When and How Are Backchannels Used?: A Comparison of Japanese and English

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1. Introduction

1.1. What is backchannels?

Backchannels

- **Verbal**
  - Short messages (uh-huh, yeah), short comment (I see, Okay) (Yngve, 1970)

- **Non-verbal**
  - Nods (Maynard, 1986 and Kogure, 2007)

- **Co-occurrence**
  - Non-verbal & verbal

(Verbal)
1. Introduction

1.2. Previous Studies
~Backchannel~

- Comparison between Japanese and English (Clancy et al. 1996 and Maynard, 1986 etc...)

⇒ Frequency: English < Japanese

  Position: Japanese → ‘in progress’ of speaking
  English → Grammatical Completion points, pause

◎ the difference among verbal backchannels alone, non-verbal backchannels alone, and co-occurrence of verbal and non-verbal backchannels in Japanese and English conversations is not revealed so far.
1. Introduction

1.2. Purpose of Study

1) the difference among non-verbal, verbal backchannels and co-occurrence of non-verbal and verbal backchannels

2) the relationship between what the speaker says and the type of backchannels the listener chooses
2. Definition

Backchannels

◎ verbal backchannels
  ▪ Non-lexical utterances → They do not have particular conceptual meaning.
    Ex) “un (yeah)” and “hee” in Japanese and “yeah” and “uh-huh” in English.
  ▪ Lexical utterances → They are more expressive.
    Ex) “I see,” “OK,” “sounanda ("I see"),” and so on.

◎ non-verbal backchannels
  ▪ listeners’ head nods

◎ Co-occurrence of verbal and non-verbal backchannels
3. Methodology

3.1. Data
- Mr. O Corpus
- Conversation: “what were you most surprised at.”
- familiar pair (student – student)
- 10 pair of native Japanese speakers and English speakers respectively.
3. Methodology

3.2. Procedure

① Frequency of three kinds of backchannels is examined.

② The contents of the utterance are classified into categories.

③ How often each backchannels are used towards each categories is presented.
3. Analysis
3.1 Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Backchannel</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal backchannels</td>
<td>209 (22.52%)</td>
<td>202 (40.32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal backchannels</td>
<td>232 (25%)</td>
<td>155 (30.94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-occurrence of non-verbal and verbal backchannels</td>
<td>489 (52.48%)</td>
<td>144 (28.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>930 (100%)</td>
<td>501 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Analysis
3.2 Categories of the contents of the utterances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information (objective)</strong></td>
<td>658 (70.75%)</td>
<td>373 (74.45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressions of idea (subjective)</strong></td>
<td>117 (12.58%)</td>
<td>88 (17.56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Backchannels</strong></td>
<td>86 (9.25%)</td>
<td>22 (4.39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request for agreement</strong></td>
<td>55 (5.91%)</td>
<td>4 (0.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse marker</strong></td>
<td>7 (0.75%)</td>
<td>4 (0.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hesitation</strong>*</td>
<td>4 (0.43%)</td>
<td>10 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laughter</strong>*</td>
<td>3 (0.32%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>930 (100%)</td>
<td>501 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*new categories (Szatrowski 1993)
3. Analysis
3.3 Results of the Japanese Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Non-verbal</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Co-occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>16.24%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>50.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressions of idea</td>
<td>17.44%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>41.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backchannels</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>27.27%</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Analysis
3.4 Results of the English Conversations

### Information
- Non-verbal: 41.94%
- Verbal: 31.45%
- Co-occurrence: 26.61%

### Expressions of idea
- Non-verbal: 36.36%
- Verbal: 21.59%
- Co-occurrence: 42.05%

### Backchannels
- Non-verbal: 13.64%
- Verbal: 63.64%
- Co-occurrence: 22.73%
3. Analysis
3.5.1 Categories of the contents of the utterances

• Information

~Japanese~

1 A: Nanka watashiga kyonennona nigatsuni/ ousutoraria
   ‘Well last February, I went to Australia’
   → /B1: H ⇒ non-verbal

2 [niittandakedo] houmusuteide/
   ‘for homestay, and’
   → (B2: [A:: a:: a::]) ⇒ verbal
   ‘Ah ah ah’
   /((B3: [Un])) ⇒ co-occurrence
   ‘Yeah’

~English~

1 A: So one thing that surprised me/ is when I was/ a kid/ [I]/
   → /B1: H [H]

2 was a teenager/ I started watching anime [Ja]pa[ne]se [a]ni[me]
   → (B2: [H] [H] [H] [H])
3. Analysis
3.5.2 Categories of the contents of the utterances
Expressions of idea
~Japanese~
1 A: *nanka omoshiroishitende miteruna:: ttehitomoirushisa*
   ‘well, some people have interesting points of view and’
2 [ironna] *aidhiaga atte su[goi] omoshiro::i tteiunoto*
   ‘There are different ideas, so I feel they are so interesting and’
   \[ \rightarrow ([H]) \quad (B2: [H]) \Rightarrow \text{non-verbal} \]
   \[ ([B1: [A::]]) \Rightarrow \text{co-occurrence} \]
   ‘Ah’
3 [bi]kkurito [arune]
   ‘surprising’
   \[ \rightarrow (B3: [H]) \quad (B4: [A::] a:: a::) \Rightarrow \text{verbal} \]
   \[ \Rightarrow \text{non-verbal} \quad ‘Ah ah ah’ \]
3. Analysis
3.5.2 Categories of the contents of the utterances
Expressions of idea

~English~
1 A: I think it’s there’s a lot of things in common with like the/ uh/ consumerism attitude with Japan and the U.S. as opposed to [li]ke p[la]c[es] in Europe where → 
(B1: [H]   [H]   [H]) ⇒non-verbal
4 it’s not like that/

[H]
→ /((B2: [Yeah])) ⇒co-occurrence
3. Analysis
3.5.3 Categories of the contents of the utterances

Backchannels

〜Japanese〜

1 A: Atowa::/ tyottoshitakotode bikkuriwa yokuarukedone/
   ‘And I am often surprised at small things’

   verbal⇒/(B1: Ma:: soudayone[::])
   ‘Well I agree with you’

   [H]
   co-occurrence ⇒ (A1: [Un])
   ‘Yeah’

〜English〜

A: Cuz he was sleeping there/

   / (B1: Yeah)/ ⇒ verbal

   ⇒/ (A1: Yeah) ⇒ verbal
4. Discussion

&lt;Japanese&gt;
→ preference for co-occurrence of non-verbal and verbal backchannels towards each categories
→ react to the speakers’ talk actively; visually and aurally

&lt;English&gt;
→ preference for non-verbal backchannels alone
→ distinguish three types of backchannels according to the contents of the utterance (The more the speakers’ utterances have information, the more the listeners use non-verbal backchannels)
→ avoid interfering the speakers’ talk
The different stance towards communication

\textit{Japanese}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Conversation is something that has to be constructed by the participants.
\end{itemize}

⇒ Cooperation and establishment of a social relationship with others (Kita and Ide, 2007; Maynard, 1986)

\textit{English}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Exchange of information and stating what the speakers want to say are important.
\end{itemize}

⇒ Independence and individualism (Iwasaki 1997)
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