

When do we say ‘Mhmm’?: Backchannel Feedback in Dialogue

Julia Hirschberg
Columbia University

In human-human dialogues, speakers regularly indicate that they are attending to their conversational partner by producing oral *backchannels* like ‘mhmm’ and by facial and other gestures. One intriguing question for students of conversation is how speakers decide when to produce such signals. A number of us at Columbia, UPenn, the University of Buenos Aires, and Constantine the Philosopher University, have been studying the sort of acoustic-prosodic behavior of speakers which precede the production of oral backchannels by their partners to identify *backchannel-preceding cues*, which may give us some insight into partners’ decisions to backchannel or not. We have also been examining how backchannel behavior on the part of one partner is reflected in the backchannel behavior of the other partner in conversation, as speakers *entrain* on each others’ backchannel-preceding cues. I will present results of these investigations and explore their consequences for Spoken Dialogue Systems.