

# Toward a cultural-sensitive taxonomy of backchannels: A transition from listener to speaker



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## Introduction

In conversation, we use various kinds of signals related to not only meaning but also sequence of conversation. Listener backchannels, such as *erm*, *yeah* and hand gestures, function as key signals with reference to the transition from listener to speaker in conversation. Conversation Analysis on the video-recorded conversation data has been conducted with the multimedia annotation interfaces.

## Research Focus

In the early 1970s, although Chomsky's grammarian view was dominant in linguistics at that moment, Yngve (1970) shows interest in functions of discourse and describes the organisation of conversation, in other words 'turn-taking'. What is referred to by the term 'backchannels' varies from study to study (McCarthy & O'Keefe, 2004). I take a broad definition of backchannels as described by Duncan (1974), which includes verbal and non-verbal response tokens such as *right* and *mm*, body gestures such as gaze, nods and silence, and forms such as completion of prior turn. I would like to investigate whether any systematic patterns in choices of backchannels can be observed at turn-boundary in English language conversation or not. Two types of face to face dyadic conversations in English language in a pedagogic context, namely MA and PhD supervisions at university, are video-recorded and analysed with time-based multimodal annotation software;

1. Native Speaker Native Speaker (NS-NS) dyad;
2. Native Speaker Non-native speaker (NS-NNS) dyad.



Figure1 Transana

A time-based multimodal annotation software developed by Chris Fassnacht at the University of Wisconsin. A video viewer, sounds wave bar, annotation field and project control panel are included.

## Turns and floors in conversation

Based on the previous study from Schegloff (2007) and Sacks et al (1974), Floors and turns in conversation are distinguished in the current research. A turn, on the one hand, can be an exchange of any utterances between participants or within the speaker himself, a floor, on the other hand, can be related to listenership and speakership in conversation, and a participant who takes a floor can be a speaker in conversation. To make it simple, I take the utterance with more than three words as floors and take all of the utterances as turns.

## Lead Time

Lead time is a new concept which I have developed in order to describe time distance to or from each participant's taking floor. As illustrated in Figure 2 below. I define the timing where either participant's taking floor as 'floor taking point (FTP)' and describe it as 0 in lead time.

Figure 2 Floor taking and lead time

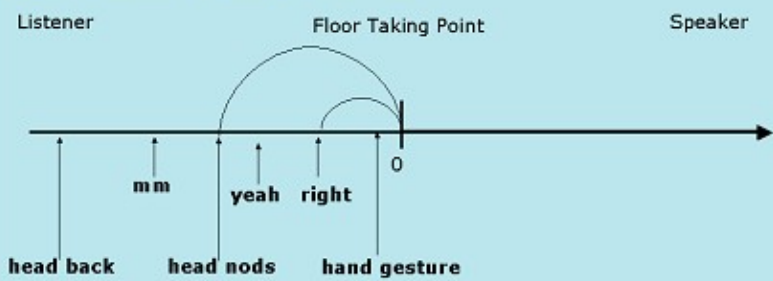


Figure 3 HN and HG in Conversation 1

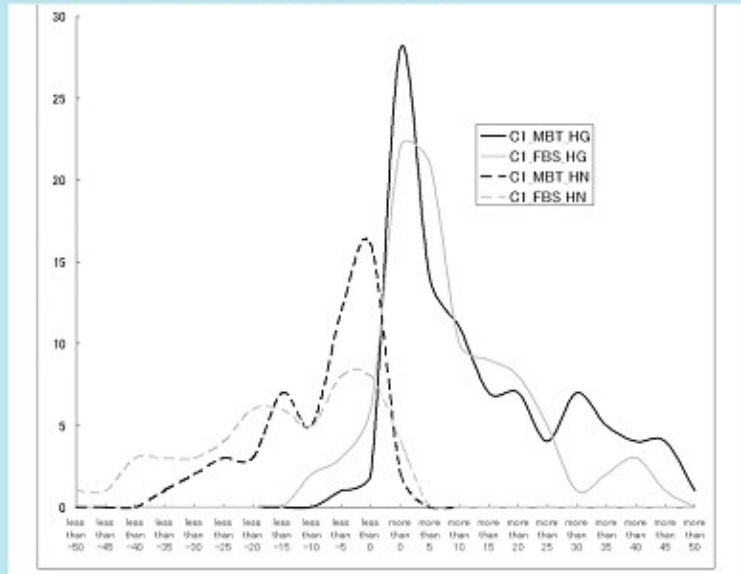


Table 1 HN and HG in Conversation 1

leadtime	C1_MBT_HG	C1_FBS_HG	C1_MBT_HN	C1_FBS_HN
less than -50	0	0	0	1
less than -45	0	0	0	1
less than -40	0	0	0	3
less than -35	0	0	1	3
less than -30	0	0	2	3
less than -25	0	0	3	4
less than -20	0	0	3	6
less than -15	0	0	7	6
less than -10	0	2	5	5
less than -5	1	3	12	8
less than 0	2	6	16	8
more than 0	28	22	2	4
more than 5	14	21	0	0
more than 10	11	10	0	0
more than 15	7	9	0	0
more than 20	7	8	0	0
more than 25	4	5	0	0
more than 30	7	1	0	0
more than 35	5	2	0	0
more than 40	4	3	0	0
more than 45	4	1	0	0
more than 50	1	0	0	0
Sum	95	93	51	52

## Research Method

Although both quantitative and qualitative study are conducted with the data, only a part of the qualitative study is described. Two conversation data C1 and C2 shown below is transcribed as vocal and visual data with Transana separately. These transcripts are combined with Microsoft Access with timeline as a primary key. Time line and lead time are applied to these transcripts for analysis.

Conversation Data	Type	Participant
Conversation Data 1 (C1)	N-N	Male British Teacher (C1_MBT) / Female British Student (C1_FBS)
Conversation Data 2 (C2)	NS-NNS	Female British Teacher (C1_FBT) / Male Japanese Student (C2_MJS)

## Findings and Conclusion

Only a finding about the use of hand gestures (HG) and head nods (HN) is reported here. As shown in figure 3 and table 1 above, in C1, HN has been observed more often soon before FTP while HG has been observed more often soon after FTP. This tendency is not obvious in C2 (NS-NNS conversation). Both differences and similarities in the use of backchannels between NS-NS conversations and NS-NNS conversations should be concerned in a further research.

## References

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