

**Inhalation noises, <ja> and laughter in a German dialogue corpus –
Phonetic forms and their possible communicative functions**

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Among the most frequent paraverbal (or 'paralinguistic') vocalisations which are typical for spontaneous speech are various types of laughter as well as 'words' like <yeah> and <uh-hu>, different forms of <hm>, fillers like <uh> or <uhm> and other forms of affective interjections. In this study we explore laughter, the 'word' <ja> (engl. <yeah>, literally <yes>) and audible inhalation as the three most prominent categories of vocalisation in a German corpus of spontaneous dialogues (IPDS 2006) (six conversations with two friends each (same sex), no visual contact, mean duration per dialogue: 11 minutes).

Inhalation noises

The preliminary results show that the majority of all audible inhalations occur between two phrases of the dialogue partner who has the floor, most of the time in a narrative more monologue-like section. Roughly a quarter of all inhalation noises were uttered by the listener to get the turn. In both cases the breathing sounds feature a rather shortened but intense frication noise that seems to be strengthened by the additional oral inhalation. Obviously, this sort of inhalation noise is used as a signal to claim the turn.

Instances of <ja>

A very common pattern found in this corpus is the combination of audible inhalation plus <ja> when taking the turn. When turns were started with <ja> – which is a very frequent pattern – this <ja> shows a high intensity, a longer duration and more pitch variation compared to <ja> at the end of turns or those instances of <ja> that are feedback signals. Here, the vocalic opening gesture <ja> seems to be a hypo-articulated vocalisation (cf. Pompino-Marschall 2004) whose *prosody* plays the decisive role for discourse functions.

Interestingly, <ja> occurred only twice as a modal particle and neither as a question tag (in the sense of English <isn't it>) nor in its original lexical meaning as an affirmative <yes> in this corpus.

Laughter

Laughter is frequently used at the end and beginning of turns for a speaker change. This pattern fits nicely in the 'invitation-acceptance' scheme described by conversational analysts (cf. Jefferson 1979) and also found by physiological studies of discourse breathing (McFarland 2001). However, the 'invitation-acceptance' of laughter at turn-taking locations frequently leads to situations where it is unclear who continues to take or to hold the floor.

A second interesting observation of laughter at turn-ends, at a micro-level, is a great variation of the duration of the silent pause after the last 'laughter syllable' and the concluding inhalation noise. It can be speculated that this variation in the off-set of the speaker's laughter is a function of turn-taking: The speaker can signal to yield the floor with a sufficiently long duration of the off-set silence before the inhalation.

The described general observations of inhalation noises, instances of <ja> and laughter in the investigated corpus indicate that these paraverbal vocalisations are used prosodically in complex ways to control interactional demands by the timing and the intensity of breathing. More analyses of corpora as well as experimental studies are needed to clarify the discourse functions explored in this presentation.

References

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