

# Turn-taking

## -a Comparative Study of Backchannelling Behavior of Japanese and Native Speakers of English

Chandini Wanduragala

### ターンテイキング —日本人と英語ネイティブスピーカーのバックチャネリング比較

シャンディニ ワンドウラーガラ

#### Abstract

This paper reports on a study which compared backchannelling behavior in turn-taking of Japanese Speakers of English (JSE's) with Canadian Native Speakers of English (NSE's). The results showed a marked difference in backchannel utterances between the two groups with the JSE's accounting for as much as three times the NSE total. Backchannelling refers to signals both verbal and non-verbal, given by hearers to indicate that they are following what is being said. Although backchannelling utterances are not considered turns, according to Duncan (1972), they 'comprise a large and complex set of signals' which 'may participate in a variety of communication functions, including the regulation of speaking turns'. Thus backchannelling plays a crucial role in turn-taking. Furthermore it has pedagogical implications for inter-cultural communication since backchannelling could be perceived differently by diverse cultural groups. Therefore while in Japanese discourse backchannelling or *aizuchi* is expected from a competent speaker of the language, in other cultures it could be interpreted as an interruption or even an attempt to take the turn away from the speaker, or change the topic. Thus in the language classroom raising students' awareness of its different use and perception by diverse cultural groups is important in order to minimize possible misunderstanding and to ensure smoother inter-cultural communication.

**Key words:** backchannelling, *aizuchi*, intrusive interruption, cooperative interruption  
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#### 抄 録

本稿は日本語を母語とする人の英語と、カナダ人で英語を母語とする人の話す英語のターンテイキングにみられる、バックチャネリングを比較した研究を報告する。研究の結果、両者のバックチャネリングを比べると、日本語を母語とする人の方が3倍もの頻度でバックチャネリングを使うなど、顕著な違いがみられた。バックチャネリングは、聞き手が相手の言うことに、ついていっている事を示す発話やしぐさと定義される。バックチャネリングは、ターンとは一般には考えられていないが、ダンカン (1972) によるとバックチャネリングは「複雑かつ多くのシグナルの集合であり、会話のターンのコントロールも含む様々なコミュニケーション機能に登場する。」このようにバックチャネリングはターンテイキングにも重要な役割をもっていると考えられる。さらに、バックチャネリングが文化間で異なった受けとめられ方をすると、という点から、異文化間コミュニケーションの教育の上でも重要である。日本語の談話で、バックチャネリング、すなわちあいづちは、当然と受けとめられるのに対し、別の文化では相手の話のじゃま、ターンをあいてから取り上げる、話題をかえようとするかのように受けとられることもある。しかるに、語学教育のなかでも、誤解を避けスムーズなコミュニケーションのために、この問題をとりあげる必要がある。

**キーワード:** バックチャネリング、あいづち

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## **Backchannelling utterances in turn-taking**

This paper reports on a study conducted in Japan, which compared backchannelling behavior in turn-taking of Japanese Speaker of English (NSE's) with Canadian Native Speakers of English (NSE's). Backchannelling refers to signals both verbal and non-verbal, given by hearers to indicate that they are following what is being said. Although backchannelling utterances are not considered turns, according to Duncan (1972), they “comprise a large and complex set of signals” which “may participate in a variety of communication functions, including the regulation of speaking turns”. Thus backchannelling plays a crucial role in turn-taking. Furthermore it has pedagogical implications for cross-cultural communication since backchannelling could be perceived differently by diverse cultural groups. Therefore while in Japanese discourse backchannelling or *aizuchi* is expected from a competent speaker of the language, in other cultures it could be interpreted as an interruption or even an attempt to take the turn away from the speaker, or change the topic. Thus in the language classroom raising students' awareness of its different use and perception by diverse cultural groups is important in order to minimize possible misunderstanding and to ensure smoother inter-cultural communication.

As mentioned earlier backchannelling involves non-verbal signals such as eye contact, nods, smiles and body gestures. Tannen refers to the importance of eye gaze as a non-verbal backchannel or 'listenership' (Tannen, 1983). In addition, expressions commonly used in English conversation like 'uhuh', 'mmm', 'yeah', encourage a speaker to continue. Duncan (1972) also observed sentence completions - where the listener completed the speaker's sentence ; requests for clarification and a brief restatement by the hearer of the speaker's immediately preceding thought which could be included as backchannel signals.

Backchannel utterances are not intended to take the turn away from the current speaker. In fact Duncan (1972), states that when a speaker makes a turn yielding signal, “the backchannel is often used by the hearer to avoid taking his speaking turn”. Sometimes it is not clear whether such sounds are just encouragers or an attempt to take the floor. In fact some researchers, such as Edelsky (1981), argue that these constitute actual turns. The type of backchannelling used depends on the setting e.g., whether it is an informal gathering of friends or a formal business meeting. Backchannelling could also differ according to the role of the speakers and hearers e.g. with audiences at a concert, or participants of a religious ceremony, compared to a group discussion.

Coulthard, Montgomery and Brazil (1981), see backchannel utterances as supportive acts and classify them into three types : acknowledgement such as 'yeah', 'uhuh', 'mmm' with falling intonation and low key ; acceptance such as 'yeah', 'okay', 'yeah', 'I know', 'oh I see', etc. and endorsement such as 'yeah', 'that's a point' or 'you're quite right yes'.

There is also evidence that backchannelling behavior differs by culture. The examples of Japanese (Lo Castro 1987, Maynard 1986, 1990), Spanish (Scarcella, 1983) and Americans (Lo Castro 1987), are cases in point. Lo Castro makes the assertion that to be recognized as a competent speaker of Japanese, one must use backchannelling or *aizuchi* such as *so desu ne*. "To do otherwise would be impolite to one's conversation partner. It also seems one would be judged as being too assertive not using *aizuchi* not showing enough deference to the speaker" (Lo Castro 1987 : p102). In her study comparing backchannelling behavior of JSE's and NSE's, Lo Castro found a greater use of and a greater variety of *aizuchi* in Japanese than in American English. She attributes this to the Japanese emphasis on group harmony and cooperation "to show support of and attach value to on the part of the listener". Furthermore as interrupting a speaker for clarification is considered rude, "*aizuchi* serves in the continuer function signaling that the speaker should go on. The listener may allow the speaker to hold the floor for a longer period of time" (Lo Castro 1987 : p110). Lo Castro also observed that for English speaking foreigners living in Japan, "the frequency of *aizuchi* increases as the foreigner becomes more 'japanized'" (Lo Castro 1987 : p101).

Maynard comparing the use of backchannel expressions in Japanese conversations with those in American English in 40 dyadic casual conversations, concluded that "in Japanese casual conversation, listener's response such as brief comments and head movements occur far more frequently than in comparable American situations" (Maynard 1990 : p.397).

In her cross-cultural study of interruptions, Murata (1992), divides interruptions into two categories : 'intrusive' interruptions (II's) and 'cooperative' interruptions (CI's). She sees the latter as a sub-set of backchannel signals, where the listener "joins the speaker's utterance by supplying a word or phrase for which the speaker is searching". She draws a similarity between CI's and backchannelling, where the purpose is to encourage the speaker by showing interest, revealing listenership and participation. "There is no intention on the interrupter's side to change topics or trespass on the speaker's territoriality". Murata however cautions that even this cooperative interruption could be interpreted as being threatening or disturbing in certain cultures, where the 'territorial imperative', 'deference' and 'independence' are highly valued (Murata 1992 : p. 399).

For the purpose of this study, the definition of backchannel utterances was based on Duncan's observations ; utterances showing listenership including sentence completions, requests for clarification and brief restatements.

## **Research method**

Two discussion groups of three speakers each were set up. The first group consisted of three Japanese Speakers of English (JSE's) A, B and C, and the second group consisted of three Native Speakers of English (NSE's) D, E and F. The groups were given three topics X, Y

and Z and asked to discuss each topic for fifteen minutes. Both groups were given the same predetermined topics, presented in the same order. The topic was revealed immediately prior to the discussion. The topics were discussed in the same order in each group, viz. X, Y and Z. The topics were chosen so as not to give one group an unfair advantage over the other. Therefore care was taken in choosing topics that were not too culture specific or taboo and where much background information was not necessary. They were topics which the participants could imagine based on their own day-to-day experiences. The topics were :

X: Leisure and entertainment in the year 2050

Y: Lifestyles in the year 2050

Z: Employment in the year 2050

The discussions were recorded on audio tape. The recorded discussions were then transcribed and analyzed for backchannelling.

The rationale for using three participants per group was the speech event under study was 'natural' conversation among friends (McLaughlin, 1984, Ch. 7). Three was therefore considered an optimum number for the study which was based on audio recordings only, making transcribing more manageable. With larger groups, there is also the possibility of the conversation breaking down into two-party exchanges (Langford 1994, p108).

### **Limitations of the research method**

- a. Small sample size : The discourse analyzed was 3 fifteen minute conversations for each group. While more recordings with more groups would improve accuracy, it would have been more difficult to control the variables hence compromising internal validity (Nunan, 1992).
- b. Sample type i.e. NSE-NSE vs. JSE-JSE : The study did not observe NSE-JSE and NSJ-NSJ interaction. In the latter case the problem of equivalence would pose a problem i.e. whether the specific features dealt with in this study would be comparable when the language of communication is different for the two groups.
- c. Audio recordings only : unfortunately it was not possible to make video recordings of the discussions for practical reasons. Video recordings would improve transcribing-and coding-accuracy. It would also show non-verbal interaction which plays an important role in spoken communication. However the affect of recording equipment being visible, on the behavior of participants, especially video, is a consideration in defense of not using video recording.
- d. Contrived nature of the conversations : the type of conversation that was analyzed, although defined as 'natural conversation in controlled environments' (McLaughlin, 1984, Ch. 7) were nevertheless contrived. Although both groups conducted the conversations in an informal setting, the participants were aware that their conversations were to be

analyzed. "Subject behavior can be expected to be more than usually prudent and cautious" ... "conforming behavior will be more than usually apparent ... Participants could also be expected to 'put on a bit of a show' when recording equipment is visible' (McLaughlin, 1984 : p242—243).

- e. Nature of the JSE-JSE discussions : it is very uncommon for Japanese to talk to each other in English in informal conversation. Therefore with the JSE-JSE group there was the possibility that the participants, who are close friends who would normally speak to each other in Japanese, would in this case feel rather awkward talking to each other in English.

## Variables

In order to increase comparability of the two groups, key variables needed to be controlled. Seven variables cultural background, gender, age, participant acquaintanceship, English proficiency and familiarity with the other group's culture were controlled. The personality variable was measured but not controlled.

- a. Cultural background :
  - NSE's : all three NSE's were Canadian nationals.
  - JSE's : all three speakers were Japanese nationals from the Kansai region of Japan. In both groups inter-and intra-regional variations were expected.
- b. Gender : all participants were female
- c. Age : all participants were in a fairly narrow (25—29) age group.
- d. Participant acquaintanceship :
  - participants in both groups had met the other members of the group socially on several occasions.
- e. English proficiency level of JSE's :
  - All three participants had TOEIC scores ranging from 700—800, thus categorizing them as high intermediate to advanced.
- f. Familiarity with the other group's culture :
  - NSE's : all the NSE's had been living in Japan for over a year.
  - JSE's : all the JSE's had traveled to English speaking countries on more than three occasions each.
- g. Topics : both groups were given the same predetermined topics presented in the same order.
- h. Personality profile :
  - This was measured using the Eysenck and Wilson personality test in the form of a questionnaire where the questions were translated into Japanese. Two traits, sociability and expressiveness were measured. Interestingly all three JSE's

scored higher than the NSE's for both traits. This, although confounding stereotypical expectations, was quite plausible considering the apparent liveliness of the JSE's as evident in the conversations. However the possibility of the results being affected by ambiguity arising from the translation of the questions, from English to Japanese, could not be discounted. This variable was not controlled.

### **Method of Analysis**

The taped discussions were transcribed and coded. The raw data was analyzed using simple totals and averages and then subjected to more rigorous statistical analysis. In particular, the chi-square test was used to test the hypothesis.

### **Limitations of the method of analysis**

- a. Transcriber reliability : there were several instances where accurate transcription was not possible because of the limitations of the equipment. This was especially true in the case of simultaneous talk. In an attempt to overcome this problem a member of each group double-checked the transcripts for accuracy and the researcher and the checker were able to agree on every instance of a problem.
- b. Coding scheme validity : a very serious limitation of studies on discourse is the high degree of subjectivity. This cannot be helped due to the complex nature of human communication. This problem could be partially overcome by resorting to more objective 'technical' definitions such as the definition of a turn or backchannel utterance, but this would compromise heavily at the pragmatic level. Since meaning is so crucial in communication, it is necessary for the coder to imagine the speaker's illocutionary intention. Indeed often the speaker may find it difficult to recall the intention at a particular juncture of the conversation.

### **Results**

The data clearly shows a marked difference in the number of back-channel utterances between the two groups with the JSE group showing approximately three times as many back-channel utterances on average as the NSE group. Within the groups the NSE's show a more even distribution than the JSE's.

## Number of backchannel utterances

JSE					NSE				
	A	B	C	total		D	E	F	total
X	38	123	136	297	X	23	23	28	74
Y	46	104	124	174	Y	45	42	43	130
Z	37	80	125	242	Z	24	25	33	82
total	121	307	385	813	total	92	90	104	286
%tot	15%	38%	47%	100%	%tot	32%	32%	36%	100%
ave.	40	102	128	271	ave.	31	30	34	95

A chi-square test was conducted using the above data. Based on a 0.05 (5%) level of significance and 2 degrees of freedom, if  $\chi > 5.991$  it shows a difference in the total number of backchannel utterances by the two groups for the three topics. The chi-square value for the above data was 13.3, proving that there was a significant difference in the total number of backchannel utterances by the two different groups for the three topics.

## Discussion

The results showed a marked difference in the number of backchannel utterances, between the two groups with the JSE's accounting for as much as three times the NSE total. Speaker A who was the most proficient in English with the highest TOEIC score of 790, used far fewer backchannel utterances than either speaker B or C. Infact her result was closer to the NSE's. Backchannel utterances were evenly distributed among the NSE's. The JSE backchannel utterances were predominantly at grammatical completion points and usually had both listeners making utterances simultaneously. This rarely happened in the NSE discussions.

Another interesting feature of JSE backchannelling was laughter and clapping which occurred often. Indeed these could also be considered backchannel signals (Maynard 1990 : p403). Unfortunately non-verbal signals could not be observed in this study ; it is very likely that there would have been much gesturing and body movement both as backchannel signals or accompanying backchannel utterances.

Based on Lo Castro's claim that foreigners living in Japan become more japanized and start using more backchannel utterances, it is conceivable that had there been a comparison made with a NSE group where the participants had had little or no contact with Japanese, it is possible that the difference in the amount of backchannelling would have been even more pronounced. Without having a NSJ-NSJ or JSE-NSE control groups, it is not possible to say whether the Japanese would have used more backchannel utterances through transfer from the L1 or fewer through adjustment to the L2.

The most commonly used backchannel utterances were 'mmm', 'hmm', 'mm hmm', 'uh huh' and 'yeah' accounting for 84% of the JSE backchannel utterances and 61% of the NSE utterances.

NSE's used a greater variety of backchannel utterances such as 'that's true', 'really', 'definitely', 'for sure', 'exactly', 'that's cool', 'totally', 'I think so', 'that's amazing', 'I agree', 'neat', 'wow', accounting for 7% of the total. By contrast, JSE's used a more limited range of backchannel utterances such as 'good idea', 'that's good', 'right', 'that's nice', 'sure', 'all right', 'I think so', 'wow', accounting for just 2% of the total.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

One of the most important and conclusive findings of this study was the significant difference in the type and frequency of backchannel utterances in the turn-taking behavior of JSE's. Although the study did not investigate to what extent backchannelling is 'transferred' from the L1, it is likely that this phenomenon did take place since the JSE's, although they used the less varied backchannel utterances, due to their relatively lower English language proficiency, used backchannelling far more frequently than the NSE's, as they would in a discussion conducted in Japanese.

It is also highly probable that misunderstanding could arise in cross-cultural communication when participants' behavior is based on different cultural values and expectations. Thus, the findings of this study have implications for cross-cultural communication, in particular in interaction between Japanese and Native Speakers of English. Smooth inter-cultural communication is indeed a desirable goal which could be effected through greater awareness of the other culture's values and practices.

From a pedagogical point of view, this awareness raising needs to be incorporated into the EFL curriculum. Students could use audio and video recording to study both verbal and non-verbal interaction. Students could then be made to role-play a variety of situations from formal to informal, in order to experience how different aspects of turn-taking vary accordingly. For example, back-channelling and other turn-taking features, such as interruptions, would be different depending on the formality of the discussion.

As a corollary, it would be necessary to compare and contrast underlying cultural values and different interpretations of turn-taking behavior. The emphasis in training would be to teach when and how to provide backchannel signals, take turns at speaking, and interrupt if necessary. For example, Japanese EFL students could be taught a wider range of backchannel utterances to indicate greater involvement rather than mainly using non-verbal utterances such as 'mmm' or 'hm mmm', to show listenership, if Native Speaker-like competence is the goal. In fact the different category of backchannel utterances acknowledgement, acceptance and endorsement could be practiced.



Depending on the needs of the students, teaching materials could be used to raise their awareness of factors, such as age and gender, influencing turn-taking. To date there is very little of this awareness raising specifically related to turn-taking in commercially published material. However, recently in 'Handshake' (OUP 1996), Peter Viney and Karen Viney have devoted two of the book's eight units to non-verbal communication and conversation strategies using listening and role-play activities to highlight backchannel utterances and other features of turn-taking such as interruptions and pauses.

### **Further research**

This study indicated two backchannel signals which warrant further study : laughter and clapping in JSE discourse. In addition, two important aspects of backchannelling needs to be investigated further. Firstly, research into the pragmatic force of backchannel signals would show the true purpose of backchannel utterances. e.g. when they convey just listenership and when they show understanding and/or agreement. In order to do this, prosodic features of backchannel utterances such as intonation, stress, rhythm and pitch, need to be analyzed in detail as well as the precise timing with respect to the current speaker's utterances. Secondly, non-verbal backchannelling needs to be investigated further, focusing on its relationship to verbal cues. This would be of value since so much of communication is non-verbal. Video recording of the conversations would be essential for such analysis. Such research would shed light on how backchannel utterances combined with verbal cues are used as communication strategies.

### **Summary and conclusion.**

The major aim of the study was to determine whether there were significant differences in backchannelling behavior between Japanese and Native Speakers of English and to consider how the findings could be applied to the EFL classroom in order to improve intercultural communication. Overall the results of the study showed a significant and unequivocal difference in backchannelling behavior between the two cultures with the frequency of utterances by Japanese being as much as three times as that of the Native Speakers.

A secondary aim was to find other areas for follow-up research. The study suggested two areas which could provide useful insight into non verbal backchannelling by the Japanese : laughter and clapping.

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