Learning to Show You're Listening: A Back-Channel Trainer for Arabic

Rafael Escalante, Nigel G. Ward, Yaffa Al Bayyari, Thamar Solorio

100 word abstract

Good listeners generally produce back-channel feedback, and do so in a language-appropriate way. Second language learners often lack this skill. This paper presents a training sequence which enables the acquisition of basic Arabic back-channel skill, namely, that of producing feedback immediately after the speaker produces a sharp pitch downslope. This training sequence includes software that provides feedback on learners' attempts to produce the cue themselves and feedback on learners' performance as they play the role of an attentive listener in response to one side of a pre-recorded dialog. Preliminary experiments indicate that this is effective.

300 word abstract

One of the signs of listening attentively and supportively is the occasional production of back-channel feedback, small utterances like "uh-huh" by the listener while the speaker continues his turn. To do this appropriately it is necessary to understand when back-channels are and are not welcome. This differs across languages, and second language learners are known to have difficulty acquiring the appropriate dialog patterns (Berry 1994). As a result, they may be perceived as cold or awkward, and this can limit the speaker's social and communicative success.

Often there is a prosodic cue from the speaker that indicates to the listener when back-channel feedback is welcome (Yngve 1970). Corpus-based analysis of dialogs has recently revealed that in Arabic this cue most often takes the form of a sharp pitch downslope (Ward & Al Bayyari 2006).

This raises the question of how to teach this to second language learners. We have developed a training sequence for two necessary skills: detecting such prosodic cues and responding to them swiftly. This training sequence includes an explanation, audio examples, the use of visual signals to highlight occurrences of the cue, system-generated auditory and visual feedback on learners' attempts to produce the cue themselves, and system-generated feedback on the learners' performance as they play the role of an attentive listener in response to one side of a pre-recorded dialog.

A 5-subject pilot study showed that this training sequence was effective in helping American students to back-channel following the Arabic rule; the full-scale study will be done this Fall. This seems to be the first demonstration of a teaching technique that helps learners acquire a real-time dialog response skill. Applications to other aspects of turn-taking and other interactive skills are foreseen.