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Back Channeling: Function of Back Channeling and L1 Effects on Back Channeling in L2

Leah Shelley
St. Cloud State University

Fernanado Gonzalez
St. Cloud State University

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LEAH SHELLEY WITH FERNANDO GONZALEZ

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the use of back-channels in speakers of English as a second language. It is mainly focused on the use of the utterances: yeah, ok, uh huh and mhmm. The functions of back channeling signals and when can they occur will be discussed. For this study, we recorded a group of women conversing for fifteen minutes and analyzed two three-minute sections of this recording. The women in the recording represented Japan, Taiwan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The findings suggest that the most commonly used types of back channeling were continuers and signals of acknowledgment. Our study also suggests that native language and culture do play a part in how back channeling is used. Further studies could investigate gender issues, physical back channeling signals, and how individual cultures and languages make use of back channeling.

1.0 Statement of the Problem and Review of Research

Back channeling is a part of conversation and speech that the majority of us do not think about or notice unless a person's back channeling varies from what is expected. It is the part a listener plays in a conversation. There are both verbal and non-verbal back channeling signals. A non-verbal example of back channeling is a head nod. Throughout a conversation, the listener may nod their head periodically to show that they are listening. Another way to indicate attentiveness is through verbal signals such as *yeah, ok, uh huh,* and *mhmm*.

Within each culture, there are learned expectations for back channeling (Sharifi & Azadmanesh, 2011). Do the speaker and listener make and maintain eye contact throughout a conversation? Does the speaker expect non-verbal cues such as head nodding to show attentiveness or does the speaker expect verbal responses such as *yes* and *mhmm* to show attentiveness? Is there such a thing as too much back channeling or too little?

The questions we seek to answer in our study are as follows:
1. What function do the common back channeling signals play in a conversation?
2. How does the first language (L1) background affect how back channeling behaves in the second language (L2)?

It appears that back channeling behavior is a universal feature of human communication, but specific back channeling behavior is particular to languages and cultures (Sharifi & Azadmanesh, 2011). A back channel token may sometimes serve more than one function within a speech community, and the same token may have different ranges of interpretation from community to community (Houck & Gass, n.d.). For this main reason, we decided to investigate the use of back channeling by different types of speakers. For example, *yeah, yes,* and *uh huh* are some of the back channels used regularly by native speakers of British and American English to signal agreement. This is not necessarily the case for speakers of other varieties of English, or for non-native speakers of English (Houck & Gass, n.d.). Based on this research, we decided to investigate the differences between cultures when it comes to back channeling.

One of the specific parts of our project dealt with gender issues. Where gender differences in adult language have been found, they are most likely to occur between men and

women in same sex settings. Men's and women's social groups are constituted differently, and language serves different purposes within these groups. For example, women within women's groups emphasize personal relationships, cooperation, and rapport. Women use more back channeling (Gleason & Ely, n.d.). Since we are focusing on back channel signals, we decided to do this project with only women, due to the fact that it would enable us to elicit more back channel tokens.

Differences in back channeling among cultures may be obvious through the study of a single individual from several cultures, but studying individuals alone can pose difficulties because of personal disparity. One book that provides an in-depth study of differences between Japanese native speakers and American English natives speakers is *Japanese Culture and Communication* by Ray T. Donahue (Donahue, 1998). In this paper, we use this book as a reference when discussing differences between Japanese and American English, and the possible transfer of back channeling between the two languages.

The model for our study is the source, *Back-channeling: The Use of Yeah and Mm to Portray Engaged Listenership* (Limbertz, 2011). This source provides insight into the importance of listenership, and the ways in which a listener can project effective listenership through back-channels (Limbertz, 2011). While the paper by Limbertz (2011) focused on Australian English, this paper will utilize American English data.

2.0 Methods

This study was conducted by focusing on a group of five women whose country of origins varied. One woman was from each of the five countries: Japan, Taiwan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The women range in age from upper twenties to mid-forties. During a holiday get-together, the women were sitting around the kitchen table talking and playing a game. The conversation shifted multiple times, sometimes with more than one conversation happening at once. From this time spent around the table, we took a fifteen-minute recording of the women, which included conversation and game playing. The game was new to one or more of the women, so the conversation also included explanation of how to play.

English is the most commonly used language in the video. It is the second language of four out of the five women. Some of the women have been in the United States for five or more years, and some have been in the country for a year or less. In order to narrow our research, we chose to include only women in the study. There are studies that address differences in language use by gender which support our decision to narrow our research by including only one gender. For example, Jean Berko Gleason and Richard Ely conducted a large study that speaks to gender differences in language (n.d.).

From this video, we transcribed two 3-minute sections. Using the transcriptions, we tallied the back channels observed into four function categories: continuers, acknowledgements, newsmakers, and change of activity tokens. The back channels observed were tallied into these function categories while also marking which speaker made use of the back channeling signal.

The second method used in our study was interviewing. We interviewed the Japanese woman, the Egyptian woman, and the American woman from the video. The questions asked were:

1) What are some of the common back channeling signals in your L1?

Are there any back channeling words in your L1 that are comparable to English back channeling signals, such as *yeah, mhmm,* and *uh huh?*

2) How do you let people know that you are listening in your L1? How does back channeling work in your L1?

3) Can there be too much or too little back channeling?

For our analysis, we chose four categories of back channeling. These categories were found in multiple articles and books that were used as background information for our research. Often times, the articles list a larger number of back channeling categories, and at times, have different names for the four that we chose to use (Sharifi & Azadmanesh, 2011; Houck & Gass, n.d.). We feel that the following four categories adequately comprise the verbal back channeling signals we researched. Our chosen four categories as listed earlier are: continuers, acknowledgements, newsmakers, and change of activity tokens. Continuers indicate that the listener is paying attention and gives the floor right back to the prior speaker (e.g. *mm* and *uh huh*), acknowledgements show that the listener agrees with the speaker or understands what the speaker is saying (e.g. *mm* and *yeah*), newsmakers mark the prior turn as newsworthy by communicating an emotional reaction, and change of activity tokens signal movement toward a new topic in the conversation (e.g. *ok* and *right*) (Limbertz, 2011). Alternative names for these categories can be found in Ray T. Donahue's (1998) book, *Japanese Culture and Communication*. Continuers are termed as go-ons, acknowledgements as accepts, newsmakers as exclaims, and change of activity tokens as okays (Donahue, 1998). As we analyzed our transcriptions, we noticed that laughing and repeating are continually used as back channels. Placing them where we felt they best fit, we added both laughing and repeating to the acknowledgement category, and also added repeating to the continuer category. Repeating functioned as both categories depending on the way it was used in a conversation.

3.0 Results and Discussion

	Continuers	Acknowledgements	Newsmakers	Change of Activity Tokens	Total
Total	21	35	2	6	64
Japanese	||	卌 ||		||	11
Taiwanese		卌			5
Egyptian	卌	卌			10
Saudi Arabian	卌 卌 ||	卌 ||||				22
American	||	卌 ||||	||	|||	16

Table 1: Back Channeling Function and Frequency from Transcriptions

Table 1 displays the quantitative data from our research. The top row states the four function categories of back channel signals. The first column states the L1 background of the

speaker using back channel signals in our recording. Tally marks are used to display how many times each speaker used specific back channeling functions. The total number of back channels used for each speaker is on the furthest right hand column, and totals for each back channel function run across the second row.
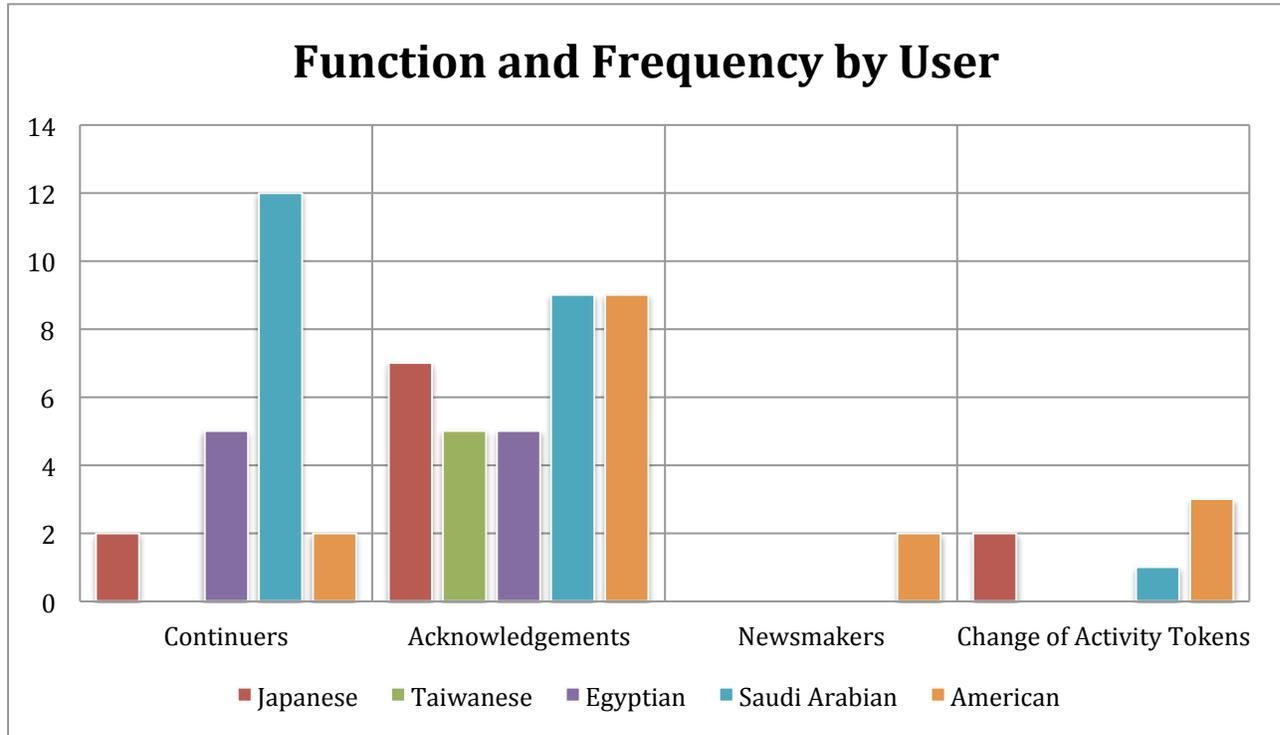

Table 2: Back Channeling Function and Frequency from Transcriptions

Table 2 restates the information given in Table 1 in bar graph form. It does not include the total numbers. This is because of the large disparity in total numbers from the individual person's numbers. The large disparity put into a graph would make the individual persons' information very difficult to analyze.
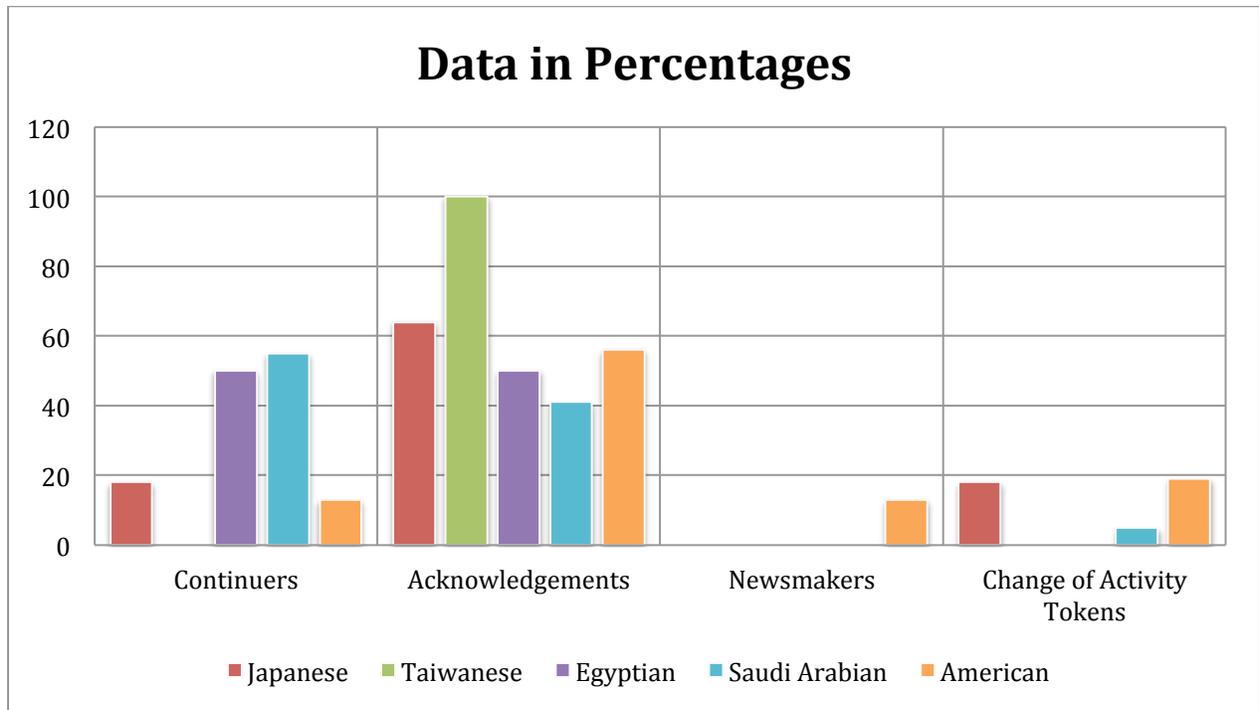
Data in Percentages

Table 3: Back Channeling Data in Percentages

Table 3 provides percentages by speaker of each type of back channel used. Because each speaker used a different amount of back channel signals throughout the transcription taken, providing numbers in a bar chart is not a completely accurate way to study the frequency of back channel signals. This percentage graph offers a more accurate way to analyze the frequency of each type of back channel signal.

As interviews were our second method of research, we also performed an interview with the Japanese woman, Egyptian woman, and American woman represented in our transcriptions. The first interview was done with the Japanese woman. When asked for the common back channeling signals in her first language, she said that *ooon* and *hai* are used the same as *yeah* is used in American English as an acknowledgement. Both *ooon* and *hai* mean *yes*, but *hai* is used more formally. *Ah* and *nnn* are used in the same way that *mmm* or *mhmm* are used as continuers in American English, that is, to show that the listener is listening and paying attention. *Hey* is used as a newsmaker to display interest or to show that the listener is impressed.

Other ways of showing that a person is listening in Japanese culture is through non-verbal back channel signals, such as head nodding and eye contact (Donahue, 1998). When listening to the Japanese woman in our recording and as performed the interview, I made note of her repeating back what was said in order to show understanding. It was asked of her whether she repeated in Japanese to show understanding too, and she said no. When it was pointed out to her that she does this in English, however, she said that she had not realized that she does it. In conclusion, another method of back channeling in Japanese may be to repeat what was said previously.

As with other cultures, it is possible to have too much or too little back channeling in a conversation in Japanese, but there is no prescribed amount. It just seems "off" when there is too much or not enough back channeling going on. There was also the utterance: "I'm with you", in the correspondent language.

The second interview was with the Egyptian woman. The answer for the common back channeling signal in the first language was *aha*. The woman said that repeating and saying *yes* are also ways to back channel in her native language. In addition, eye contact is one of the most important ways of showing that the listener is following and understanding. When it comes to if there is a lot or not enough back channeling, the answer given by the Egyptian woman was that it depends on the person. She stated that, "It is important to signal with backchannel, but the amount, and if it would bother or not, will depend on the person."

Addressing our first question of what function common back channeling signals play in a conversation, we see from our data that back channels fit well into the categories of continuers, acknowledgements, newsmakers, and change of activity tokens. These categories describe the functions of back channel signals in conversations. All of these four functions were seen in the transcriptions of our two 3-minute voice clips. Based on the information displayed in Tables 1, 2, and 3, we see that acknowledgements are the most frequently used type of back channel by all, except the Saudi Arabian woman. Continuers are the second most commonly used back channel signals. Together, continuers and acknowledgements function to portray general listening and understanding. As evidenced by the frequency in use of these two categories, we see that all five cultures and language backgrounds represented place high priority on letting the speaker know that the listener is understanding and following along with what is being said. Significantly, the interviews performed back up this observation. All three interviewees stated that the function of back channeling, whether it is verbal or non-verbal, is to let the speaker know that he or she is being listened to and understood.

Addressing the second question of how L1 backgrounds affect back channeling behavior in the L2, we look to both our quantitative and qualitative data. The only function of back channeling that every speaker utilized is acknowledgements. Four out of five speakers used continuers. The American woman was the only person who used all four types of back channels. The American woman was also the only person whose native language is English. Therefore, the lack of other speakers using all four back channeling functions may have been caused by language and culture background, but it also may have been caused by a less extensive understanding, knowledge, and usability of the language. From our study, we can conclude that Japanese culture makes use of continuers, acknowledgements, and change of activity tokens; Taiwanese culture limits its use of back channeling to acknowledgements; Egyptian culture makes use of both continuers and acknowledgements; Saudi Arabian culture uses continuers, acknowledgements, and change of activity tokens for back channeling; and American culture makes use of continuers, acknowledgements, newsmakers, and change of activity tokens in back channeling.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Leah Shelley is a senior at St. Cloud State University with a linguistics major and a TESOL minor. Her interest in back channeling began when she spent almost half of 2010 in India. During her time in India she began to notice the different ways that people show listenership in a conversation. Some people are loud and overpowering back channelers and some people seem to not back channel at all. Her findings are useful for teaching ESL because it provides evidence that back channeling may need to be taught in ESL classrooms. Back channeling is an important part of communication as it is how a speaker knows the person being talked to is listening.

Fernando Gonzalez is an international student from Panama. He contributed to this paper.

Recommendation: This paper was recommended for publication by Professor Emeritus Susan Ross, Ph.D., English Department, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN. Email: sross@stcloudstate.edu

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Appendix A

Transcriptions
Keys

J=Japanese
T=Taiwanese
E=Egyptian
SA=Saudi Arabian
A=American

C= Continuer
A= Acknowledgement
N= Newsmaker
CAT=Change of Activity Token

Continuers give the floor right back to the prior speaker. E.g. mm, uh huh, repeating
Acknowledgements show that the listener agrees with the speaker or understands what the speaker is saying. E.g. mm, yeah, repeating, laughing
Newsmakers mark the prior turn as newsworthy.
Change of activity tokens signal movement toward a new topic in the conversation. E.g. ok, right

27 seconds to 3 minutes 20 seconds

A: Are you graduating from IEC this semester?
SA: Yeah
<A: Very exciting N
<SA: Yeah A
A: When is graduation?
SA: 16 December
<A: Oh, ok CAT
A: And Monday is your oldest son's surgery for his eye
SA: nnn mhmmm
A: Is he nervous?
SA: No
<A: No C
SA: Because I told him if you finish the surgery I will make party, big party for you
<J: Aww big party A
SA: So yeah. He is very excited.
<A: mhmmm A
J: Why does he have to have the surgery?
SA: Because he has glaucoma
A: Glaucoma
<J: I'm not sure C
SA: Like uuh water in his eyes
<J: Aaah water in his eyes oo-ok. C
<SA: nhmm A
J: So, did it bother him so he notice something, or
SA: Uuuuh
A: Is it like cloudy, right
SA: mhmmm
A: Or fog
SA: mhmmm yeah
J: Mkay so he say like can't see well
SA: not clear, mhmmm
J: And took him to the doctor and
SA: mhmm
<J: Ok CAT
<SA: yeah A
<J: Eyes, ok CAT
E: But now I know why she said now ….means now. Because my mother in law, their grandmother had this…this uh

SA: Glaucoma?
E: Glaucoma yeah. And they like, uh, check the doctor. And my my, my sister has it right now.
<SA: uh huh C
E: And she visit the doctor like every month and he check and he said not yet
<SA: uh huh C
E: not yet not yet. And once he said ok it's now.
SA: The doctor want to open his eyes and know what like uuum, how to say, like uh, in the eyes we have uh something- asphinga?
<A: Yeah C
<E: uh hmm C
SA: Asphinga
E: Sponge?
SA: Yeah. Similar to sponge that make the water go out from the eyes. So he want to see why it doesn't work.
<A: Interesting. A
E: So she won't change the
SA: No no no
E: It's not surgery
SA: No no no. It's just want to open uh this block and see
<E: Yes C
SA: Why the water go out
<E: Hmmmm A
A: Um, it's like when I had Lasik surgery, they lift up the part of your eye, they peel it back
<SA: Yeah C
<E: Yeah, yeah C
E: My sister had that
SA: Why?
A: I I wore glasses
<SA: Uh huh C
A: So it was corrective
<SA: Uh huh C
A: It was freaky
<SA: laugh A
A: You know that word? It scared me.
<J: laugh A
J: But it's worth it, right?
A: They put the thing down and they pop your eye
<E: Uh huh C

10 minutes 18 seconds to 13 minutes 21 seconds

A: Do 5. 4? 5?
J: 5
<A: yeah A
A: Ok. K, so since I dealt what I would do is I would go like this,
<SA: mhmm C

A: and this is an adjective, right?

<SA: uh huh C

A: And you have nouns in your hand

<SA: uh huh C

A: Ok. Then everyone puts down a card like this.

<SA: uh huh C

A: And I will take the stack and I will choose one of the cards that I think matches this. And maybe, uh, maybe it just relates more to me, right?

<SA: uh huh C

<A: Ok CAT

<SA: Ok CAT

A: So it's very fun to get to know each other

T: So you have to…what's Carol thinks the word that…

<SA: uh huh C

V: This is fun. I love this game!

<J: yeah A

SA: It is…?

A: Short.

<SA: Short. A

A: Not long, not tall

A: So we have Japanese, Taiwanese, Saudi Arabia…an, Egyptian, Egyptian, Egyptian

<T: <laugh> A

A: American

<T: American A

<<Laughing by many> A

J: When I hear Egyptian, I think Egyptian cotton

<All: ahhhh, yeah. <Laughing> A

J: ooo the word

<A: Very famous N

SA: Ok

<A: Ok CAT

E: Uh, how many cards do you have?

Other: She needs all the cards.

E: Yeah, yeah you need…

J: I put mine down

….

A: Ok, so don't tell me unless you wanna argue

<SA: uh huh C

A: Oh! What in the world?

A: I knew

<SA: <Laughing> A

A: You're not supposed to tell me that but I knew that was yours.

J: Why is that short?

A: It's not but she's playing to knowing me.

---hmmmm

A: Knowing her friend Carol

<E: nnnn Yes C
A: Who loves 4th of July
<J: ooOoooh A
A: Ooooh!
A: <laughing>
J: But now we should speak right? Or no?
A: Well, you can. Normally she shouldn't tell me. But that was…
J: Yeah, I I
<E: Oh oh A
<A: <laughing> A
E: Ok don't choose this time
J: Yeah, don't choose
J: It's a game. You have to put your answer
E: Yeah I think you already choose it
<A: <laughing> A
<All: ooooh oh A
A: Oh that's why. Oh, got it got it
A: mhmmm. Goldfish, Christmas, Bert 'n Ernie, turtles
J: Gets shorter and shorter, then it disappears. Very short
<A: <laughs> A
J: My answer
A: ooOoooh mm
J: Nothing else gets shorter than that one