

Functions of Frequently Used Back Channels in a Corpus of Intercultural Conversations between Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and native English Speakers (NES)

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Abstract

In conversation, two channels operate simultaneously. Yngve (1970) refers that the ‘main’ channel is that through which the speaker sends messages, whereas the ‘back’ channel, such as *okay*, *mm* is that over which the listener offers response without claiming the speakership. Back channels are particular to languages and cultures. The present study aims to examine the naturally occurring conversations between Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and native English speakers (NES) and to investigate how these culturally divergent participants manage to use different back channels. Two important taxonomies that describe variations in cultural patterns in the present study are Hofstede’s cultural differences and Hall’s high-context and low-context cultures. The results reveal that NES use more newsmarkers, change-of-activity tokens and markers of dispreference than HKC; while HKC use more continuers and acknowledgement back channels. The present study hopes to develop better culturally specific discourse strategies in intercultural encounters.

Keywords: *back channels, Hong Kong Chinese, Native English Speakers, intercultural conversations*

1. Introduction

In almost any conversation, one speaker takes the floor and the other focuses on listening. Speakers sometimes use verbal responses, such as *uh huh*, to indicate that they are listening (Drummond & Hopper 1993a). Yngve (1970) first called these types of feedback responses ‘back-channels’ in English conversations. Back channels are observed when ‘the person who has the turn receives *short message* such as *yes* and *uh-huh* without relinquishing the turn’ (Yngve 1970:102). However, back channels are difficult to describe as they lack of semantic meaning in the conventional dictionary sense of the word. Also, they are not incorporated into clausal structures. As a result, back channels have historically been neglected by linguists and lexicographers, and even by many discourse analysts. However, the high frequency of their occurrence in spoken interaction suggests they are worthy of study, and potentially of significant interest to researchers of conversational interactions. Some research indicate linguistic and cultural differences in regard to the frequency, type, and functions of back channels (e.g., Beach & Lindstorm 1992; Maynard 1990a, b; Orestorm 1983; Philips 1983). However, the exact relationship of back channel responses to language and culture has yet to be specified (Clancy *et al.* 1996; Kubota 1991).

The present study is a study of intercultural interaction. The genre of communication examined is conversation. Participants who came from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interacted in one of the participants’ native language, i.e. English. The present study aims to study naturally occurring spoken discourse between Hong Kong Chinese and native English speakers as a starting point to analyze how individual participants with cultural differences employ back channels in the intercultural conversations. The data for the present study were selected from a corpus of audio-recordings of Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and native English speakers (NES) interacting in naturally occurring conversations. The participants come from Hong Kong and Britain. This has enabled a comparison of the usage and frequency of the back channels in the interactions. The assumption of the present study is that language behaviors are culturally determined. The present study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the frequency, the differences and similarities, if any, in the HKC and NES types and functions of usage of back channels?

2. How will differences in national culture affect the types and functions of back channels in HKC/NES conversations?

Since the use of back channels is language-specific, examining the forms and functions of back channels in the intercultural communication can reveal discourse strategies used by speakers of different cultural backgrounds.

2 . Literature Review

This section reviews the chronological development, the functions and the frequency of back channels cited in various intercultural spoken discourse literature.

2.1 Chronological Development of the Characteristics of Back channels

Back channeling as an important discourse activity has been discussed by various researchers. The significant development of back channels is reviewed according to their chronological order as follows:

Scholars first published documented observations of back channel in the 1950s. Fries (1952:49), looking at English conversations, was perhaps the first to consider utterances such as *unh huh*, *yeah*, *I see*, *good* and *oh*, as a group, to be 'signals of continued attention' by the participant who is listening at that point of the talk. This interpretation is very similar to many more recent research studies on back channels. Then, beginning with Kendon (1967), more scholars in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and communication studies began examining back channels in the 1970s (e.g. Dittman 1972; Dittman, Llewellyn & Lynn 1968; Duncan 1974). In addition, some studies of feedback, which is similar to the concept of back channel, have been conducted in the later years (Allwood *et al.* 2007; Kjellmer 2009; Ruhlemann 2007). For example, Allwood, Nivre and Ahlsen (1992) analyzed linguistic feedback functions of dialogue utterances, and described different ways of producing feedback expression, and Allwood *et al.* (2007) studied communicative feedback as a kind of vocal or bodily expression between a recipient of information and a contributor of information.

Yngve's (1970) pioneering study on the back channel phenomenon was in English conversation. The term back channel implies that two channels in conversation operate simultaneously. The 'main' channel is that through which the speaker (the person holding the floor) sends messages, whereas the 'back' channel is that over which the listener (the addressed recipient of talk) gives information without claiming the speakership. Yngve means by back channel does not only limit to conversational items such as *yes* and *uh huh* but also include short comments such as *oh*, *I can't believe it* and short questions such as *You've started writing it then – your question?* (Yngve 1970:574). Duncan and Fiske (1977), drawing from Yngve, extended the term 'back channel' to include sentence completions, requests for clarification and brief statements. Ward and Tsukahara (2000) defined back-channel feedback as responds directly to the content of an utterance of the other, is optional, and does not require acknowledgement by the other. It has been noted that back channels have different characteristics according to different research aims. In sum, back channels are generally considered not to challenge current speakership. In the present study, back channel is defined as:

1. occur within current speaker's turn (Tao & Thompson 1991),
2. offer information by the listener without claiming the speakership, and
3. do not only limit to short utterances, but also include short statements.

2.2 Functions of Back channel

The primary function of back channel for the listener is to signal attention to what the current speaker is saying (Dittman, Llewellyn & Lynn 1968; Fries 1952; Mott & Petrie 1995; Mulac *et al.* 1995). Researchers have identified up to 13 specific functions associated with back channels. Those specific functions include to encourage continue talking (Sacks *et al.* 1974, Schegloff 1982); take the turn and hand back the floor to the current speaker (Jefferson 1984; Sacks 1992a, 1992b); show a signal of hearing (Drummon & Hopper 1993a; Gardner 2001); perform as a retrospective receipt (Drummon & Hopper 1993a; Gardner 2001); acknowledge the ongoing telling (Drummond & Hopper 1993a; Laforest 1992); claim understanding (Aijmer 2002; Orestrom 1983); mark the prior speaker's turn as newsworthy (Heritage 1984); indicate emotional states (Fries 1952); indicate sudden remembering (Jefferson 1980); shift the focus to other (Beach 1993; Heritage & Sorjonen 1994); move to a new topic or activity (Gardner 2001); display lack of interest (*Stenström* 1994) and lack of understanding (Brunner 1979). These functions of back channels can be categorized into five main types, including continuers, acknowledgement tokens, newsmarkers, change-of-activity tokens, and markers of dispreference. Each sub-type of the back channels will be briefly illustrated by their definitions and functions as follows:

Continuers perform a function of encouraging the current speakers to continue with their talks (Schegloff 1982). A continuer token, for example *uh huh*, *mm hm* and *yes*, shows a low degree of speakership incipency; this utterance automatically returns the floor to the current speaker (Gardner 1994; Schegloff 1982).

Acknowledgement tokens include *mm* and *yeah* (Gardner 1994). Gardner (1994) reminds that *mm* is categorized as the listener has nothing substantial to add to the topic of the talk. *yeah* is the most frequently used of all response tokens in ordinary conversation (Gardner 2001). In the data used in Gardner's (2001) study, *yeah* occurred hundreds of times in an hour of conversation. Drummond and Hopper (1993b) also pointed out that *yeah* tokens were more frequent than *mm hm* and *uh huh* tokens.

Newsmarkers mark the current speaker's turn as newsworthy in some way (Fries 1952). Jefferson (1980) also described the effect of *oh* as a 'sudden remembering'. Examples of Newsmarkers include *really*, *oh*, *yer kidding*, *did you?* *right* and *I see*. *oh* is traditionally used as an exclamation or interjection to indicate emotional states (Fries 1952).

Change-of-activity tokens, for example *okay* and *alright*, mark a transition to a new activity or a new topic in the talk (Gardner 1994:2). *alright* is similar, but appears to propose a stronger and higher level movement to a new topic or activity (Gardner 2001).

Markers of dispreference reflect a lack of interest and impatience which are spoken by a listener of the talk (Levinson 1983; Stenström 1994). Examples include *well*, *yes but*, *gosh* and *hell*.

2.3 Back channels across Languages

Some cross-linguistic studies concerning back channel behavior have been carried out in comparing American English and Mandarin Chinese speakers. American English speakers use back channel tokens much more frequently than Mandarin Chinese do (Tao & Thompson 1991). Researchers also have compared the back channel behavior between German and American speakers in English conversations. German speakers produce fewer back channel responses than American. Germans are generally perceived to be abrasive and to be more direct of expressing requests and complaints (Blum- Kulka *et al.* 1989; Hinkel 1996; House & Kasper 1981). All people engage in some forms of back channels while the frequency and function of back channel responses differ from language to language and culture to culture. As Kubota (1991) notes, little knowledge exists about the extent to which the use of back channel responses is tied to specific culture or language. In addition, very little research has been carried out to compare the use of back channels between HKC and British.

2.4 Back channels Behaviors in Intercultural Communication

The present study focuses on the significant cultural differences in back channel behavior between HKC and NES. This section summarizes two most important taxonomies, Hofstede's (1983; 1991) cultural differences and Hall's (1967, 1977) high-context and low-context cultures, that describe variations in cultural patterns, with an emphasis on the comparison between China/Hong Kong and Western countries, particularly England, since the native speakers of English who participated in the present study come from this country.

Geert Hofstede's impressive studies (1980a, 1980b, 1983, 1985 and 1991) offer a significant approach to understanding the range of cultural differences. He identified four dimensions along with dominant patterns of a culture: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity. Among four dimensions, individualism-collectivism is the major dimension of cultural variability used to explain cultural differences of back channel behavior in the present study.

The other important taxonomy in the present study is Hall's (1967, 1977) high-context and low-context cultures. Hall's (1977) research about the relationship between culture and communication are well known. Cultures differ on a continuum that ranges from high to low context. In high context cultures, speakers and writers rely heavily on the wider context to communicate. High-context communication can be characterized as being indirect, ambiguous and understated with speakers being reserved and sensitive to listeners (Hall 1976). In low-context cultures, speakers and writers are more direct and explicit when they communicate. Low-context communication, in contrast, can be characterized as being direct, explicit, open and precise.

These two cultural theories share similarities. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1998:44) observe that 'All cultures Hall labels as low-context are individualistic, given Hofstede's score, and all the cultures Hall labels as high-context are collectivistic in Hofstede's schema'. Deng (1992) confirms that Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension and Hall's (1976) low- and high-context distinction are isomorphic. To summarize, individualism-collectivism dimension and high-low context culture have been used widely to explain cultural differences in different types of behavior (Triandis 1990, 1995). In the present study, they are expected to provide a powerful explanatory framework for understanding cultural similarities and differences in back channel behavior.

3. Research Design And Methodology

Naturally occurring conversation is chosen as the data of the present study because such data are more representative of talk in the real world (Taylor & Cameron 1987; Warren 1993). The present study is based on empirical spoken data drawn from the Hong Kong Corpus of Conversational English (HKCCE) which is an approximately 122 000-word structured collection of spoken texts. The HKCCE was a sub-corpus of Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English currently compiled by a research team based in the English Department at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In the present study, 17 dyadic intercultural conversations involving a total of 34 participants, between 17 HKC and 17 NES were selected to analyze. All names and sensitive references in the transcripts were changed in order to ensure confidentiality. Topics range from family, travel, restaurant, and property, to religion and social affairs in Hong Kong. These conversations consisted of 8.5 hours audio recordings or 86,000 words of transcription. These conversations were sufficient to provide representative analysis. All the data analysis from the present study had been cross-checked by research team members to enhance the credibility of the findings.

The present study has chosen the Hong Kong Chinese participants (HKC) and British participants, i.e. Native English Speakers (NES) to study in order to minimize the varieties of nationality. As social variables such as educational background, first language, place of residence and social status affect participants' linguistic and conversational competence, and so, these variables were controlled. All HKC were adult Chinese raised, educated and worked in Hong Kong. They had Cantonese as the first language and English as a second language. All of them were educated to tertiary level. All Hong Kong Chinese participants are born and brought up in Hong Kong and have no significant travel or residency in an English-speaking country. White (1989) suggested that all participants needed to converse with a friend or acquaintance rather than with a stranger in order to eliminate potential differences in back channel responses that might occur in initial interactions. Therefore, the social distance and power status between the HKC and NES were controlled. The chosen participants were colleagues or friends who had equal status and familiar with each other. The conversations were balanced in terms of the total words spoken by two sets of speakers. 40500 words (47%) are spoken by HKC; 45500 words (53%) are spoken by NES, enabling the present study to make directly comparisons in terms of frequencies of occurrence and patterns of usage.

4. Findings and Discussion

The back channels were selected largely because they are among the most frequent in the corpus. 28 back channels including *mhm, mhmm, mm hmm, uhuh, uhuh, yes, aha, ah huh, mm, yeah, sure, yes sure, oh yes, great, oh, right, that's right, I see, oh I see, really, oh gosh, oh god, okay, ok, alright, all right, well* and *nowere* the focus of the present study. The frequencies were manually counted. The total frequency of back channels used in HKC/NES conversations was 2033 times. The overall frequency of the back channels was 1070 times among native English speakers. Hong Kong Chinese back channel behavior was found to be slightly less frequent, totaling only 963 times. NES and HKC produced the similar proportion of back channels in the intercultural conversations. The focuses of research are placed on the frequency and functions of the five major categories of back channels, namely continuers, acknowledgements, newsmarkers, change-of-activity tokens and markers of dispreference. Compared the raw number of each type of back-channels, HKC seem to play a more active role in producing continuers and acknowledgement. In contrast, NES seem to have a more active role in producing newsmarkers, change-of-activity token and markers of dispreference. This section examines each back channel category from the data.

4.1 Frequency and Functions of Continuers

Continuers are used by the listener to encourage the current speaker to continue talking but do not take the current speakership. Table 1 shows that HKC use continuers more frequent than NES do. HKC used 395 (77%) continuers and NES used 118 (23%) continuers.

Table 1: Total frequency of continuers used in HKC/NES conversations

Continuers	Total HKC	Total NES	Total
mhm/mhmm/mm hmm	218	44	262
uhuh/ uh huh	146	30	176
yes	28	43	71
aha/ ah huh	3	1	4

Newsmarkers mark the prior speaker's turn as newsworthy, project emotional states and indicate sudden remembering. Table 3 shows that HKC use newsmarkers less frequently than NES do. HKC used 220 (33%) newsmarkers and NES 448 (67%) newsmarkers.

Table 3: Total frequency of newsmarkers used in HKC/NES conversations

Newsmarkers	Total HKC	Total NES	Total
oh	176	136	312
right/ that's right	22	278	300
I see/ oh I see	17	18	35
really	5	11	16
oh gosh/ oh god	0	5	5
Total	220 (33%)	448 (67%)	668

In 017, speaker B (male British) says *really* in line 582. From lines 580 to 581, speaker A (female Hong Kong Chinese) gives information of a professor in Department of Accountancy. This piece of information is new to speaker B (male British). Therefore, the *really* in line 582 is used to propose that speaker B has undergone some kind of change in his locally current state of information. This *really* is used to say something like 'I now know something that I didn't know before' by speaker B.

017 B: male British A: female Hong Kong Chinese
[talking about the professor of accountancy]

580. A: and after he ar- he arrived PolyU er I think that the Department of Accountancy has
581. announcing new programme at least at least I think two new programmes
582. B: **really**
583. A: yea and for this year the coming September there will be a new programme

In 003, speaker C produces *oh* in line 79. This *oh* is a newsmarker which indicates exclamation of speaker C. Speaker C is very surprised to learn that speaker B feels ill. *oh* in this case indicates an emotional state of the listener.

003 B: male British C: male Hong Kong Chinese
[Talking about food in McDonald]

77. B: well I don't know what topics we want to talk about er (.) I can't think of anything it's
78. lunch time and I've just had two McDonald's and I am feeling ill
79. C: **oh**
80. B: McDonald's always make me er ill

In 002, the speakers talk about the MD they received from the student of John's friend from English Department. In the previous turns, speaker A (male Hong Kong Chinese) has told speaker B (male British) that the MD does not belong to him. In fact, speaker A does not know much about the MD. However, in line 40, speaker B (male British) keeps asking speaker A (male Hong Kong Chinese) questions about the MD. Therefore, in line 41, speaker A reminds speaker B that "I don't know don't ask me. I just got it from that student of John's friend". In line 43, speaker B produces *ohright right right.oh* and *right* in this case are newsmarkers. They indicate the effect of 'sudden remembering' by speaker B. Speaker B suddenly remembers that the MD is from English Department.

002 B: male British A: male Hong Kong Chinese
[talking about where the MD come from]

40. B: listen to it while we go back ((laugh)) how much do these cost
41. A: I don't know don't ask me just just I got it just from the from that student from John's
42. friend
43. B: **oh right right right** from the English Department yea
44. A: I don't know

82. A: [oh I see so you know sometimes it's it's difficult
 83. when you need people you know er to to replace in a very short period of time yea

Westerners are highly individualistic. They consider language to be a major aspect of the ongoing negotiation of the relationship (Scollon & Scollon 1995). NES in the present study come from low-context culture which encourages communicators to separate the issue from the person, sometimes however, at the expense of personal relationships. Therefore, NES respect each other's rights to their own autonomy and freedom of choice. As a result, they give more change-of-activity tokens than HKC. Contrary to NES, Chinese have been found to value risk-avoidance in negotiations (Weiss & Stripp 1998: 69). The impact of cultural traditions is evidenced in the Chinese negotiators' attempt to create emotional ties with their counterparts and value friendship, favourable extra-contractual actions, tolerance, and trust (Weiss & Stripp 1998: 66). In the present study, HKC tend to look for a 'soft' way to communicate that there is a problem in the relationship rather than having keen negotiations. Preserving the harmony of the relationship has a higher priority than being totally honest (Ueda 1974). In addition, high-context cultures tend not to separate the person from the issue. HKC may think that if they attack the issue, they are assumed to be attacking the person and would create embarrassment or ill will. Such perceived attacks, from a high-context culture viewpoint, need smoothing (Dodd 1998). Therefore, HKC prefer not to use so many change-of-activity tokens which claim to be 'negotiation back channels'. HKC only produce 24% of the total number of change-of-activity tokens found in the data.

4.5 Frequency and Functions of Markers of Dispreference

The markers of dispreference are frequently used to reflect impatience and to show a lack of understanding. Table 5 shows that HKC use markers of dispreference more frequently than NES do. HKC used 36 (19%) markers of dispreference and NES used 153 (81%) markers of dispreference.

Table 5: Total frequency of change-of-activity tokens used in HKC/NES conversation

Markers of dispreference	Total HKC	Total NES	Total
well	27	103	130
no	9	50	59
Total	36 (19%)	153 (81%)	189

In 012, speaker B (male British) and speaker C (male Hong Kong Chinese) discuss the price cut of product. In line 344, speaker C does not have an interest to continue the talk. Thus in line 344, he produces *well* that reflects a lack of interest and patience to further discuss the price cut. Speaker C prefers having dinner to discussing price cut.

012 B: male British C: male Hong Kong Chinese
 [Discussion of price cut for product]

339. B: and now the price has er come down
 340. C: I think that's good the the price come down a lot
 341. B: yea
 342. C: uh huh
 343. B: yea
 344. C: **well** (.) I think we'd better have (.) [dinner first ((laugh))
 345. B: [I think so

In 003, speaker A (female Hong Kong Chinese) and speaker B (male English) are discussing the cause of speaker A's sickness. In line 340, speaker B produces *well* that show a lack of understanding. Therefore, in line 342, speaker B asks A follow up question to confirm.

003 A: female Hong Kong Chinese B: male English
 [Discussion of the cause of sickness]

335. B: [oh really what's wrong
 336. A: [oh many things
 337. B: [you're worried about T_
 338. A: no no no but many things to do because just after the examination I've do the
 339. marking a lot marking and then just finished (.) erm two hours ago
 340. B: **well**
 341. A: yea [finish all
 342. B: [is it is it the same (.) so like C_ she has to do the marking as well as the same thing

NES use markers of dispreference more frequently than HKC do. The Western culture supports the ‘independent conception of the self’ more than Asian cultures. NES are more likely to be willing to enter confrontation than HKC. They may be more willing to express open criticism; be disposed to express individual, unpredictable views; and attach importance to individual goals and ‘self-actualization’ (Markus & Kitayama 1991, 1994). Chinese thus have a preference for gentleness and compassion, i.e. human-heartedness (Bond 1987). It is often pointed out that Chinese people tend to avoid confrontation and are constantly preoccupied with how other people feel. To the Chinese people, who come from a high-context culture (Hall 1976), to show one’s disagreement openly and carry on debating is not preferred. They may think that British people are breaking the harmony in the conversation. Chinese emphasizes the maintenance of the collectivity and the continuation of amicable relationships. As HKC make special efforts to avoid antagonisms that unsettle the group or place individuals in confrontation with the group (Lau 1979), they produce less markers of dispreference (19%) than the NES (87%) do.

The British individualistic cultural value leads to the goal of openness (Hofstede 1983). This objective is best achieved through the use of explicit and direct back channel behavior, such as using more newsmarkers, change-of-activity tokens and markers of dispreference. The Chinese collective value orientation, on the other hand, constrains people from speaking boldly in preference for a more harmonious and indirect language style (Knutson, Hwang & Deng 1999). Indirect communication helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person as well as disagreement among partners in the Chinese culture (Lebra 1976). Therefore, HKC use more continuers and acknowledgement back channels in the intercultural conversations. They tend to have more approachable and supportive back channel behavior than NES. Lastly, the present study focused on the functions of back channels by first creating back channel word lists, then searching for examples in the data. However, this type of function categorization was carried out for frequency distribution and comparison. The present study focuses less on generating the unfolding prosody development in detail. However, the study of prosody is also significant and should be considered for the next step of investigation.

5. Conclusion

Culture and communication are interdependent (Lustig & Koester 1999). The primary purpose of intercultural communication studies is to investigate the influence of cultural characteristics on communication behavior (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Knutson & Hwang 1999). The present study is an intercultural communication study which attempts to reveal how cultural beliefs inform back channel conversational styles. The present study adopts the cultural communication approach, highlighting how people express culture in their everyday conversations. The present study proposes that back channel behavior in Hong Kong Chinese and Native English Speakers’ casual conversations differ in terms of types, frequencies, and the functions. The present study has suggested that members of Hong Kong and Britain have different back channel behaviors that they use with certain frequency: NES provide significantly more back channels of several types than HKC do. The greater frequencies of back channels have its roots in the culture of the Hong Kong Chinese and Native English speakers in their languages. The significance of differences in back channel behavior increases when we consider that back channel responses are most likely a predominantly unconscious behavior, since it is acquired along with the linguistic or culture system, rather than being taught in explicit language training. People that do not learn aspects of back channel production are not likely to recognize differences in back channeling as a source of communicative inefficiency. The findings of the present study add to the mounting evidence that languages differ in regard to their back channel tokens. The use of these tokens is also culturally specific.

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