Topic Selection in Conversation

Michael Yeomans & Alison Wood Brooks

Among humans, conversation is ubiquitous and important. But prior research tells us surprisingly little about the descriptive, generative, and prescriptive models underlying conversational behavior. In this paper, we study a choice that everyone confronts during every turn of every conversation: Should we stay on this topic or switch to another one? Descriptively, how do people navigate this decision? Prescriptively, how should they? Across thousands of synchronous and asynchronous conversations among close others and strangers, we demonstrate the behavioral limits of effective topic selection in cooperative conversation. In particular, humans fall short in detecting many cues of others' interest in topics (compared to natural language processing algorithms as a normative benchmark), and are overly reluctant to react to cues to switch topics. Lastly, we identify an intervention that led to Pareto improvements in conversational enjoyment: empowering strangers to switch topics more readily together.