

Making conversation: How participant status in dialogue affects responses to clarification requests

Christine Howes
University of Gothenburg
christine.howes@gu.se

Patrick G. T. Healey
Queen Mary University of London
p.healey@qmul.ac.uk

Arash Eshghi
Heriot-Watt University Edinburgh
a.eshghi@hw.ac.uk

Dialogue is a fundamentally incremental and interactive process and the joint building up and coordination of ‘common ground’ is crucial to understanding. However, although common ground is known to be influenced by a number of factors, such as the context in which information was mentioned, or participant role (e.g. addressee versus overhearer) many accounts assume that interaction plays only a peripheral role. Despite these observations, little work has experimentally tested *how* meanings in dialogue are built up interactively, or to what extent we take account of social agency and shared context when we are constructing a turn.

This talk will discuss some experiments that systematically introduce spoof clarification requests (CRs) into an ongoing text dialogue. These CRs target a noun phrase (NP) that appears to come from either the other person in the conversation or an external source that is attributable to a human being (a ‘listener’) or a question asking computer program (‘q-bot’), thus manipulating the level of social agency exhibited by the apparent question asker.

Results show that the type of response depends on whether the target of the CR should be considered to be in the common ground, which is affected by whether the targeted NP is one that has been used previously in the conversation or not, whether the apparent source of the CR has been involved in the dialogue process and whether the question asker is attributed with human agency or not. In understanding dialogue we need to take into account not just what is said and how, but also who is actively involved in the process of doing so.