Elementary particles of conversation

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In this talk I provide an overview of current work in our collaborative project Elementary Particles of Conversation. The project focuses on how small words like 'mmhm', 'huh?' and 'oh!' streamline interaction and scaffold complex language. A central feature of the project is its combination of sequential analysis and computational approaches. Qualitative CA-style analysis is unparalled in its power to lay bare fundamental aspects of interactional structure, as I show in a discussion of "liminal signs" (Dingemanse 2020). Insights from sequential analysis can help to turn corpus linguistics from 'bag of words' models to sequentially aware analyses at scale. I show this using ongoing work on repair initiators and continuers. The influence can also go the other way: computational modelling of pragmatic reasoning provides us with possible reasons for the prevalence of other-initiated repair. Finally, I discuss how insights from interactional linguistics can be made relevant to general linguistics and language documentation, using the case of interjections as an example. The talk represents joint work with Marieke Woensdregt, Andreas Liesenfeld and Jeroen van Paridon.