

The Interactional Basis of Backchannel Behaviour in Japanese English

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Abstract

Short vocal and/or non-vocal utterances often observed in conversations are called backchannels. Backchanneling has long been considered to be a listener response behaviour, and previous research has attempted to understand backchannel behaviour by identifying individual backchannel items and their locations in discourse. The current paper critically reviews literature on backchannels, questioning the assumed definitions of backchannels that have been used in studies, and argues for the need of looking at backchannel instances as a collaborative behaviour in interaction instead of a one-sided listener's behaviour. It concludes with discussion on cross-cultural communication where speakers of different varieties of English need to negotiate and accommodate in order to collaboratively construct backchanneling interaction.

1 Introduction

Japanese has been known to have unique backchannel behaviour called *aizuchi*, characterized by high frequency and a wide variety of types (Mizutani, 1985). The distinctive use of backchannels in Japanese has triggered academic interest, and several attempts have been made to investigate frequency differences of backchannels among languages such as English varieties (Tottie, 1991; Wong & Peters, 2007), Japanese, Mandarin and Thai (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996), as well as among L1/L2 speakers (Cutrone, 2005; Lee & Mukai, 1998; White, 1989). However, definitions of backchannels differ widely among scholars, from being limited to only non-lexical utterances (e.g., Clancy et al., 1996) to including non-verbal elements such as nodding (e.g., Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Maynard, 1997), which has led to different findings and results across studies. Although it has been shown that Japanese speakers use backchannels more frequently than English speakers (e.g., Maynard, 1986, 1987, 1997; White, 1989), how frequently backchannels are used remains uncertain, due to the diversity of what has been counted as a backchannel across the various studies.

Despite the growing interest in backchannels, little research has been done to investigate

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the mechanisms of actual backchannel behaviour. Studies have mostly focused on frequency differences, functions, and where they occur, but interactional aspects of backchannel behaviour have for the most part been overlooked. This is largely due to the fact that backchannelling has typically been considered to be a ‘listener action’ rather than a collaborative interaction between the speaker and the listener. In this paper, I argue for the importance of looking at backchannel behaviour as a collaborative interactional management strategy rather than as a one-party action.

This paper starts with a brief overview of terms used to describe backchannel behaviour, and then critically assesses the identification criteria that form the basis of these definitions. From here the case is made for defining what counts as a backchannel on the basis of talk-in-interaction and for analysing backchannelling as a collaborative interactional management strategy.

2 Defining ‘backchannel’

Traditionally, backchannels have been considered to be ‘short’ messages, such as *uh huh* and *mhm*, that are performed solely by the listener. These short utterances were ignored for a long time by linguists, as they lack semantic meaning in conversation (Gardner, 2001, pp. 3–4). Perhaps the first attempt to properly analyse such utterances was a study by Yngve (1970), proposing the now widely used term ‘back-channels’. Since then, backchannels¹ have gained much attention among researchers and a variety of terms have been used in describing the nature of these utterances. Gardner (2001) suggests that the term ‘minimal responses’ by Fishman (1983) is the most widely used term. However, many scholars who focus on specific aspects of minimal responses use Yngve’s (1970) term ‘back-channels’ (e.g., Cutrone, 2005; Maynard, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1997; Oreström, 1983; Saft, 2007; Tottie, 1991; Ward & Tsukahara, 2000; White, 1989). Focusing more on its primary function, Schegloff (1982) calls it a ‘continuer’. Other terms include ‘reactive tokens’ (Clancy et al., 1996), Gardner’s (2001) ‘response tokens’ and ‘generic listener responses’ (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2002). Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘backchannel’, for it has been used in a number of studies concerning such behaviour.

Lack of consistency in defining backchannel behaviour has been discussed in Conversation Analysis literature such as Gardner (2001), Ike (2012) and Wong and Peters (2007). Also as Gardner (2001) points out, definitions are not always clearly stated in studies; all too frequently, a few examples of the tokens are introduced and others are all included in ‘etcetera’ (Gardner, 2001, p. 15). The following is a review of backchannel definitions and identification criteria employed in previous studies.

One criterion frequently used in defining backchannels is length of utterance. As mentioned above, backchannels are often referred to as ‘short’ utterances, and researchers have reached different conclusions of how short they should be. While Duncan and Fiske (1977) include long vocal utterances with more than one word in backchannels, Clancy et al. (1996) consider only non-lexical single word utterances as backchannels. Tottie (1991) and Cutrone (2005) code longer expressions consisting of more than one backchannel item such as *yeah yeah yeah* and *yeah sure right* as one backchannel instance, and Lee and Mukai (1998) also treat such expressions

as one backchannel token. Yngve (1970) even includes an instance that consists of a number of sentences, lasting for about thirty seconds, and calls the turn ‘an extensive back-channel activity’ (p. 574). Similarly, S. Iwasaki (1997) includes any form of a sentence or a series of sentences that comes from a floor supporter as a ‘substantive backchannel’ (Iwasaki, 1997, p. 666). It becomes clear from these different classifications that length of utterance cannot be considered as a very reliable criterion for defining backchannels. In other words, what is considered to be a ‘common understanding’ of backchannels is in fact not common at all.

Another commonly taken approach is to provide a list of lexical items for backchannels. Needless to say, individual studies have provided different lists of backchannels. For instance, White (1989) lists what she claims are the five most common backchannels in English, all being single words (*mmhm*, *uh-huh*, *yeah*, *oh!*, *hmm*). Kjellmer (2009) criticises inconsistent vocabulary lists among studies, but he limits his analysis of backchannels to six lexical items (*mhm*, *mm*, *right*, *uh huh*, *yeah*, *yes*) on the claim that they are the most frequent backchannels. Having a list seems convenient in identifying backchannels, and it is true that *uh huh* is almost always used as a backchannel in English conversation. However, previous studies have already demonstrated that *uh huh* is not the most preferred form of backchannel in varieties of English such as Australian English and New Zealand English (Wong & Peters, 2007), as well as American English and British English (Tottie, 1991). Moreover, short non-lexical items such as *mhm* seem to be described differently in different studies. It is not clear whether *mmhm* in White’s description is the same item as *mhm* in Kjellmer’s study. Ike (2012) differentiates *mm* from *un* in her descriptions of backchannels among Japanese English speakers. What is most problematic in listing lexical items for identifying backchannels is that the list inevitably will include words that have more than one function. For example, the single word *yeah*, another commonly cited backchannel, can be used as a backchannel suggesting to the other interlocutor that s/he keep talking, or alternately as a simple answer to a closed question such as “Would you like coffee?” (Oreström, 1983). That is, not all *yeah* utterances are backchannels, and one needs to look at the surrounding context in order to distinguish *yeah* functioning as a backchannel from one functioning as a response to a question.

Cutrone (2005) reports that *yeah* is the most frequently used backchannel both in British English and Japanese English. He further states that certain backchannels such as *un* and *oo* seem to be specific to Japanese English, while some other backchannels such as *okay* and *right* are rarely used. *Un* is in fact reported to be the most dominant type of backchannel in Japanese according to Ward and Tsukahara’s analysis of 80 minutes of casual Japanese conversation (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000). Therefore, preferred backchannels differ across varieties of English, not to mention the fact that there are different lexical items used as backchannels in different languages. A related problem is that relying on lists of lexical items in defining a backchannel will restrict the possibility of cross-linguistic examination of backchannels and backchannel behaviour. Furthermore, it is also possible that by only considering a predetermined list of items as backchannels, other lexical items that are actually functioning as a backchannel in a particular interaction will be excluded.

What is also often excluded in backchannel studies is non-verbal elements such as nodding and eye gaze shift. This is especially the case in studies taking a Conversation Analysis approach

(e.g., Clancy et al., 1996; White, 1989; Wong & Peters, 2007). However, it has been shown that in Japanese and Japanese English, for example, nodding and other forms of head movement are one of the most common means of backchannelling (Ike, 2010, 2012; Kita & Ide, 2007; Maynard, 1987, 1997). Using video-recordings of dyadic conversations, Maynard (1987) demonstrates that over a third of head movements perform backchanneling functions in Japanese conversation. White (1989) states (however anecdotally) that head nods co-occur with vocalised responses about 85% of the time in English, and Maynard (1990) shows that nearly 20% of backchannels produced in Japanese conversations consist of head movement alone. Similarly, Cutrone (2005) shows that in his data more than 20% of the backchannels produced by British English speakers and more than 25% produced by Japanese speakers consist of head movement alone. Ike (2010) analyses backchannel behaviour in Japanese English and Australian English and finds that about 40% of backchannels in Japanese English and more than 50% of backchannels in Australian English consist of head movement only. Clearly, whether or not to include non-verbal elements in assessing backchannel behaviour will have a significant impact on any conclusions about frequency of occurrence and the nature of backchannel behaviour. It may have been difficult to employ video-recording in earlier research, but with the advanced technologies available now non-verbal elements should not be ignored in present-day research on backchannels.

A third approach to defining backchannels is to focus on function, rather than form or utterance length. As noted above, Schegloff (1982) uses the term ‘continuer’ for what is being called a backchannel here, since one of the primary functions of backchannels is to facilitate the other interlocutor’s (i.e., the primary speaker’s) turn. Similarly, Oreström (1983, p. 24) explains this function as ‘I listen, you talk’, as opposed to the speaker’s turn ‘I talk, you listen’. In addition to the continuer function, Maynard (1997) identifies five other functions: (1) display of understanding of content, (2) support toward the speaker’s judgement, (3) agreement, (4) strong emotional response, and (5) minor addition, correction, or request for information. Gardner (2001) also classifies his set of response tokens into seven categories according to their function: discourse markers, dispreference markers, hesitation markers, assessment tokens, acknowledgement tokens, continuers, and newsmarkers. Again, different categorisations of backchannel functions result in different analyses and findings in each study.

It should also be noted that Gardner’s seven functions do not necessarily cover all of Maynard’s five functions; Gardner’s categorisation is more descriptive and detailed in terms of emotional function. Although Gardner states that ‘brief question’ and ‘collaborative completion’ are two of the roles of the listener in conversation, he does not include such responses as response tokens. Therefore, Maynard’s function ‘minor addition, correction, or request for information’ is not included in Gardner’s definition of backchannels.

Earlier, Duncan and Niederehe (1974) included ‘request for clarification’ in their discussion of backchannels. However, Oreström (1983) points out that such an utterance can directly influence the subject matter, i.e., the content of the speaker’s next turn, and thus they are likely to be ordinary question/answer adjacency pairs. Furthermore, Ward and Tsukahara (2000) state in their definitions that backchannels do not require acknowledgement, whereas a request for information

assumes a response. The primary speaker might have to devote his/her next turn just to supplying the necessary information, but the next turn might have been different if such a request had not been made. A similar argument is made by Tottie (1991) that backchannels do not claim to take over the turn, and by Francis and Hunston (1992) that backchannels do not claim the floor. In other words, backchannels do not have a function of steering the course of the interaction, and so acknowledgement of backchannels is optional. What is more, utterances should be identified as backchannels as long as they do not change the direction of conversation, and such utterances may be word/phrase repetition of the speaker's speech content or sentence completion, as claimed by Tao and Thompson (1991) and Duncan and Fiske (1977).

These functional analyses of backchannels indicate that backchannels are highly dependent on the interactional context. Accordingly, an interaction-based approach, i.e., discourse analysis, is necessary in identifying a backchannel, and each potential backchannel instance needs to be analysed in relation to the speaker's action and the listener's action within the particular context. A backchannel needs to be an utterance that does not claim a floor change, and does not direct the course of the speech content.

3 Backchannels as an interaction management strategy

Studies have been devoted to identify the discourse locations of backchannels, such as Grammatical Completion Point (Lee & Mukai, 1998), Complex Transition Relevance Place (Clancy et al., 1996), Pause-bounded Phrasal Unit (Maynard, 1986, 1997), low pitch ranges (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000), and mutual gaze period (Bavelas et al., 2002). Studies of Japanese conversation also suggest that backchannels and the listeners head movements are often initiated or invited by the primary speaker's head movement (Ike, 2010; Kita, 2009; Kita & Ide, 2007; Maynard, 1997). Maynard (1997) states that about 30% of backchannels in Japanese are produced near the primary speaker's head movement, while only 8% of backchannels are near the speaker's head movement in American English. Ike (2010) reports that more than 30% of backchannels are produced in response to the speaker's head movement in Japanese English, but only 10% are in Australian English. Meanwhile, studies of Australian English suggest that High Rising Tunes (e.g., Fletcher & Harrington, 2001; Gardner, 2001; McGregor & Palethorpe, 2008) often elicit listener's minimal responses as a continuer or an acknowledgement. As for Canadian English, eye gaze seems to have an important role in eliciting a backchannel. Bavelas et al. (2002) show that most of the listener's responses occurred during a period of mutual gaze, 'a gaze window' (Bavelas, et al., 2002, pp. 569–570), and conclude that the speaker's gaze has the most influential relationship to a listener response.

Without explicitly stating it as such, what the researchers in the above studies are all claiming is that the listener orients to a backchannel cue in producing a backchannel. However, what is still missing in this analysis is a way of capturing the complex nature of collaborative behaviour by both participants in the interaction: the speaker and the listener.

Although limiting analysis to a specific type of backchannel instance, Iwasaki (1997) was

the first to look at the speaker's active involvement in backchannel instances. He argues that sometimes there are successive exchanges of backchannels between the primary speaker and the primary listener—which he terms a 'loop sequence'—and the loop sequences are used as a floor negotiation opportunity. Iwasaki notes that such loop sequences are seen in Japanese considerably more frequently than in English and Thai, and argues that the high frequency of loop sequences has its roots in cultural difference in the notion of mutual dependency in floor management. In addition to the mutual dependency claimed by Iwasaki, Kogure (2007) suggests that the rhythmical consecutive nodding in Japanese conversation may facilitate smooth negotiation of the floor. In a similar vein, Kita and Ide (2007) analyse loop sequences and argue that loop sequences in Japanese conversation reflect the cultural value of placing equal importance on both sides, the speaker and the listener, in the interaction. They conclude that simultaneous nodding in backchannel instances is a way to establish rapport between the conversation participants.

The studies of loop sequences imply that backchanneling behaviour is not a solo act of the listener or a speaker, but a carefully orchestrated collaboration between the speaker and the listener. Taking a more discourse analytic approach, Ike (2010, 2012) and Ike and Mulder (2012, 2014, 2015a) argue that backchannels are sometimes elicited by the speaker, and sometimes initiated by the listener. Ike and Mulder (2015b) look at backchannel instances as a collaborative interaction management strategy, and classify the instances into two types, Speaker-elicited backchannels (S-BC) and Listener-initiated backchannels (L-BC). Through detailed multimodal discourse analysis, they demonstrate that in an L-BC instance the listener orients to the end of an intonation unit (IU) and offers a backchannel without an overt backchannel cue by the speaker. On the other hand, in an S-BC instance, the speaker gives one or more overt backchannel cues such as head movement, eye gaze shift on, appeal intonation and pause to elicit a backchannel response from the listener. Furthermore, when the speaker acknowledges the listener's backchannel, the backchannel instance involves one or more sets of backchannels by both the listener and the speaker, forming a backchannel sequence (cf. Iwasaki, 1997). Ike and Mulder (2015b) further show that in a lengthy backchannel sequence, namely 'extended BC instance' which is frequently observed in Japanese English conversations, a series of acknowledgement phase, rapport establishment phase, and/or turn negotiation phase can be observed. From the analysis of different types and phases of backchannel instances, Ike and Mulder (2015a, 2015b) argue that backchannel instances are the product of careful observation and collaboration by both the listener and the speaker in interaction, and that backchannels can be used not only to show the listener's active involvement in the interaction, but also to negotiate speakership.

4 Negotiating backchannel behaviour in cross-cultural interactions

Analysing backchannelling as an interaction management strategy allows researchers to further observe how participants negotiate and accommodate in cross-cultural interactions when they do not share a common linguistic background. It has already been shown that speakers of Japanese English and Australian English have different preferences in backchannel cues—

Japanese preferring head movement and Australian English speakers preferring eye gaze shift (Ike, 2010)—and Bavelas et al. (2002) claim that listener responses are elicited by eye gaze shift by the primary speaker in Canadian English. However, given the nature of backchannels as collaborative interaction participants constantly need to collaborate in producing backchannel instances even when participants do not share a common cultural background. In this respect, backchannel behaviour is the same as other linguistic differences such as accent and vocabulary that need to be negotiated and accommodated in English as an International Language (EIL) settings.

White (1989), for instance, reports that American English speakers increase their frequency of backchannels in English conversations with Japanese participants. Ike and Mulder (2014, 2015a) point out that, in EIL conversations between an Australian English speaker and a Japanese English speaker, Japanese participants use a range of overt backchannel cues to elicit a backchannel from their Australian interlocutor, while the Australian participants carefully monitor their Japanese interlocutor and often produce a backchannel on cue. They also speculate that the lack of a rapport establishment phase in backchannel sequences in Australian English that has been noted in their analysis may contribute to fewer instances of extended backchannel sequences in EIL interactions between Australian and Japanese participants.

Kita and Ide (2007) emphasise on taking into account cultural values and socio-cultural practice in understanding a linguistic behaviour. They argue that a certain principle may be common across cultures, but the practice of the principle may be different cross-linguistically. Backchannel instances in Japanese conversations as well as Japanese English conversations seem to have a significant role not only in maintaining listenership and speakership, but also establishing rapport between the participants and facilitating a closer relationship to each other. It is argued here that these socio-cultural values become visible only by looking at such backchannel instances as a whole, in other words, as a collaborative interaction management strategy instead of looking at them as a one-sided linguistic production in interaction.

5 Conclusion

The current paper has critically reviewed previous research on backchannels, questioning assumed definitions of backchannels. Backchanneling has long been considered to be a listener response behaviour, and previous research has attempted to understand backchannel behaviour by identifying individual backchannel items and their locations in discourse. However, it is argued that instead of looking at backchannels as a listener behaviour and backchannel cues as a speaker behaviour, backchannel instances should be looked at as a collaborative behaviour in interaction. Therefore, the fundamental definition of backchannel should not solely be dependent on its linguistic form or its discourse location. Rather, linguistic form such as a list of lexical/non-lexical items, and discourse location such as pauses and IU boundaries, should be used as an indicator of a possible backchannel instance. The claims from functional analysis of backchannels that a backchannel is free of floor constitution and does not require speaker's acknowledgement, also need to be taken into account. However, the functions of each backchannel instance need to

be examined as an event collaboratively formed by both the speaker and the listener, as a single backchannel instance may consist of more than one backchannel item. Furthermore, certain functions such as rapport establishment may only become visible when backchannels are looked at as a collaborative strategy for managing interaction. By doing so, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons of backchannel behaviour become possible, which then enables us to better understand the complex nature of the accommodation and negotiation strategies used in EIL communication. It is hoped that backchannel behaviour—a subtle yet distinctive element of language interaction—will be accurately described by focusing on its collaborative nature within interaction.

Notes

- 1 Note that ‘back-channels’ also have varieties in labelling, such as ‘back-channel items’ by Oreström (1983), ‘back channels’ by Maynard (1986; 1990), and ‘back-channel feedback’ by Ward and Tsukahara (2000). Throughout this paper, ‘backchannel’ is used for consistency.

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