a more asymmetric giving and receiving instructions to reach a specific outcome.

The recordings were transcribed and coded for instances of vocal backchannel (Yngve, 1970) and repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). We define backchannels as conversational features that signals that there are no problems with the interaction and that the interlocutors have established common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991). Repairs, on the other hand, are defined as a signal of a problem in communication and as a signal that the interlocutors need to realign and reestablish common ground. We define interactive alignment as the propensity to re-use the interlocutor’s linguistic forms across successive turns, calculated in terms of cosine similarity. Lexical alignment is calculated at the level of lemmas, syntactic alignment at the level of 2-grams of parts of speech, semantic alignment using the averages across sentences of 300-dimensional word2vec scores (based on FastText’s Wikipedia-based semantic representations of Danish and Norwegian).

We observe credible cross-linguistic differences. Danish consistently presents higher amounts of alignment and lower amounts of repair than Norwegian. Backchannel is also higher in Danish, but only in spontaneous conversations. Moreover, we observe consistent pair- and individual variability (e.g. consistently using more repair than average) with trade-offs between repair and backchannel (the more of one, the less of the other, that is, negative correlation between varying effects).
The implications of the above findings for interactional research will be discussed.

References:


