Non-lexical vocalisations in interaction: an introduction to the panel

As far as we know, non-lexical vocalisations occur in all languages. However, much remains to be discovered about how much they vary from language to language, or to what extent they are conventionalised either in their form, their sequential positioning, or their meaning/function. Some such vocalisations are describable using conventional phonetic terminology. One such example is grunts that display effort, which tend to be initiated with a glottal stop and consist of vowel sounds made in the pharynx or the back of the vocal tract (Esling 2005); or clicks (Ogden 2013), which are consonant sounds that occur lexically in a small number of languages, and serve other functions in English and other languages such as expressions of affective stance, and aspects of the management of talk (such as initiating a new sequence, marking incipient speakership or displaying trouble in a word search). Other vocalisations, like whistles or sniffs, are less speech-like, and are therefore less amenable to being produced or represented as speech-like events. In all cases, an important question is: how do such vocalisations come to make and display meaning, and to what extent are they a part of our social, interactional and linguistic repertoire?

Non-lexical vocalisations are outwith the usual remit of linguistics, but they do exhibit some of the characteristics of conventional linguistic signs. They exhibit aspects of distribution which are not merely instantaneous or visceral responses, but are sequentially and positionally sensitive: in other words, position in turn and sequence are crucial elements of semiosis for such vocalisations.

Because of this rather marginal linguistic status, I will argue, such vocalisations are a key phenomenon in understanding the relationship between language and interaction and boundaries of language. I will argue that the papers in this panel explore a key phenomenon in understanding more precisely the nature of spoken language as an inherently social and embodied phenomenon.

References