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Dual feedback in interpreter-mediated interactions: On the role of gaze in the production of listener responses

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the coordination of listener responses and gaze in the production of *dual feedback* in triadic interpreter-mediated interaction. The focus is on backchannel responses in turn-medial position accompanied by a gaze shift from the interpreter to the 'principal', through which the recipient displays a change in the epistemic stance and/or affiliation. The analyses draw on a data set of interpreter-mediated interactions (Dutch-Russian) that were recorded with mobile eye-tracking glasses. The study shows that, through the production of dual feedback, recipients in a triadic, interpreter-mediated talk display momentary orientation to the participation status and knowledge states of their interlocutors. It is also argued that dual feedback objectifies the double conversational ground between the primary interlocutors and the interpreter, and plays an important role in maintaining a triadic participation framework in an interpreter-mediated dialogue. The study relates dual feedback to the existing models of interpreting and discusses the significance of the analysis for the current understanding of multimodality in interpreter-mediated interaction.

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1. Introduction

In face-to-face communication, listeners are more than just passive recipients of speaker's talk. During extended units of talk, recipients actively signal their attention, understanding, (dis)agreement, assessment and affiliation through the use of verbal and visual listener responses or so-called *backchannel responses* (Bavelas and Gerwing, 2011; Clark and Brennan, 1991; Gardner, 2001; Norrick, 2010; Tolins and Fox Tree, 2014; Yngve, 1970). These backchannel responses include verbal tokens (e.g. *mh hm, yeah, okay, right, that's great*) and visual practices, such as facial expressions, head nods and gestures (Gardner, 2001; Stivers, 2008; Fox Tree and Tolins, 2014). Through backchannel responses the recipient displays how (s)he understands the ongoing talk, which is essential for the emergence of intersubjectivity or common ground (Clark and Brennan, 1991) in ongoing communication.

In this paper, we focus on backchanneling behavior in triadic, bilingual interactions with a consecutive interpreter. In comparison to the substantial body of literature on backchannel responses in same-language interaction, backchannel

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responses have received only little attention in research on interpreter-mediated interactions. According to Davidson (2002: 1277), “acknowledgment or acceptance turns are not easily found or identified” in interactions where the interlocutors do not understand each other’s language and have to communicate with the aid of an interpreter. In particular mutual feedback between the primary participants is delayed or even non-existent in interpreter-mediated talk (Linell et al., 1992; Wadensjö, 1998). According to the collaborative model of conversational interpreting (Davidson, 2002), interpreter-mediated talk consists of two overlapping dyads, where two separate sets of common ground are co-constructed: between the interpreter and each of the primary participants, leaving no space for direct grounding between the participants. This implies that, during a dyadic exchange in one particular language, the participant who has no understanding of the language is temporarily ‘excluded’ from the conversation. However, previous studies on listener responses in interpreter-mediated encounters (Davidson, 2002; Linell et al., 1992; Wadensjö, 1998) have mainly been based on audio recordings and their transcriptions. Only a few studies have taken a multimodal approach, that takes into account the visual modality, to study listener responses in interpreter-mediated interaction (see Englund Dimitrova, 1997; Merlino and Mondada, 2014; Vranjes et al., 2018). This paper aims at making a contribution in this direction by focusing on participants’ nonverbal behavior and – in particular – gaze in the production of listener responses.

Our paper examines a recurrent pattern of recipient behavior in turn-medial position, which we refer to as *dual feedback*. More specifically, we found that the recipient regularly shifts his/her gaze towards the other interlocutor while listening to the interpreter’s rendition and that these gaze shifts in the majority of cases co-occur with a backchannel response. The phenomenon of interest can be illustrated by the following example of an interpreter-mediated encounter between a Russian-speaking exchange student and a Dutch-speaking university counsellor. In this extract, the interpreter (INT) is rendering the student’s preceding turn into Dutch for the counsellor (CNS). Note that the green dots indicate the gaze direction of the counsellor, who is the recipient of the utterance.

1 INT da’s het eerste jaar dat wij euh
it’s the first year that we uh
2 euh examenperiode in januari#[hebben]%,
uh have exams in January
3 CNS [+ah ja+]
I see
+ nod +
cns gaze to Int-----%gaze to Stu-%gaze to Int->1.5
fig #fig 1-2



figure 1

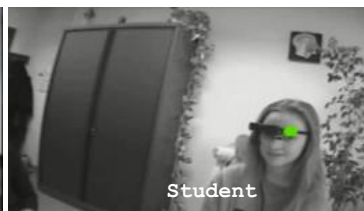


figure 2

4 #(0.6)
fig #fig 3



figure 3

5 INT euh vroeger hadden wij alle examens voor eenendertig december.
uh we used to have all the exams before the thirty-first of December

While listening to the interpreter’s rendition of the student’s talk, the counsellor produces a backchannel response ‘ah ja’ (line 3) in combination with a gaze shift towards the student. The counsellor orients towards the ‘principal’ (Goffman, 1981), whose utterance is being rendered in Dutch by the interpreter. The present analysis thus takes into account “the simultaneous use of multiple semiotic resources by participants” (Goodwin, 2000: 1490) in the interaction.

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