The Use of Back Channels Between Native and Non-native Speakers in English and Japanese

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Abstract

The analysis of English native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) and Japanese NS and NNS conversations revealed a large number of BC's, to some degree, mirrored the Maynard et al. (1986) study. More frequent use of back-channels (E:122, J:52) and reactive expressions (E:81, J:7) were found in the English data. In the English data, the NNS used the most bacchanals (115 out of 122) and reactive expressions (67 out of 81), while in the Japanese data, the NNS used far less bacchanals (7 out of 52). It can be argued, then, in these two particular cases, 'NNS driven' negotiation of meaning took place in the English NS-NNS conversation and 'NS driven' negotiation of meaning took place in Japanese NS-NNS conversation. When the distributions of BC functions were compared, it was found that more continuers used in the English data (E: 67%, J: 31%). The author might be able to suggest adding one more functional category of 'non-understanding' to Maynard's BC function list. In the Japanese conversation, 'un' and 'u:::n' were found so frequently (13 out of 52). This could be a good example of other-initiated self-repair with a BC function.

Introduction

Maynard defines BC's as turn-internal back-channel strategies where "an interlocutor who assumes primarily a listener's role sends short messages during the other interlocutor's speaking turn" (p. 1085). Maynard defines the listener's back channel in the context of turn: whether the listener's utterance is given during the other participant's speaking turn or not. To identify them in the turn-taking context, Maynard adopted Markel's (1975) definition of turn as: a speaking turn begins when one interlocutor starts solo talking. For each speaking turn, there is a concurrent listening turn. Solo speaking does not include short utterances and pauses are seen as internal to the current speaker's turn. Maynard focuses on behavior where an interlocutor, assuming a listener's role, sends short messages during the other's turn. These are called turn-internal listener back channels. Maynard classifies the functions of back-channeling into five categories:

1.   Continuer- forsaking the opportunity for repair. These back channels are continuing the speaker multi-turn where the S is describing his plan concerning his course work

2.   Display of understanding on content- confirmation of the listener's understanding is necessary. The back channel here is a simply acknowledges that speaker B is understanding the reply to the question. Again the location of these back channels is a TRP when the intonational contour is up.

3.   Support and empathy toward the speaker- when felt necessary by the listener. The back channel here simply offers support and understanding. Again the location of these back channels is a TRP when the intonational contour is up.

4.   Agreement- speaker's turn performs a SA of questioning

5.   Strong emotional response- listener sends exclamatory phrases or laughs. Both of these back channels occurred at TRP places. The intonational contour is up and also it is at the end of the current clause.

Back channels in English conversation

In principle, the author accepts the Maynard definition of back channels with certain revisions that the author will explain later. An early observation in the English NS and NNS data was that the high frequency of Japanese back channeling had an effect upon the exchange in English. In this case, the Japanese female participant exhibited a high frequency of back channels characteristic of Japanese females (See Appendix A). The author felt that this may have encouraged the Canadian male (English NS) to increase his own back channeling not only in English forms, but also using distinctive common Japanese forms, thereby, generating some sort of cross-linguistic "convergence". By convergence, the author means that the high 'frequency back channeler' (person exhibiting a high frequency of BC's) would cause the lower frequency back channeler to increase his or her frequency of BC's over time, type and style. The author began asking himself: what are other characteristics of cross-linguistic interaction could be accounted for by the NS-NNS interactions?

Cross-linguistic analysis of back channels

The author thought that it might be interesting to contrast the transcripts with the Japanese NS-NNS talk as well. This would give him a broader view of back channeling and allow him to see how high and low back channelers interact. The author noticed, in the Japanese transcript, something that the Maynard taxonomy could not account for, and accordingly, created a "non-understanding" BC to account for the BC function (u::n?,) of signaling a non-understanding to the primary speaker. Following a preliminary exploration of the data, two main issues surfaced which the author believes were interesting.

1. In interaction between high and low back channelers, is there any evidence that convergence takes place?
2. With some revisions, is the Maynard taxonomy adequate in describing BC's in NS-NSS conversation in both English and Japanese?

Method

Participants

For English data, the data was audio-taped from a natural conversation of two people. The Canadian male is a 38 year old bilingual (English & French) university teacher and doctoral student with some limited Japanese ability. The Japanese female is a doctoral student and very highly proficient in English. Both of them are about the same age. For Japanese data, the data was audiotaped from a natural conversation of two males. The NS is 41 year-old Japanese man and the NNS is a 44 year-old American man who has lived in Japan for more than ten years. Both of them are university teachers, teaching English. Both of the tapes were twenty minutes long and recorded at one time.

Procedure

In the beginning stages of coding, the author experimented with both the Maynard (1986) and Clancy, et al. (1996) taxonomies (See Table 1) using the Jefferson system. Based upon this experience, the author decided that the Maynard system would best describe BC behavior with the addition of one category, thus, allowing him to focus his attention on two main issues. The author found in both the English and Japanese transcripts, instances of BC's that contain a continuer function signaling non-understanding to the primary speaker, and thus initiating self-repair routines. This will be described in more detail later. However, on account of the Clancy, et al. category of reactive expressions (e.g., Oh really!) can also fulfill the functions of BC's and are quite numerous, the author decided to count them separately for comparison. In principle, the author will distinguish BC's as being short non-lexical utterances made by the interlocutor with the listener role and which signals the primary speaker that a speaker change will not occur at that time. Transcription convention and abbreviations in transcription are shown in Appendix B.

Table 1.
Maynard Taxonomy and Codes
• Continuer-CON (u::n)
• Display of Understanding of Content-UND (I see.)
• Support and empathy toward the speaker-SUP (Oh, yeah. *I know what you mean*.)
• Agreement-AGR (Right.)
• Strong Emotional Response-EMR (Wow! LAUGHS)

Clancy, et al. Taxonomy and Codes
• Back channels- (includes continuers and claims of understanding). These were coded using Maynard's taxonomy.
• Reactive expressions-REX- These overlap with Maynard's category, EMR, so the author coded them both for comparison.
• Collaborative Finishes-COL
• Repetitions-REP
• Resumptive openers-ROP

Results

English data
    An immediate challenge that faced the researcher is how to code his two types of data. Clancy limits BC's to Schegloff's notion of continuer and includes "claim of understanding." Also, Clancy's REX overlaps with many of Maynard's categories (See Appendix A). Therefore, the author coded with Maynard's categories so that he could focus on the functions of BC's. For coding agreement, Maynard identifies this function when the primary speaker is performing a speech act of questioning. The author would widen the context to include statements of opinion as well.

Continuer (with overlapping continuer)
C: [We have] to write a paper=
A: [mumble]
C: =for each=
74A: Yeah.   A:CON:3
C: =each seminar. (2.0)
A: I don't know what kind of course that's going to be
       [::or:::::]
C: [Umm] C:OCON:24

    In this case, the speaker is giving an opinion in statement form and the hearer follows with a BC such as "Yeah," indicating agreement. Laughter should be coded as EMR as Maynard suggests. It usually follows something surprising or provocative although its function is basically that of a continuer. Back channel function distribution for English data is shown in Table 2. The following are other coding examples from English data.

Display of Understanding of Content
C: So you collected the real (.2) data?
A: Oh no. It's [just] all theoretical.
C: [No.] C:REP:4
    Oh I see. C:UND:8
       Hmmm. C:CON:12

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A: Just articles
C: Articles.   C:REP:5

Support
A: My main problem, I try to do too much and then it ends up to be too
            complicated and I get all ah:::
C: Unnn   C:CON:22
A: I get all complicated and stuff like that.
C: Oh yeah:::/   C:SUP:1

Agreement (with overlapping agreement)
73A:I don't know if I'm going to take next week.   Are you taking next
            weekend's:::seminar?
C: I think so yeah. C:AGR:4 Doctors Connor's one right?
A: Yeah. A:AGR:1
C: Yeah. C:AGR:5 (1.0) Think I will take it. (1.5)   [Unnnn].
A: [Yeah::] A:OAGR:2

Strong Emotional Response/Reactive expressions
59A:=fifty sixty articles.
C: Hmm.   C:CON:14
A: About=
C: =Wow!= C:EMR:3   C:REX:3 (delayed reaction linked with C:CON:14)
A: =two dozen books or so.
C: Really? C:EMR:4   C:REX:4

Collaborative Finishes
C: Oh yes. I I graduated (.2) from the ah::=
A: master's course. A:COL:2
C: =master's course here C:REP:18

Repetition
C: So you collected the real (.2) data?
A: Oh no. It's [just] all theoretical.
C: [No.]   C:REP:6
       Oh I see. C:UND:8 Hmmm.   C:CON:12
A: Just articles
C: Articles.   C:REP:7

Non-understanding BC (NNS Japanese female)
A: It's not three courses it's actually y'know five, because we have three
            papers to write for one course.

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C: Umhum?,   C:NUN:2
A: Right?,
C: Oh yes. Right.   C:AGR:12

Resumptive openers (appear at a new turn)
54A: I'll go to Kinko's and get it bounded.
C: Hmmmm. C:CON:6
A: So. A:ROP:2
C: I see.   C:UND:2
A: Ah. A:ROP:3
C: So how was your your vacation?
A: Well, it was <u>OK</u>:::

Table 2. BC function distribution for English transcript.

	J. femaleNNS	N. Amer. male NS	Total	Ratio
CON	74	5	79	65%
OCON	20	0	20	16%
UND	8	2	10	8%
SUP	2	0	2	2%
AGR	5	0	5	4%
EMR	3	0	3	2.5%
NUN	3	0	3	2.5%
BC total	115	7	122	
REX	67	14	81	

Japanese data
     It is interesting if the author considers the BC functions of 'un', 'u:::n' not only as continuers (Schegloff, 1982), but also serving as non-understanding indicator routines (Varonis & Gass, 1985). According to Varonis and Gass, especially in NS-NNS conversations, negotiation of meaning frequently occur. In order to make discourse successful, the interlocutors use BCs as "triggers" of 'non-understanding routines'. Therefore, the BC functions of 'un' and 'u:::n' may be characterized as serving two functions (1) triggers of non-understandings and (2) continuers. In the Japanese spoken data NN-NNS, the author found ten instances of negotiation of non-understandings which used 'u::n' This prolonged vocalization of nasal sound is assumed to make the form u:::n 'marked' so that it can be easily distinguished from common 'un'. Furthermore, in fifteen instances of 'un', there were only two instances considered functioning as NU, while a the higher ratio (10:14) of these non-understanding indicator BCs were in the form u:::n .The following example is an instance of 'un' as NU indicator BC.

A24: un
      Yes.
      (0.6)
      >haru ni naruto sakura ga sugoku kireiya ne<.
       spring PL come cherry SB   very beautiful FP
       "In spring, the cherry trees are really beautiful."

B24: un, soto ga naiyo ne.
      yes, out   SB NEG   FP
       'Yes, there is nothing outside.'

A25: ➔un?
      yes
       'Yes?'

      Here, A doesn't understand what B meant in the prior turn With a slight rising intonation, A uttered 'un' to show possible non-understandingship, while also giving B the choice to accept the'un' as a continuer (see Varonis and Gass, 1998:74). The following example is an instance of 'u:::n' as NUN indicator BC.

B60:   ippai ne, hikkoshi.
      many PL   move
       'many move,'

A61:   [u:::n].
       well

B61:   nedann
      the price

A62:   [u:::n] (with puzzled look).
       well

B62:   ato wa sono kikenna toko
      rest SB DEM   dangerous place
      and the dangerous places are,'

A63:   [u::: n] (with more puzzled look).
      well
B63:   miryoku nai.
      attractive less
      (1.0)

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Los Angeles souiu toko aru.
LA   such places be
ʻThere are such places in LA.ʼ

In this excerpt, A doesn't understand what B is trying to convey and sends ʻu:::nʼ as a ʻmarkedʼ form of ʻunʼ to show his non-understandingship and solicits B to self-repair or clarify meaning. This does not seem to be immediately evident to B, and consequently, A, in order to make this signal more explicit, increases the frequency of the same BC ʻu::nʼ three times. BC function distribution for Japanese transcript is shown in Table 3 and types of Japanese back channels with functions is shown in Table 4.

Table 3. BC function distribution for Japanese transcript.

	Male NNS of J.	Male NS of J.	Total	Ratio
CON	4	12	16	31%
OCON1	1	6	7	13%
UND	2	6	9	17%
SUP	0	5	5	2%
AGR	0	1	1	2%
EMR	0	1	1	1%
NUN	0	13	13	25%
BC total	7	45	52	
REX	4	3	7	

Table 4. Distribution of BC s in NNS-NS Japanese data

Back channels (52)	
Types	functions
un (15)	CON(13), NUN (2)
un un (3)	CON(3)
u:::n(14)	SUP(4), NUN(10)
Hun (2)	CON(1) NUN(1)
Hun hun (1)	AGR (1)
hu:n (5)	CON(3), UND(2)
a:::(1)	CON(1)
sou(1)	CON
ahh:(1)	UND(1)

aha:a(1)	UND(1)
ne:::(2)	EMR(1),UND(1)
fu::n(1)	UND(1)
maa:u::n(1)	UND(1)
hahaha:::(laugh 3)	UND(3)

(*CON=continuer, NUN=non-understanding, SUP=support/empathy, EMR=strong emotional reaction, UND=understanding, AGR=agreement)

Discussion and Conclusion

I found more frequent use of back channels (E:122, J:52) and reactive expressions (E:81, J:7) in the English data. However, it should be considered that the dominant user of BC 's and RE's in the English data is a Japanese female, and the Japanese data doesn't include any female interlocutors. Therefore, I cannot simply compare and claim that more BC's and RE's are used in the English data.

In the English data, the NNS used the most bacchanals (115 out of 122) and reactive expressions (67 out of 81), while in the Japanese data, the NNS used far less bacchanals (7 out of 52). I can argue, then, in these two particular cases, 'NNS driven' negotiation of meaning took place in the English NS-NNS conversation and 'NS driven' negotiation of meaning took place in Japanese NS-NNS conversation.

When I compare the distributions of BC functions, he found more continuers used in the English data (E: 67%, J: 31%). One interesting contrast is with the use of overlapping continuers by the Japanese interlocutor in the English data. These BC's occurred while the primary speaker was talking and were performed in such a way as to allow the speaker to keep the floor without interrupting.

I found instances of BC's used to indicate or serve as a triggers of non-understanding in both the English and Japanese data. Especially, in the Japanese data, it was frequent and used more strategically not only with the use of repetition or intonation, but also, with the use of some non-verbal cues (e.g., a puzzled-look). I suggest adding one more functional category of 'non-understanding' to Maynard's BC function list. In the Japanese conversation, 'un' and 'u:::n' were found so frequently (13) and also appeared three times in the English data. This could be a good example of other-initiated self-repair with a BC function.

As for my convergence hypothesis, support can be seen in Appendix A. The native English speaker adopted one Japanese form of BC (4 'un', 1 'unun' and 1 'ununun'). Although the Japanese NNS used a wide variety of continuers and understandings, the male counterpart utilized the one form, 'un, '. The Japanese female is highly proficient in English and utilized a wide variety of BC's in both English and Japanese. An examination of back channels (BC's) in English native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) and Japanese NS and NNS

conversations revealed a large number of BC's, to some degree, mirrored the Maynard et al. (1986) study. Anyone that has the experience of maintaining a Japanese conversation over the telephone knows that the Japanese primary speaker will expect frequent BC's from the listener. Frequent BC's will operate as continuers in the Schegloffian sense and keep the Japanese speaker secure in his or her role as speaker. I also found out that the Japanese "u:n" is used to trigger self-repair. Through more cross-linguistic analysis of the transcripts, perhaps we can gain some insights and create research questions for future work.

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Appendix A
Non-lexical Back-channels and Reactive Expressions by Function

(For English Data)

	Male NS (Totals)	Female NNS (Totals)
Continuers	umm(m)	21
	Hm(mmm)	16
4	mmmm	1
	un huh	5
	un huh un huh	2
	un(n)	6

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	oh(h)	8		
	huh huh	3		
	ummm un un	1		
	um(h)um (um)	9		
	ooo	1		
	ahaa	1	(74)	
	unun	1	(5)	
Overlapping	umm huh	1		
Continuers	hmm	2		
	ohh	2		
	un huh	1		
	un(n)	3		
	unahunahunah	1		
	ummmm	8		
	um um um	1		
(0)	hhhohhhhhhhhh	1	(20)	
Agreements	hm hm hm	1		
	um(m)	2		
	umum	1		
(0)	unhum	1	(5)	
Understandings	Oooo	2		
	un huh	1		
1	ununun	1		
1	ahh			
	ohhhhh	1		
	umhum(mm)	2		
(2)	ah ah	1	(8)	
Support	laugh	1		
	oh yeah	1	(2)	
Non-understanding	umm?	1		
	unn	1		
(0)	umhum	1	(3)	
Emotional	wow	1		
Response	hehehe	1		
(7 BC's)	ohh?	1	(3) (115 BC's)	
Reactive	really?	9	EMR	
Expressions	oh really?	2	EMR	
	[Ooo][that's a good idea]	1	EMR	
	(laugh) yeah	1	EMR	
	3 yeah	8	CON	

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	yeah	2	OCON
	yes	2	OCON
	yeah yeah	1	OCON
4	yeah	6	AGR
	OK	1	AGR
	I think so yeah	1	AGR
	yes	2	AGR
1	ya		AGR
1	yeah that's right		AGR
	right	3	AGR
1	that's right		AGR
	ah that's right	1	AGR
1	yeah		OAGR
	yayaya	1	OAGR
	Oh I see	11	UND
	Oooo I see	2	UND
1	I see	3	UND
	really	1	UND
	right	1	UND
	yes right	1	UND
	yeah right	1	UND
	ooo OK	1	UND
	yeah	1	UND
2	ya		UND
	yes (.2) yes	1	UND
	Oh yes yes yes	1	OUND
	oh I see	2	OUND
	(14 RE's)		(67 RE's)

Totals   (21 BC+RE)   (182 BC+RE)

 (For Japanese Data)

	Male -NNS	(Totals)	Male-NS	(Totals)
BCs				
Continuers	3	un	10	
	1	un un	2	(16)
Overlapping		umm huh	1	
		hun	1	
	1	hu:n	2	
		a::	1	

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	sou	1	(7)
Agreements	hun hun	1	(1)
Understandings	ahh:	1	
	hu:n	2	
	aha:a	1	
	fu::n	1	
	maa:u::n	1	
3	hahaha:::(laugh)		(9)
Support	u:::n	4	
	sou	1	(5)
Non-understanding	u:::n	10	
	un	2	
	hun	1	(13)
Emotional Response	ne:::	1	(1)
Reactive Expressions	eh, honto (really?)	1	
	ah souka (I see.)	1	
	aa sou ka (I see.)	1	
	a sou (Is that right?)	2	
	soune (I agree.)	1	
	so:::ne (I agree.)	1	(7)

Appendix B
Transcription conventions for English Data
Conventions list for transcription taken from Jefferson.
= no interval between utterances
I used to [smoke.] overlapping utterances
      [me too]
You didn't do it? (1) Did you? Timed inverval
Did you::see that?   Extension of sound
. stopping fall in tone
, continuing intonation
?rising inflection
?, rising intonation but weaker than question
! animated tone
- halting
rising and falling intonation indicated by arrows
((cough)) vocalizations or noise
>fast talk< delivered faster than surrounding talk
(talk) not recognizable
It's <u>mine</u>. Emphasis

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hhh aspirations

Transcription conventions for Japanese Data**.**

[ ]	designating where overlapping talk starts, and ends.
> <	increase in tempo
( )	unintelligible stretch
(0.0)	length of silence in 1/10 sec.
:::	lengthened syllable
=	latched utterances
underlining	relatively high pitch
CAP	relatively high volume
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
!	animated tone
.hh	audible inbreath
hh	audible outbreath

Abbreviations in transcription

DEM:	demonstrative
FP:	final particle
GEN:	genitive
NEG:	negative morpheme
NR:	nominalizer
OB:	object
PL:	particle other than FP
PST:	past tense
SB:	subject
TL:	title
TP:	topic