

A pragmatic typological survey of backchannelling in sociolinguistically diverse sign languages

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The proposal that there are universals of human grammar has been largely discredited in the face of evidence from typologically and grammatically diverse languages. However, the proposal that there are universals of human interaction is gaining ground, with recent research showing striking cross-cultural uniformity in domains such as turn-taking and repair. The present study (co-authored with Hannah Lutzenberger, Josefina Safar and Connie de Vos) provides further evidence for what has been called the “human interaction engine” via a corpus-based investigation of the presence and shape of response tokens in five sociolinguistically diverse sign languages (response tokens being a particular type of back-channelling behaviour that a listener engages in to indicate that they are attending to and understand the sender's utterance; in English, common response tokens include ‘mm-hmm’, ‘uh-huh’ and nodding). The study is in progress and in this talk I aim to do the following: (a) present the corpora under investigation and interim results; (b) problematise how response tokens and other back-channelling behaviour has been presented in the literature thus far; and (c) present initial thoughts on how homesigners' deployment of response tokens intersect with notions of theory of mind, building on other work regarding homesigner repair in progress in collaboration with Ronald Planer.

Biodata:

Lauren Reed is the acting Director of the Centre for Australian Languages at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). She is also a PhD candidate at Tilburg University. In her research outside of AIATSIS, Lauren focuses on topics to do with pragmatics, interaction and theory of mind, with a particular focus on homesigners. Her work has previously focused on the sociolinguistic typology of sign languages.