

TURN-TAKING AND BACKCHANNELS

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ABSTRACT

The activity of conversational turn-taking involves participation of the speaker and the auditor as well. When a person speaks the auditor does not remain mute and motionless as the he indicates active participation in the talk at hand through verbal and non-verbal means called backchannels. These backchannels occur simultaneously, sometimes overlapping the ongoing speaker's turn. This backchanneling is important in monitoring the quality of conversation as backchannels are non-interruptive, non-floor taking verbal and non-verbal responses produced intentionally to enhance the quality of the ongoing speaker's turns.

KEYWORDS: *Backchannels, Floor, Turn-Taking, Loop-Sequence, Amaf, Uptaking, Gaze*

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INTRODUCTION

In face-to-face interaction when speaker continues his talk, the auditor generally does not remain mute, motionless and completely inactive. Rather, he frequently indicates his active listenership through verbal and non-verbal means. It includes his head nods or shakes and a number of vocalizations like hmm, m-hm, yeah, uh, huh, oh and the like. These responses are termed as backchannels or backchannel responses following Yngve (1970).

Most of the time auditor backchannels occur simultaneously with speaker's verbalizations. Sometimes they clearly overlap with the speaker's ongoing utterances. There are also the instances when backchannels occur exactly prior to the end of speaker's turn or immediately after. But generally backchannels are not viewed negatively as infringements. On the other hand, as Yngve observes (1970, p. 560), backchannels are very important in monitoring the quality of communication.

DEFINITIONS OF BACKCHANNELS

The phenomenon of backchannels has received enormous attention during last two decades across the world. All the studies have the common agreement that backchanneling is crucial to monitor and enhance the quality of interaction. Maynard (1990, p. 402) rightly observes that backchanneling is solely a listener activity. He refers to backchannels as the listener behaviour during the other interlocutor's speaking turn. According to Yule (1996 a, p. 127), backchannels are crucial to indicate listener attention. He illustrates them as social indicators of attention when someone else is talking. Likewise, Ford and Thompson (1996, p. 152) describe backchannels to be brief utterances produced by the listener. They think that backchannels are the short utterances produced by the listener during the other interlocutor's speakership.

Iwasaki (1997, p. 665) believes that backchannels support the ongoing conversation. She claims that they are any verbal deliberations whose main purpose is to respond in a supporting manner to the other participant's preceding or current vocalization. Furo (2001, p. 16) supposes that backchannels sustain the current speaker's talk. She names backchannels as short responses to the primary speaker's utterances which do not project any upcoming longer talk or change in the current topic, polarity or floor formation. Ninio and Snow (2011) contend that the nature of backchannels is unlike that of interruptions. They assume that backchannels are the non-interruptive responses by the addressee. In essence, backchannels are the non-interruptive, non-floor taking listener verbal and non verbal responses intentionally produced to indicate active listenership, support and comprehension to the ongoing speaker.

FUNCTIONS OF BACKCHANNELS

There are so many functions that backchannels play during conversation. We have listed some of them as identified by White (1989, p. 607), Ward and Tsukahara (2000, p. 1193) and Heinz (2003, p.1117). According to them, backchannel responses are initiated to:

- Provide feedback to the primary speaker;
- Signal listener attention to the speaker's talk;
- Show active involvement in the interaction;
- Acknowledge the details in the speaker's utterances;
- Indicate agreement or sometimes disagreement;
- Show lack of understanding and understanding too;
- Judge the ongoing speaker's talk;
- Express sympathy, and in certain cases, empathy;
- Communicate boredom and scepticism on rare occasions;
- Exhibit unwillingness to take longer turns;
- Display interest and support to whatever the speaker says;
- Evince any strong emotion like amazement, anger, happiness, admiration, joy, etc.
- Negate the claim of fact given in the speaker's speech.
- Indicate, irony, sarcasm, criticism, etc.

All the above functions reveal that backchannels are very essential in our communication. There are many good reasons to believe that backchanneling makes conversation so vigorous, meaningful and interesting. It is the best way to know how the auditor approaches the talk as well as the talker.

TYPES OF BACKCHANNELS

Duncan (1973), Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki and Tao (1996) and Iwasaki (1997) have been some prominent contributors in the extensive study of backchannels. All of them have discussed various types of backchannels according to their content as well function.

Duncan's Classification of Backchannels

In his phenomenal paper on dyadic conversation, Duncan (1973, pp. 38-39) has demonstrated the following varieties of backchannels:

- **"mm - hm":** This expression is used to represent a group of readily identified verbal behaviours. Examples of this group would be "mm", "yeah", "right" and the like. Such backchannels may be used either singly or in a brief series, for instance "mn-hm-mhm."
- **Sentence Completion:** On occasions, the auditor would complete a sentence that the speaker had begun. In such a case, the speaker could not continue his turn as if he is interrupted.
- **Request for Clarification:** Contrasting with sentence completion are brief requests for clarification. These requests are usually accomplished in a few words or phrases.
- **Brief Restatements:** It is similar to sentence completion except that here the auditor relates in a few words an immediately preceding thought expressed by the speaker.
- **Head Nods and Shakes:** Head nods and head shakes are the non-verbal type of backchannels. These backchannels may be used alone or along with verbalized backchannels. They may vary in duration from a single to a rather protracted continuous series.

Clancy et al.'s Reactive Tokens

Clancy and her colleagues (1996, pp. 355-87) have applied the term "reactive tokens" for backchannels. They have illustrated various types of such tokens in the following fashion:

- **Backchannels:** These are non lexical vocal forms which serve as a "continuer". They function as display of interest or claim of understanding as in hm, huh, oh, mhm, uh, etc.
- **Reactive Expressions:** If the auditor utters a non-floor taking lexical phrase or word, it is coded as a reactive expression. Such expressions include oh, really, yeah, okay, sure, exactly, alright, man, shit, hell, etc.
- **Collaborative Finishes:** When the auditor completes ongoing speaker's utterances, it becomes a collaborative finish. For example,

A: He did not come to us, because he was { too busy
 B: } too busy.

- **Repetitions:** If the auditor reacts by repeating some of the portion of speaker's speech it is termed as repetition.
- **Resumptive Openers:** These are the non-lexical elements which are used at the initial points of utterance. But such forms should not be followed by full turns.

A: Biden himself invites him
 B: Oh... Biden.

Resumptive openers do not constitute a new turn, but they occur in the beginning of a turn.

Iwasaki's Backchannels

Like Clancy et al., Iwasaki (1997, pp. 661-93) too elaborated only verbal backchannel responses, which are based on a comparative study of English and Japanese. Iwasaki's data include even Japanese backchannels. She divides all the backchannels among three categories as follows:

- **Non-Lexical Backchannels:** The non lexical backchannels are mn, n::, ee, e::, aa, aa::, hai, haa, ha:: hoo, he::, hn, n, n, etc.
- **Phrasal Backchannels:** Such backchannels may occur in the form of following phrases:
 - "Really?"
 - "Is that right!"
 - "I don't believe it!"
 - "I see what you mean!"
 - "How ridiculous!"
 - "Are you serious?"
- **Substantive Backchannels:** It may comprise any term of a sentence or a series of sentences.

LOOP SEQUENCE

According to Iwasaki (1997, pp. 681-93), loop sequence is totally a Japanese phenomenon which is a regular feature of conversation. The term refers to a turn-taking pattern consisting of a consecutive backchannel or backchannel expressions, produced by different speakers. The loop sequence is a pattern that provides participants with an opportunity to negotiate the next floor holder who will subsequently control and develop the floor. This sequence appears when the ongoing speaker indicates the floor transfer; or when the auditor returns a floor which has been transferred to him inadvertently, or when participants jointly produce utterances in a rapid succession.

Loop Head and Loop Tail

The first backchannel expression which is directed to the preceding or concurrent utterances by the other speaker is identified as the loop head; and the second backchannel which is directed to the loop-head is identified as the loop-tail. Thus, the identification of loop head is contingent on the discovery of a loop tail as in the following example:

A: Do you know where these boys stealthily drink wine? In toilets...

B: Pigs! ←—— **Loop Head**

A: Pigs! You are right to call them pigs.



Loop Tail

Loop Sequence and Amae

Iwasaki (1997, pp. 661-93) proposes that the frequent use of loop sequence is a consequence of the Japanese conversationalists' preference towards *amae* or mutual dependency, the idea is of immense importance in Japanese interaction. *Amae* is highly essential factor for Japanese people to develop social relationship. The producer of a loop tail suggests his helpless and submissive position ("I cannot contribute to the floor, help me out.") and at the same time his trust in or dependency (or *amae*) on the other who he believes can provide help.

Finally, Iwasaki concludes (1997, p. 689): "All types of loop sequences exhibit loop tail producer's concern towards mutual dependency by acknowledging his weaker (lower) position and his interlocutor's stronger (higher) position."

BACKCHANNELS AND UPTAKING

According to Faerch and Philipson (1984, p.72), feedback from a native speaker in the form of gambits like "aha," "mm," "yeah," "yes," "no," "oh," "hm," "you don't say so," etc. are called as uptaking. It is also signalled non-linguistically by gaze, head and hand movements that accompany to alternate with gambits. Uptaking is a kind of backchanneling used to encourage the speaker, especially learner to go on.

CONCLUSIONS

Turn-taking is a two-way activity involving participation of the speaker and auditor. The auditor responses in the form of backchannels have different functions that enhance the quality of conversation at hand. Backchannels change the conversation into a shared and participatory activity which is an imperative to make conversation a meaningful and constructive social event.

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