

Exploring phonetic and gestural signals to speaker change and floor-holding

Margaret Zellers

Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

Across a wide variety of languages, the amount of variation of silent time between conversational turns has been shown to be relatively stable, with a peak around 200ms of silence between turns; a similar timing relationship even holds between turns in sign languages. Since our brains need at least 600ms to do the processing required to begin speaking, it is not possible that listeners simply wait until they hear silence before beginning a to speak. Instead, speakers must have ways of indicating during speech that they intend to continue to speak or to stop speaking, and listeners must be able to take advantage of these signals in order to predict turn ends and appropriately time their own initiation of speech. I will discuss a number of ways in which speakers in conversation make changes in speech rate and intonation, and how these changes can help listeners to know when it is time to speak. Some of these phonetic changes are the same or similar across many languages, while others appear to be different depending on the different phonological systems of the languages. Additionally, I will show some ways in which speakers use hand gestures alongside such changes in their speech in order to communicate more clearly about whether they are finished speaking or not. Looking at these two types of signals together helps us to place phonetic research in the wider context of everyday language use in social situations.