BACKCHANNEL ACROSS CULTURES: A REVIEW AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Backchannel plays a crucial part that decides the success of a conversation in terms of rapport establishment between interactants and effective information transmission. Despite its universality, backchannel behavior varies to such a remarkable extent that numerous studies have been conducted to investigate it on divergent bases and in various aspects, such as (1) the relation between backchannel and behavioral development; (2) the differences in backchannel behavior between genders; (3) the differences in backchannel behavior among regional varieties of English-speaking community; and (4) the differences in backchannel behavior across cultures. This review prominently deals with the last two respects of research on backchannels to reflect better understanding in backchannels across cultures, thereby hopefully reducing biased perceptions based on listener responses while promoting bilinguals and multilinguals' backchannel routines. Moreover, language pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research in the field are also demonstrated through the review.

Key words: backchannel; listener response; intercultural communication; English speaking cultures; cultural biases

1. INTRODUCTION

Backchannel is a shared property in conversations of all cultures and languages. Albeit labelled as listener interactional behavior, listener responses, auditor responses or listener talk, this discourse element refers

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to the “subtle verbal, nonverbal and paralanguage cues” used to show other interlocutors that one is paying attention (Baldwin et al, 2013, p.163). Cultures vary in both the specific point of time to give backchannel and the contents of channeling to such an extent that numerous studies have been conducted to investigate it on divergent bases and in various aspects.

So far, backchannel behavior has been primarily canvassed in children’s and young adults’ acquisition of backchannel. The previous research on the domain found that abstract and complex nonverbal backchannel increased as children aged and their speaking became more fluent (Jancovic, Devoe, & Wiener, 1975), and while simpler deictic behaviors were frequent among younger children, more semantic ones were familiar with older kids (Gutmann&Turnure, 1979; Hess & Johnston, 1988; Masur, 1978). Stohl (1981) also found that young children were attracted by those who were “contentious, impression-leaving, dramatic, open and animated”, whereas adults much more appreciated those who could let others know “that they [were] being listened to” (p.373).

Another body of research on backchannel focused ongender-related behaviors.These studies supported the hypothesis that males and females differ in the way they use and interpret questions and other verbal backchannel utterances because of the discrepant socio-cultural backgrounds where they had been raised. While men saw backchannel as a controlling strategy and interest in information, women regarded backchannel as a tool to keep the conversation going, resulting in communication breakdowns in cross-gendered dialogues (e.g. Muehlenhard et al, 1986; Reid, 1995; Mulac et al, 1998; Helweg-Larsen et al, 2004). Although undergirded by triangulation in which rigorous quantitative analyses prevailed, the data of such studies were only limited to Northern American populations and did not involve elements of intercultural communication.

As intercultural communication increases and several languages, especially English, have become lingua franca among countries and regions, it is no longer unusual for people from every corner of the world to converse with one another in a shared language but with different cultural identities. Linguistic habits as a result of cultural identity allow interlocutors to bring in their conversations multiple speech episodes, which entail backchannels, that may very well bring about misunderstandings. Therefore, the differences in backchannel behavior among regional varieties of English-speaking community in particular and the differences in backchannel behavior across

cultures in general should be emphasized. My review, therefore, draws on articles dealing with these respects of research on backchannels to provide comparison and contrast between these studies, thereby trying to reflect better understanding in backchannels across cultures. Evaluations of the contributions and limitations of these studies as well as recommendations for future research in the field are also demonstrated through the review.

2. THE USE OF BACKCHANNELS IN ENGLISH VARIETIES

There have been quite a few studies looking into backchannel behaviors in various English-speaking territories over the world, such as Reid's (1995) examination of backchannel used by Australian young soldiers, Holmes and Stubbe's (1997) research on listener responses in New Zealand conversation, Dixon and Foster's (1998) study on South African university students' backchannel behavior, Kjellmer's (2009) investigation of backchannel possible positions in British English and so forth. This body of research, however, primarily focuses on the influences of gender on illocutionary backchannels. In the meantime, contrastive studies on the use of auditor responses among different cultures within English-speaking communities are scant. Inspired by the dearth of such research, Stubbe (1998) launched her investigation into the quantitative and qualitative differences in Maori and Pakeha people's use of supportive verbal feedback in casual conversations in New Zealand English. A subsequent study conducted by Wong and Peters (2007) attempted to examine the structures and frequency of verbal backchannels between Australian and New Zealand English telephone conversations, and to compare the results with White's (1989) data of American English backchannel use. Apart from the similarities in the scope of research, authenticity of data and utility of quantitative analysis, it is clear that the most apparent differences in the presence and absence of qualitative analysis as well as conversation genre and discourse variables engender contentious issues about the research outcomes of these studies.

First, as to discourse variables, Wong and Peters (2007) did not impose any presumptions about backchannels so as not to overlook potential results in both the frequency of backchannel presence and the structures of backchannels, hence their discourse variable of 'simultaneous and non-interruptive backchannels'. This rather broad concept, on the one hand, helped them identify the complex structures of interactional verbal responses, on the other hand, weakened their conclusion that Australian

listeners who used more shorter structured backchannels and repeated reduplicate clusters were more supportive and put more emphasis on the maintenance of conversation roles, i.e., the willingness to encourage the current speaker's turn, than did their New Zealand counterparts. The inference could have been supplemented by deeper qualitative analysis. Stubbe (1998), on the contrary, narrowed her focus on auditor supportive verbal feedback and came up with three variables of 'cooperative overlaps', 'neutral minimal responses' and 'supportive minimal responses'. Together with the categories, Stubbe's (1998) qualitative analysis in light of Conversation Analysis produced justifiable outcomes of the function of supportive backchannel in relation with the frequency of usage. For example, in order to explain the fourth finding – the deviation in the total rates of backchannels used between two same-genre dyads within the same ethnic sample, Stubbe (1998) analyzed in-depth two Pakeha male dyads in which the range of total rates was highest. In the dyad of two Pakeha men who were colleagues in the musical profession and talking about their interests, the rate of verbal feedback was the highest and the rate of supportive verbal feedback was the third highest. In contrast, these rates dramatically decrease in the second Pakeha male dyads in which two men described their house-painting experiences in narrative texts. Stubbe's (1998) analysis also highlighted the impacts of contextual factors rather than ethnicity on the conversation participants' engagement and rate of supportive verbal responses. Accordingly, in the context where the conversational goal is interaction-focused, both interlocutors contribute roughly equally to the talk and mutual interests are shared, the overall rate of backchannel is generally higher. On the contrary, in such conversations whose purpose is informing news or the topic is neutral, backchanneling rate is lower, despite the closeness of the relationship between the interlocutors.

Second, since the conversational genre that Stubbe (1998) employed in her research was unified in both samples with same-gender dyads, the quantitative results were demonstrated with relevant attention to gender-related conclusions, namely, women from both ethnicities generally produced more supportive listener responses than men, with the gender difference being greater in Pakeha participants. Wong and Perters (2007), however, did not verify the influence, if any, of the presence or absence of gender variable on their results. Moreover, the range of age within Wong and Peters's sample was much larger than that of Stubbe's, which could also impact their outcomes.

Another concern that worth questioning is about Wong and Peters's (2007) comparison between their research findings and White's (1989) quantitative data of backchannels used in American English conversation. Despite their careful procedure of reformation and transference of White's statistics, Wong and Peters admitted that they do not have full access to White's data. Complicating the problem further is the fact that Wong and Peters's sample was not compatible with White's in terms of authenticity of conversations and participants' demographic characteristics. From my perspective, therefore, the three-way comparison in Wong and Peters's study did not add much value to the practice of research on backchannel behavior among English-speaking communities.

Basically, both studies contribute important discoveries to the common picture of research on backchannel in inter-group communication. Wong and Peters were successful in identifying the various structures of listener verbal responses in English conversation, which underscores the complexity of verbal backchannel behavior. The differing tendencies for higher frequency of a certain backchannel structure partially explicate the regional conversational style in managing the interaction during conversation. As a result, whether this interactional behavior can be interpreted as supportive or interruptive, positive or negative also varies across different groups within the same community. Stubbe's study on Maori and Pakeha people's backchannel in New Zealand vividly illustrated these opposite interpretations whereby Pakehas perceived Maoris to be 'unresponsive' and 'hard to talk to' (Metge & Kincloch, 1984:10, as cited in Stubbe, 1998), but Maori people considered interactional silence and pauses "as the most appropriate strategy for providing collaborative feedback, probably in conjunction with non-verbal signals, and as such indicate[d] a willingness to keep listening to what the speaker ha[d] to say in a similar way to verbal feedback in other contexts and for other groups" (Stubbe, 1998:275). The variations of verbal backchannel behavior within English-speaking communities suggest that while sharing the same repertoire of backchannels, people from different varieties of English background utilize and interpret differently the amount and type of auditor responses as well as the information of listeners' attitude implied in various cues.

3. LISTENER TALK ACROSS CULTURES

Listener responses in other languages than English are often examined on a comparative basis with those in English conversation. The

languages that have been investigated include Finnish, German, Thai, and especially Mandarin Chinese and Japanese. The research objectives revolve around differences in frequency, types, function of backchannels used in L1 and English conversations and the interference of English backchannel style on L1 backchannel usage.

Being particularly interested in the function of backchannels in intercultural conversation, Li (2006) focused his attention on the relationship between the frequency of backchannels and the effectiveness of information exchange. Eighty Chinese and Canadian participants in Canada were assigned into forty simulated same-gender physician-patient dyads in four groups: Chinese physician-Chinese patient, Chinese physician-Canadian patient, Canadian physician-Chinese patient and Canadian physician-Canadian patient. The participants were given time to thoroughly study the information that they would have to communicate with their interactants; and open-ended questionnaires were launched to measure the accuracy of information conveyed right after each role-play. The video-taped conversations were coded focusing on both verbal and non-verbal backchannels which did not interrupt the current speaker's turn, even taking into account questions with falling tone (i.e. questions without being answered by the current speaker). The correlational study discovered a strong positive relation between the frequency of backchannel use and successful information exchange in intra-cultural conversations, whereas the opposite occurred in intercultural conversations. It was suggested by the researcher that:

> "…backchannel responses may have served as misleading feedback, thus preventing the information from being transmitted correctly. In these instances, it could be argued that the listener may have nodded to show "*I am paying attention*" but the speaker could have taken this to mean *"I understand what you are saying"* and continued to the next utterance." (p.111)

It was also found that Chinese speakers of English had a tendency to employ similar backchannel repertoire and frequency to native speakers of English, and even in intra-conversations with their Chinese interactants. Although the study was conducted with simulated conversations, which made it impossible to generalize the results, it asserted the varied communicative effectiveness of the function of backchannels in intra- and inter-cultural task-oriented conversations.

Another approach was taken by Tao and Thompson (1991) and Heinz (2002). Interestingly, these two structurally resembled studies revealed rather different findings about Mandarin Chinese bilinguals and German bilinguals' backchannel behavior in first-language conversation when compared with American English conversation. Although both studies investigated the similarities and differences between native-language (Mandarin/German) and American English backchannel behavior and especially the interference of English backchannel style with native-language backchannel usage by bilinguals with a quantitative approach, the findings as regarding the function of backchannels and bilinguals' backchannel usage varied between the two studies.

On analyzing five-minute audio-taped telephone conversations conducted by the participant, Heinz's (2002) results indicated that monolingual Germans and monolingual English Americans produced the same categories of backchannel responses and the primary function of giving auditor feedback was to support the current speaker's turn. Meanwhile, Tao and Thompson (1991), whose data in the first study was based on two- or three-party casual conversations among friends, confirmed that in the English conversation, backchannels functioned as continuers (Schegloff, 1981, as cited in Tao & Thompson, 1991) to encourage the primary speaker to continue the turn. In the Mandarin conversation, however, listener responses which normally happened at the end of the current speaker's utterance were meant to indicate understanding, confirmation or agreement.

In the second study, Tao and Thompson analyzed two sixty-minute interview-style conversations in Mandarin between two professor-student dyads of bilingual Mandarin-English speakers with two professors whose English became dominant language. The outcomes were examined in five categories of backchannel types, frequency, manner (i.e. lengthened or stressed backchannels associated with degree of understanding or agreement), backchannel clusters, and backchannel function. The study underscored the considerable differences of the two English-speaking Mandarin professors whose backchannel behaviors were remarkably English-like in terms of high frequency of backchannel use, utility of practical English backchannel words and continuer backchannel function, compared to the two Mandarin-dominant students. Nevertheless, the social status of the participants, which were considered as making no difference to the study outcomes by the researchers, in my opinion, was a noticeable extraneous factor in the research, especially when it comes to such hierarchical

societies as China or Vietnam. The researchers assumed that if social status did matter, the person of lower status would backchannel more. This remains in doubt to me when actually, in hierarchical cultures (like in Vietnam), conventionally people of lower status are expected to listen in silence rather than produce frequent responses unless they are asked or unless the conversation is face-to-face.

In Heinz's second study, in contrast to the Mandarin professors' English-like backchannel behavior in Tao and Thompson (1991), there was insufficient evidence of whether bilingual German participants used English backchannels, in terms of lexis, forms or types, in their native-language conversations. Heinz's research, however, documented a greater frequency of listener feedback used by competent bilingual German participants in conversations with their German friends or relatives; and they put more backchannels in overlapping speech than did native monolingual German speakers. Interestingly, the frequency and positions of backchannels utilized by these bilinguals were also reported to be different from the two samples described in the first study. Armed with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1975), Heinz suggested possible explanations to this phenomenon of bilingual Germans' use of backchannels, including the strategy of codeswitching which was almost unconsciously by bilingual individuals in the process of establishing "an interlanguage pragmatics system different from either their first or their second language" (Blum-Kulka & Sheffer, 1993, as cited in Heinz, 2002, p.1135). The different backchannel behavior of bilingual Germans could as well be attributed to "the potential ties between individual differences in backchannel response behavior and degrees of cultural identification" (p.1135) which could be illustrated by instances where some competent bilingual German participants still produced the same amount of backchannels as their monolingual German counterparts. The final potential explanation could be the combination of both mentioned accounts. If these possible justifications are true, then the assignment of participant groups in Heinz's two studies (i.e. monolingual Germans, monolingual English-speaking American and German-English bilinguals) is not supportive enough to verify the similarities or differences in the participants' use of backchannel, and statistical evidence is insufficient to undergird the study outcomes. Further studies, therefore, should take into consideration the variety of target populations' individual demographic and socio-cultural characteristics.

Of all the languages examined in terms of backchannel behavior, Japanese seems to be the most frequently studied due to its speakers'

strong tendency of providing auditor responses. For instance, Kitagawa (1980) focused on the meaning and function of the response 'hai' in Japanese compared to 'yes' in English; Maynard (1987) identified multiple interactional functions of vertical head movements in Japanese casual conversation; Sardegna and Molle (2010) explored the advantage of using videoconferencing to support EFL students' acquisition of English verbal backchannels and reactive expressions and so forth. In this body of research, two studies that draw more of my attention are those conducted by White (1989) and Maynard (1990).

White (1989) examined the vocal backchannels within and across monolingual English Americans in the US and bilingual Japanese speakers of English to compare the frequency of backchannel use between two cultural groups in intra- and inter-cultural conversations as well as to explain the phenomenon on linguistic and cultural bases. In this research, the Japanese participants were reported to backchannel three times as frequently as their American counterparts in intra-cultural conversations in English. This result stemmed from both the Japanese cultural concept of "omoiyari" – the notion of "creation and maintenance of smooth and pleasant human interaction" (p.67), and Japanese linguistic features which favor backchannels. The significantly high frequency of Japanese backchannels was appreciated by the American participants as the signs of "comprehension, interest, and encouragement" (p.74). This rate remained the same when the Japanese bilingual participants communicate with the American counterparts in English; however, the latter group was found to increase their amount of backchannel use in cross-cultural conversations with the former. This interesting finding was justified by the Communication Accommodation Theory, whereby the American participants accommodated their conversational style to put up with their Japanese interactants whose English proficiency was inferior. A question worth being put forth for future research, as the researcher claimed, is that whether the increased rate of backchannel use by Americans remains the same in cross-cultural conversations where they communicate with people from different cultures with lower frequency of backchannel use.

The Japanese linguistic features where listener backchannels were placed most as mentioned in White (1989) were examined in detail in Maynard (1990). On conducting a grounded-theory research proposing the Contrastive Conversation Analysis framework for such studies on cross-cultural conversational discourse, Maynard was successful in identifying the contextual differences between Japanese and English backchannel use

apart from the frequency difference which was similar to White's (1989) data. It was found in Maynard's (1990) study that while English speakers often backchannel at 'grammatical completion', 'phrase ending markers', 'tag questions' and concurrent head movements, Japanese speakers put their backchannels "near or at speaker pauses … marked by particular linguistic devices", such as 'final particle', 'auxiliary verb endings', 'major clausal and sentential junctures', and 'the gerundive *–te* form of the verb'. Although Maynard investigated both verbal and nonverbal backchannel behavior of the participants, there were a handful of other variables that were overlooked such as eye-gaze, head shifts, shoulder movements, discourse themes, type of verbal text, ethnic and regional differences, and so on.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reviewed studies have provided insightful analyses to assert the role and property of backchannels. Backchannel behavior is not solely a discourse variable. It carries and reflects both socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics of a particular community. Backchannel cues can be listener verbal responses which are either very short utterances or complex syllabic lexical structures; they can be listener gestures, or even pauses and silence. Speakers from different language background may share the same repertoire of backchannels; they, however, produce such listener feedback with very different frequency and types, in different manners and contexts. The interpretation of listener's attitude and intention varies accordingly across cultures and even within the same community which comprises regional and/or dialectal varieties. Backchannels thus not only function as a supportive device in interactional discourse but it can be the reason for misunderstanding, stereotyping and conversation breakdown. In the process of second and/or foreign language acquisition, bilingual speakers also take up typical backchannel behavior of the target language at various degrees.

Having considered the strengths and limitations of the reviewed articles, my personal recommendations for future studies in the field are as follow. First, in terms of methodology, qualitative analysis needs to be conducted more adequately to supplement quantitative outcomes as well as justify phenomena which cannot be statistically measured. Second, due to the socio-linguistic complexity of backchannels, it is advisable for researchers to identify discourse variables comporting with their research scope (e.g. verbal or nonverbal, supportive or negative). Attached to such discourse variables are the consideration of discourse genre (e.g. dyadic

conversation or three-plus party conversation, same gender or mixed, casual, task-oriented, institutional or simulated, telephone or face-to-face conversation) and discourse themes (e.g. opinion, description or narrative).

Additionally, since participants' social and demographic characteristics play an influential part in their backchannel behavior, more qualitative studies should be implemented taking participants' differences not only in gender and age but also in social status, cultural and individual identification into close consideration. Finally, as to research direction, as English is becoming more and more popular, the influence of English backchannel style on bilinguals' conversation in English has been studied widely. However, there has not been research on whether backchannel behavior of native English-speaking people who are proficient in another language is affected by the conversational culture of that particular language. More research is needed to ascertain whether it is always a one-way effect that bilinguals have the tendency of producing more backchannels when the target language becomes the dominant language in their daily routine.

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