

RESEARCH TITLE

**Back-channels in Selected Scenes of American Sitcom,
Seinfeld: A Discourse Analysis Study**

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Abstract

One of the most important channels in communication is (backchannel), produced by the speaker for certain purposes within the discourse, hence both the listener and the speakers share a background knowledge about these back-channels and their functions within the conversation. It can be called the secondary channel, is that of the listener which functions to provide continuer or assessments, defining listener's comprehension and/or interest. They can be used in everyday speech for agreement or disagreement with what has been said, or they can be a way of capturing interest on the part of the listener for what has been said by the speaker.

1. Definitions

The term "backchannel" is used to differentiate between the roles of the people involved in a conversation. Victor Yngve created the word in 1970, in the following passage: "In fact, the person who has the turn and his partner are both speaking and listening at the same time. This is due to the occurrence of a back channel, which allows the person in charge of the turn to receive short messages such as 'yes' and 'uh-huh' without abandoning control of the turn." Backchannel replies are an element of basic human contact because, in order to have an effective or meaningful person-to-person relationship, participants in a conversation must cooperate with one another. In other words, when two individuals are having a conversation, only one of them is speaking and the other is listening at any given time, although the listener is frequently the one who is speaking.

During a conversation, the term "backchannel" was used to indicate that two channels of communication are active at the same time. [3] The speaker's channel is the most important, as it directs the principal speech flow. The listener's secondary communication channel (or backchannel) is used to give continuers or assessments, which define a listener's comprehension and/or interest. To put it another way, the term "backchannel" is used to distinguish between the roles of the participants in a communication.

The person who is speaking is said to be communicating via the "front channel," while the person who is listening is said to be communicating via the "backchannel." The phrase "backchannel" does not inherently define the listener's function in the dialogue, but it can help us understand how the person playing the listener reacts to the person playing the speaker. Recent research has also suggested new labels for these two functions, as seen below. They've proposed the terms generic and specific in place of continuers and assessments.

The term "backchannel" does not necessarily define the listener's role in the conversation but helps us to understand how the person that is taking on the role of the listener responds to the person taking on the role of the speaker. Recent research, which can be seen below, has also suggested new terms for these two functions. They have proposed the term generic in place of continuers and specific in place of assessments (Janet 2000 , 941).

Scholars have recently disputed the popular meaning of "backchannel" by include the word "optionality" in the term. Backchannel is never required and is always used to augment an existing communication (Jackson ,2014:37).

Alan states that A listener may make 'back channel cues,' such as *Yeah, hmmm, Wow!*, which are not intended to interrupt the speaker's flow or take over the turn. Conversations can be organized in a variety of ways. For example, some utterances are used to start a discussion (e.g. Hi!), while others are used to end it (e.g. See you later!). Some turns generate 'adjacency pairs,' which are natural pairs. Question and answer, greeting and return greeting, invitation and acceptance or refusal, and apologies and acceptance or rejection are all examples of this(Alan, 2006 :44).

The term "backchannel" was designed to imply that there are two channels

of communication operating simultaneously during a conversation. The predominant channel is that of the speaker who directs primary speech flow. The secondary channel of communication (or backchannel) is that of the listener which functions to provide continuers or assessments, (Levinson 19883) defines a listener's comprehension and/or interest. In other words the term "backchannel" is used to differentiate between the roles of the people involved in a conversation.

A person giving a narrative or explaining something to one or more others in a conversation who respond to him with short verbal signals or non-verbal body language is how backchannel is usually employed. They may make sounds like "right," "yes," or give a nod to show that they are listening and paying attention to the speaker. Such acknowledgements or little gestures signal to the speaker that the audience is paying attention and that he should continue with his story(Charles , 1986 : 25).

2. A non-lexical backchannel

A non-lexical backchannel is a vocalized sound that has little or no referential meaning but nonetheless verbalizes the listener's attention and frequently happens in conjunction with gestures. Sounds like uh-huh and hmm fulfill this purpose in English. Non-lexical backchannels generally come from a limited set of sounds not otherwise widely used in content-bearing conversational speech; as a result, they can be used to express support, surprise, or a need for clarification at the same time as someone else's conversational turn without causing confusion or interference (Nigel , 2006 : 142).

Backchannels are utterances as well as turns, but the difference is that backchannels do not purloin the speaker's floor, which is a current right to speak in a conversation. It means that using backchannels do not involve speaker shift, "on the contrary, they acknowledge what the current speaker says and generally encourage her/him to go on.

In non-lexical backchannels, such as uh-huh, mm-hm, or um-hm, English allows for the reduplication, or repetition, of syllables, as well as single-syllable backchanneling. Gardner discovered that the two tokens mm and mm-hm are generally not equal in function, with mm being utilized more successfully as a continuer, a weak acknowledgment token, and a weak assessment marker in a study analyzing the use of two-syllable backchannels that concentrated on mm and mm-hm. mm-hm, on the other hand, is commonly employed as a backchannel to indicate that a speaker is ceding their turn in the conversation and enabling the other speaker to maintain control of the conversational floor(Rod 1997: 28).

3. Backchannels' complexity

Backchannels come in a broad variety of shapes and sizes. This leads to a situation where the result of the frequency and function descriptions of all the variants becomes excessively vast and opaque. some backchannels based on the most significant and frequent backchannel item of the particular backchannel.

Backchannels can be classed as 'simple,' as in *mhm*, 'double,' as in *yep yeah*, or 'complicated,' as in *yes very* or *yes I know*.

4. Phrasal and substantive backchannels.

Phrasal backchannels most commonly assess or acknowledge a speaker's communication with simple words or phrases (for example, "Really?" or "Wow!" in English). Substantive backchannels consist of more substantial turn-taking by the listener and usually manifest as asking for clarification or repetitions.

One of the conversational functions of phrasal backchannels is to assess or appraise a previous utterance. Goodwin argues that this is the case for the phrasal backchannel *oh wow*, where use of the backchannel requires a specific conversational context where something unexpected or surprising was said. Similarly, more substantive backchannels such as *oh come on, are you serious?* require a context where the speaker is responding to something exasperating or frustrating. In both of these cases, Goodwin argues that the backchannels focus only on addressing some aspect of the immediately preceding utterance rather than the larger conversation itself.^[15] As a result, they have a broad conversational distribution, appearing both in the middle of extended talk as well as at the end of longer conversational turns.¹

5. Functions of Backchannels :

There are certain and different functions concerning backchannels within the conversations. In face there is no difference whether these functions or backchannels are performed by men or me, the concept of femininity and masculinity has no role in such a thing. Coulthard et al (1981) states the functions of backchannels into four different categories, which are as follows :

As for discourse functions of backchannels, there are two distinguished classifications, Hayashi and Hayashi (1991) subdivide backchannels in four basic categories - continuers, repairers, judgemental reinforcers and claimers, and the non-judgmental prompters and clarifiers. This theoretical classification is greatly elaborated, but it would be almost inapplicable in the practical investigation. Such a classification would require the precise knowledge of the intended meaning of backchannels used. Coulthard et al, they claim that backchannels are used to acknowledge, accept, or endorse information stated by the current speaker. This classification is not easy to be applied on account of the unclear boundaries and overlapping classification of the categories. While analysing the five conversational texts I have recognised four main functions of backchannels, in partial agreement with, based on the information provided to the current speaker. The functions of backchannels can be specified in the following main uses:

5.1. Backchannel as a ‘continuer’

In agreement with Hayashi and Hayashi (1991, in White 1997), this kind is the most common form of backchannels. Its primary function is to maintain the flow of conversation and the desire of the current speaker to continue his turn. It also serves as a floor-yielding device and it provides feedback that the attention is paid to what is being uttered.

All the instances of *m hm* in the example above merely function as continuers. They do not express any particular listener's attitude to what is said and only endorse the current speaker to continue his turn. Thus backchannels are classified as continuers.

5.2. Backchannel as a ‘captured interest token’

By the use of captured interest tokens, the current listener communicates that the information uttered by the current speaker is of great interest, or importance in relation to the listener. They express that the listener pays attention to what is said, as well as the continuers, the difference being in the relation to the uttered information. They may have the evaluative characteristic.

Example A: do you remember that • that girl from the PARTY • I mean last Friday

B: yeah, I do A: I met her yesterday in the morning at the corridor and she asked me how YOU were doing

B: hmmm, GREAT

5.3. Backchannel as a ‘consonance token’

Consonance tokens inform the speaker that the listener agrees with the standpoint of the speaker or that the listener is in convergence with the conveyed idea. They fortify the relationship of the discourse participants. These are often represented by the repetition of a particular part of the preceding utterance as in the example below, where the B’s stick an initial label is the repetition of a part of A’s preceding turn.

Example A: I mean if I don’t LIKE it I can always send it BACK CAN’T I

B: COURSE you can YES

A: well what does he SAY - stick an initial label on the

B: stick an initial LABEL

5.4. Backchannel as an ‘information confirmation token’

Information confirmation tokens express that the stated information has been received and in addition the agreement or disagreement with the information conveyed. They may confirm what was said by the devices of agreement or disagreement. The latter is evident in the example below, where the conversation participant B agrees with the speaker A’s utterance by the use of the negative form confirmation. The main function of these backchannels is to state whether the listener accepts or denies the information, and that the listener still supports the current speaker in his turn. This category of backchannels is the most likely to be mistaken for a turn and vice versa, and often is very disputable, depending on the view of the researcher.

Example

A: I expect it’s the kind of MATERIAL he GETS it with it’s either FACTUAL DETAILED stuff

B: in his NOTES or all in ADVANCE

A: it’s not like a lecture on CHAUCER or

B: NO

It should be distinguished between backchannels confirming the received information and agreements in the form of turns since both can be represented by the same device as e.g. yeah. I have decided to classify an item as a turn, thus not being the

backchannel, if it responds to a question, the clue being the final intonation. Yes/no-questions finish with final rising pitch, while wh-questions are characterised by the final falling pitch. The recognition is also achieved by the analysis of a semantic quality of the surrounding turns. Another category of turns is represented by social responses to welcome and farewell greetings. Yeah as a response to a question is indicated in the example that follows:

Example

A: OH it'll SHOW that ə • you KNOW - I shall FEEL it up to a POINT can

I

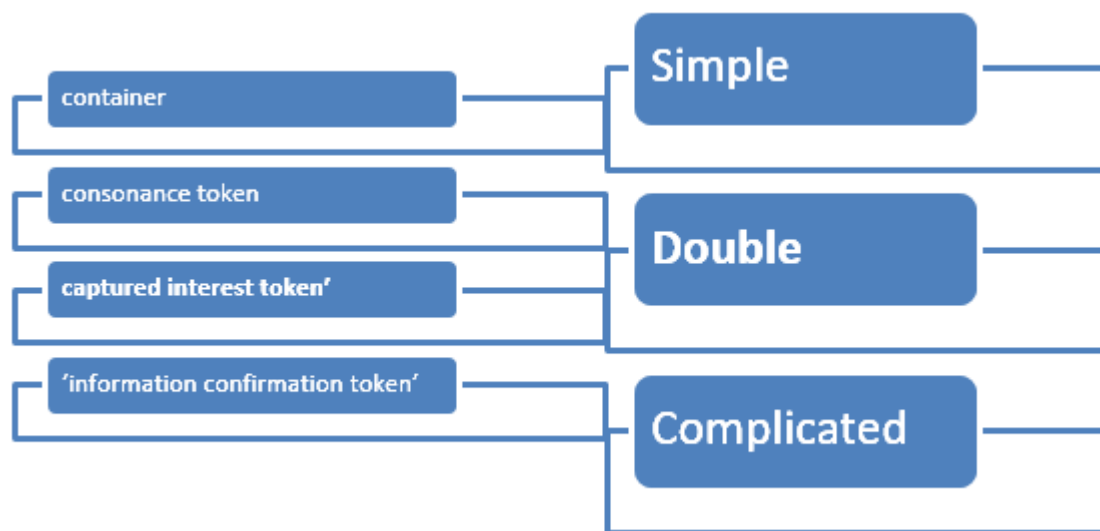
B: COURSE it is 1syll - • that A: can I pour you your TEA

B: YEAH

This example illustrates the situation when yeah in the speaker B's second turn serves as a response to the speaker A's question about pouring the tea. Another important feature should be introduced since it appears in the example above. The last turn of the transcription contains an unrecognised syllable which can be reckoned as an unknown backchannel item since thanks to its shortness it is most probable that the expression does not serve as a turn; the contention being based on the analyser's cultural knowledge. The following example is an instance of a short response serving as a greeting, but not as a backchannel.

6. Models of analysis

The model of analyzing back-channels within the selected data will be an eclectic one, a model that merges both the types as well the functions of these back-channels within the selected discourse. It is based on the studies of (Jackson, 2007), the deals with the main types of back channels, for the exploring the functions of these strategies, the studies and maps of (Hayashi and Hayashi) & (Coulthard) adopted that are three main types of back-channels which can be classed as 'simple,' as in mhm, 'double,' as in yep yeah, or 'complicated,' as in yes very or yes I know. The following figure will show the model that will be adopted by the researcher in analyzing the data :



7. Data of Analysis :

The data will comprise selected scenes of Seinfeld sitcom, different scenes from various parts of the whole series.

8. Analysis of the Data :

1. Simple backchannels

Kramer : Hey! I got the body of taut, preteen, Swedish boy.

Jerry : Ehh, I don't know.

From the first part, a conversation between Jerry and character concerning clothes, specifically Jeans, within the second part of conversation, Jerry uses a very simple backchannel which is (Ehh), simply the function can be considered as a **'information confirmation token'**, **Jerry might show partial agreement with what has Kramer just said, or it is kind of implied agreement.** This kind occurred about (22) times within all the selected scenes.

2. Double Backchannels :

The second example that shows back-channel is though a conversation between the hero of the sitcom (Jerry) and his friend (Elin),

Jerry : Hey why don't you ask Susan George's

Elin : Yeah Yeah why not Susan.

This example from season (4), a talk about third person Jerry's friend (George Kastanza), Elin also uses a back channel here which a Double Backchannel. She uses this kind for the purpose of **'captured interest token'**, **showing interest of what has jerry just said, implied hint from the speaker towards the listener to pursue his speech and keep his main role within the conversation .**

3. Complicated Back- channels.

The third example also said by the two Jerry and Kramer, it is from the second season, a talk in a hospital.

Kramer : Hey. Boy..

Jerry : Hey

Kramer : My friend Bob Sacamano, he came in here for a hernia operation.

Kramer: **oh yes** , a routine surgery.

It is kind of complicated back-channel , the speaker (actor) merges the word (oh) with (yes), the function here is to pursue his speech in a very rapid way, kind of supportive to his speech. These containers are involved with speech to continue the role.

9. Conclusions

This paper dealt with back-channels within discourse, the study comes out with certain conclusions, one of them that backchannels are used in conversation for the purpose for giving others "listeners" to pursue their roles within the speech, the functions vary from that back channels can be used as 'continuers', hence the main function here will be that to maintain the flow of conversation and the desire of the current speaker to continue his turn, while the second function of backchannels can be called interest tokens, the current listener expresses that the information delivered by the current speaker is of considerable interest or value to them. They emphasize that both the listener and the continuers pay attention to what is spoken, with the difference being in the relationship to the said information. Another important function of backchannel within conversation is showing agreement or disagreement on the part of the listener of what have been said by the speaker, or it can be part of irony and mockery for the purpose of diminishing the importance of what is said by the opposite speaker.

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