Understanding in Real-Time Communication

Micro-Feedback and Meaning Repair in Face-to-Face and Video-Mediated Intercultural Interactions

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Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication to be defended in public on Friday 15 June 2018 at 13:15 in Torg Orange (4th floor), Patricia building, Department of Applied Information Technology, Forskningsgången 6, Göteborg.

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Abstract

Title: Understanding in Real-Time Communication: Micro-Feedback and Meaning Repair in Face-to-Face and Video-Mediated Intercultural Interactions
Language: English with a Swedish summary
Number of pages: 311
Keywords: understanding, micro-feedback, meaning repair, intercultural communication, face-to-face (FTF), video-mediated communication (VMC), multimodal communication, activity type, relevance, contextualisation, inference, information sharing, sense-making
ISBN: 978-91-88245-03-8
URL: http://hdl.handle.net/2077/56223

Human communication is profoundly social. In social activities, it is not uncommon that people are understood in many different ways, which may have various consequences for social and interpersonal communication. This thesis aims to investigate how understanding is signalled, detected, handled, and resolved in social interactions of varying complexity in intercultural, multimodal, and video-mediated communication situations. The analytical focuses are on micro-feedback and meaning repair, using an interactional approach based on theories of social communicative activity type, meaning and implicature, contextualisation, and relevance. Understanding issues are explored in audio- and video-recorded data of a spontaneous communication activity in first encounters and an educational activity with collaborative learning tasks. The results show that unimodal head movement is exclusively used to signal sufficient understanding. Head forward, eyebrow and gaze movement, smile, chuckle, and laughter can indicate understanding problems. Sufficient understanding is associated with short and medium duration of micro-feedback, and non-understanding is usually associated with a rising pitch contour. Misunderstanding does not occur as frequently as predicted in intercultural communication or video-mediated communication and is difficult for the interlocutors to detect. When information is repeated, paraphrased, or responded to with unanticipated actions or when nod in combination with "yeah" is associated with hesitation and uncertainty, a misunderstanding may have occurred. All the detected understanding problems are handled by means of meaning repair either self- or other-initiated but always self-performed. Video mediating technology does not seem to affect understanding, however, face-to-face communication provides better chances of detecting, handling, and resolving understanding problems. Apart from enhancing the theoretical understanding of understanding in real-time communication, the empirical findings also add to the foundation for practical design of technology enhanced education and communication, for example, online and flexible learning and digital communication.