Multimodal resources for coordination and adaptation in conversational interaction

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Traditionallly, in much of the langugae sciences, the focus has been on the individual speaker (Clark, 1996). Addressees are typically seen as passive recipients, and frequently do not feature in experimental paradigms at all. In this talk, I will illustrate that addressees are active collaborators (Bavelas et al, 2000; Schelgoff, 1982) which becomes particularly evident if we consider their contributions multimodally. To do so, I will draw on evidence from co-speech manual gestures and their role in achieving mutual understanding, especially by facilitating grounding and repair. I will also present findings from recent studies that have investigated the role of other visual signals in these processes, including facial signals and head gestures. Further, I will consider feedback functions of visual signals from a perspective that goes beyond signalling during typical feedback 'slots', taking into account the temporal organisation of multimodal conversational turns. Together, the findings I present show that, next to idiosyncracy, feedback in face-to-face conversation is characterized by considerable regularity in multimodal signalling, suggesting that Gestalt-based processing plays an important role (Trujillo & Holler, in press). Moreover, they underline the relevance of considering human language not only as inherently multimodal (Holler & Levinson, 2019, Kendon, 2004), but also as a fundamentally bilateral, reciprocal activty (Bavelas, 2022; Clark, 1996). While this has been the modus operandi for many decades in some fields of enquiry (such as conversation analysis), it still needs to find proper recognition in many other branches of the language sciences. The findings I present are a call for pushing to move more strongly into this direction.

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