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

Non-verbal

Co-occurrence

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

Nods
(Maynard, 1986
and Kogure, 2007)

Non-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

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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

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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

①Frequency of three kinds of backchannels is examined.

②The contents of the utterance are classified into categories.

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

3. Analysis
3.1 Frequency

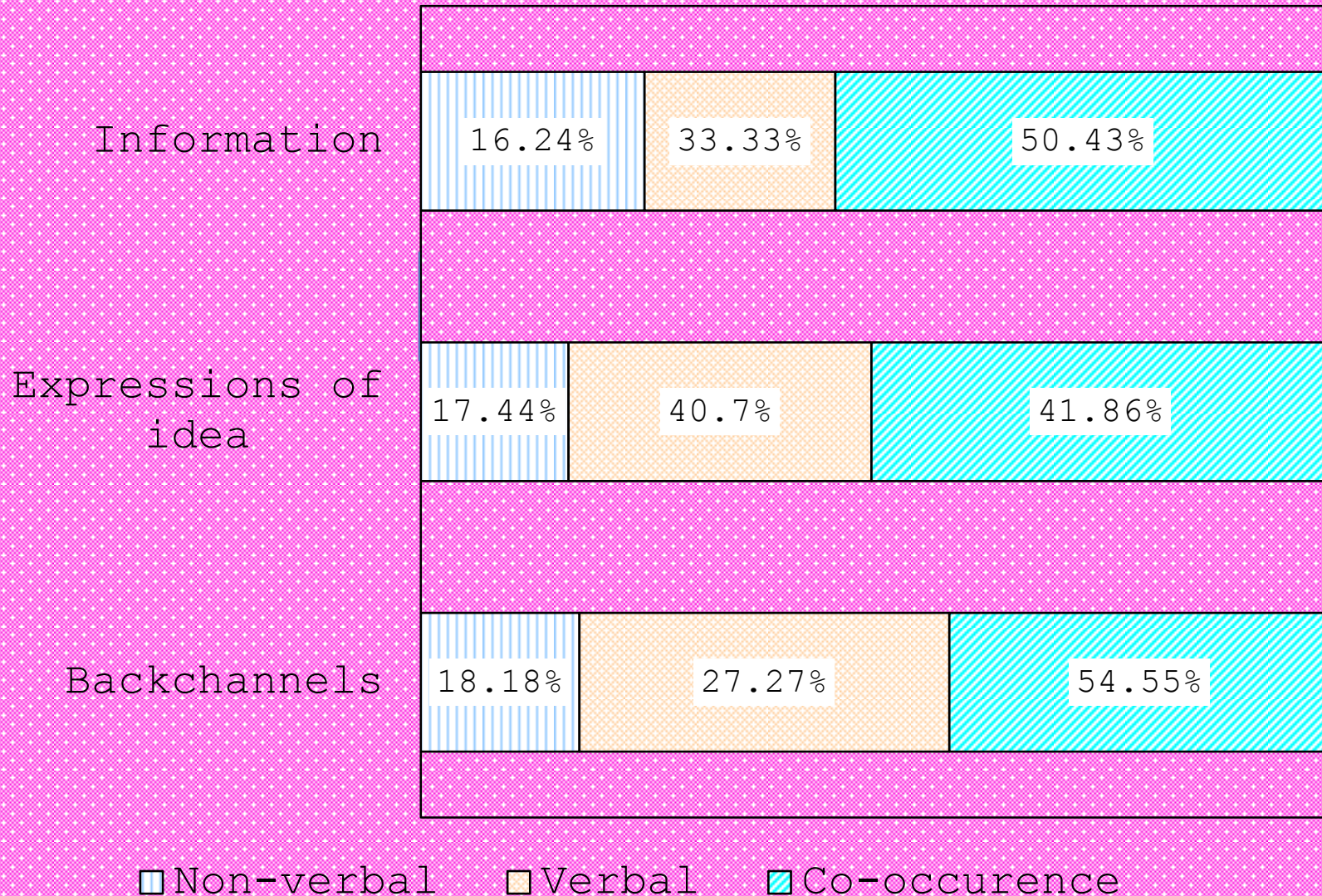| Kind of Backchannel	Japanese	English
Non-verbal backchannels	209 (22.52%)	202 (40.32%)
Verbal backchannels	232 (25%)	155 (30.94%)
Co-occurrence of non-verbal and verbal backchannels	489 (52.48%)	144 (28.74%)
Total	930 (100%)	501 (100%)

3. Analysis
3.2 Categories of the contents of the utterances

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

*new categories
(Szatrowski 1993)

3. Analysis
3.3 Results of the Japanese Conversations

	Non-verbal	Verbal	Co-occurence
Information	16.24%	33.33%	50.43%
Expressions of idea	17.44%	40.7%	41.86%
Backchannels	18.18%	27.27%	54.55%

☐ Non-verbal   ☐ Verbal   ☐ Co-occurence

3. Analysis
3.4 Results of the English Conversations

	Non-verbal	Verbal	Co-occurrence
Information	41.94%	31.45%	26.61%
Expressions of idea	36.36%	21.59%	42.05%
Backchannels	13.64%	63.64%	22.73%
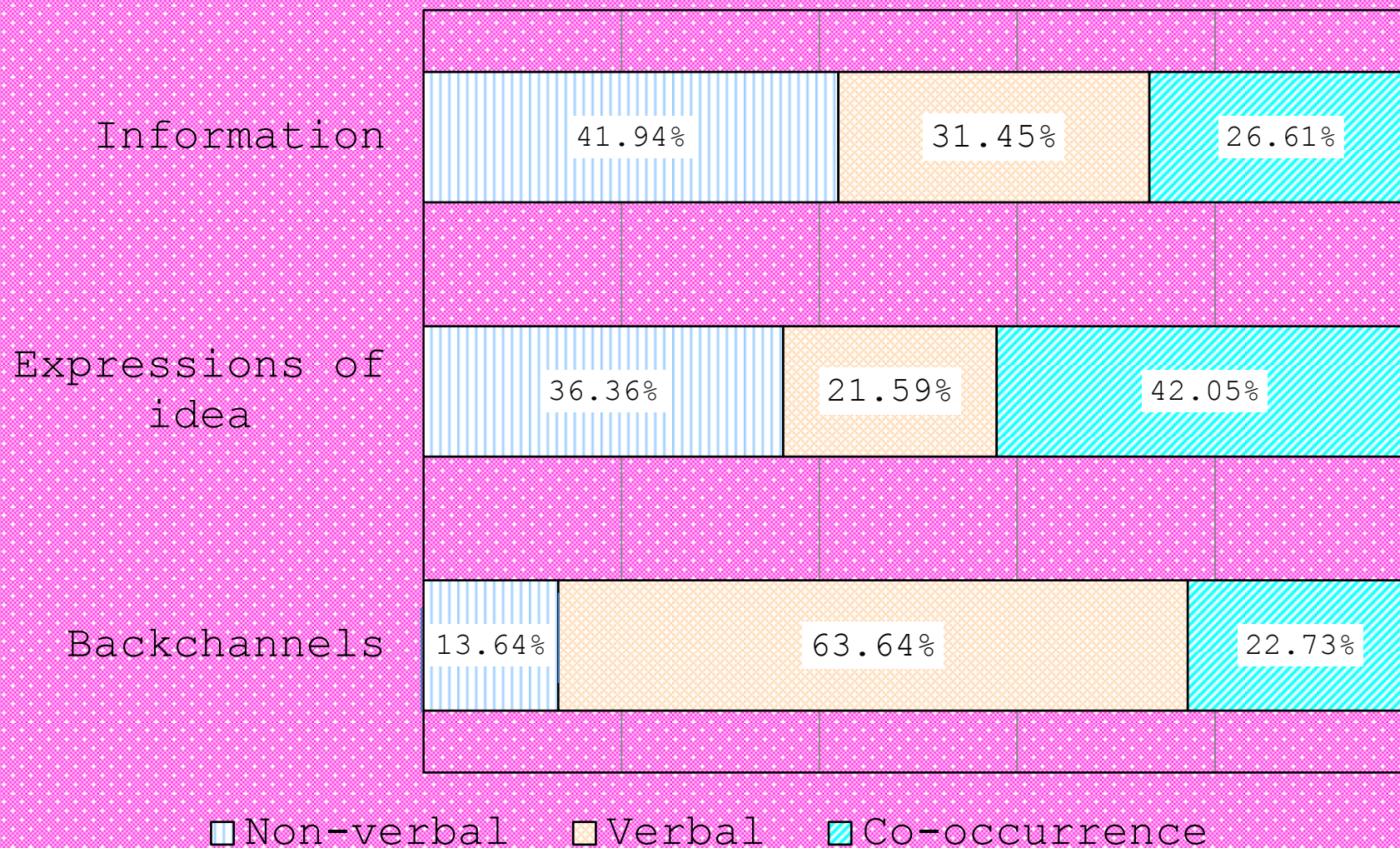
3. Analysis
3.5.1 Categories of the contents of the utterances

- 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   **[H]**
       '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])**

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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'

　→ **[H]** 　　　　　　　**(B2: [H])** ⇒non-verbal

((B1: [*A*::])) ⇒co-occurrence

　　　'Ah'

3　[*bi*]*kkurito* [*arune*]

　　'surprising'

→**(B3: [H])** **(B4: [*A*::] *a*:: *a*::)** ⇒verbal

⇒non-verbal　　'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

2　　the/ uh/ consumerism attitude with Japan and the

3　　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

<Japanese>

→preference for co-occurrence of non-verbal and verbal backchannels towards each categories

⇒react to the speakers' talk actively; visually and aurally

<English>

→ 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

5. Conclusion

The different stance towards communication

<Japanese>

・Conversation is something that has to be constructed by the participants.

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

<English>

・ Exchange of information and stating what the speakers want to say are important.

⇒Independence and individualism (Iwasaki 1997)

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