

Backchannel: A feature of Japanese English

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Reference data:

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This paper presents a detailed observation of backchannel behaviour in face-to-face dyadic English conversations from a World Englishes perspective. Japanese is known for its high frequency of the use of backchannels (*aizuchi* in Japanese), and research has shown that the frequency of backchannels in Japanese is higher than in English and Mandarin Chinese (cf. Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki & Tao, 1996; Maynard, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1997; White, 1989). The current study shows that a similar use of backchannels is observed in the English produced by proficient Japanese English speakers. Specifically, various functions of head movement in backchannel interaction that are employed by Japanese speakers of English are discussed. The author argues that the backchannel behaviour is a distinctive feature of Japanese English which should be properly recognised by Japanese speakers of English and speakers of other varieties of English in order to have successful cross-cultural communication.

本論文は国際英語の観点から、二者間における対面式の英語での会話に見られるあいづち行動を検証する。日本語はあいづちの頻繁な使用で知られており、日本語のあいづちの頻度は英語や中国語よりも多いことが研究でも明らかになっている (cf. Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki & Tao, 1996; Maynard, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1997; White, 1989)。本研究は、英語に堪能な日本人による英語発話の中で、あいづちが日本語における会話と同じように使われていることを示す。特に、日本英語話者があいづち行動の中で使う頭の動きが持つ様々な役割りが議論される。著者はあいづち行動は日本英語の特色であり、潤滑な異文化間コミュニケーションをとるためには日本人や他のスピーカーから正確に理解される必要があると主張する。

LISTENER'S SHORT responses to the speaker in conversation, such as *uh-huh* and *m-hm* in English, and *un* and *ee* in Japanese, are often called "backchannels". Japanese is known for its frequent use of backchannels, known in Japanese as *aizuchi*, in face-to-face conversation (cf. Mizutani, 1985). The frequency of backchannels in Japanese conversation has been shown to be higher than in other languages such as American English (cf. Maynard, 1986, 1990, 1997; White, 1989), British English (Cutrone, 2005) and Mandarin Chinese (Clancy et al., 1996). Furthermore, it has been shown that about 30% of the backchannels in Japanese are initiated by the speaker's head movement (Maynard, 1987, 1990, 1997), while subsequent studies have considered the role of head movement in consecutive backchannel exchanges and synchronised nodding between the speaker and the listener (Kita, 2009; Kita & Ide, 2007).

Despite the attention to *aizuchi* in Japanese, there have been few studies on backchannel behaviour in English spoken by educated Japanese who are proficient in English, which I term



Japanese English. The notable exceptions are experimental studies by Cutrone (2005), Maynard (1987, 1990, 1997) and White (1989).

The term “Japanese English speakers” can mean “Japanese speakers of English”. Throughout the paper, “Japanese English speakers” is used to mean “speakers of a specific variety of English called Japanese English”, in the same sense as “Australian English speakers” means “speakers of Australian English”.

In the current study, backchannel behaviour in Japanese English narrative-style conversation is closely analysed and compared to that in other varieties of English, especially Australian English. The data show that speakers of Japanese English produce backchannels much more frequently than speakers of other varieties of English, and the types of backchannels and the discourse contexts for backchannels are also different. In particular, head movement plays an important role in backchannel behaviour in Japanese English conversation.

What is a “backchannel”?

Backchanneling is a type of listener activity in conversation, and a rough translation *aizuchi* (cf. Mizutani, 1985) is commonly used in Japanese (Kita, 1996). Prototypical examples of backchannels in English are short utterances such as *uh-huh* and *yeah*, and *ee*, *un*, and *hai* in Japanese. Terms such as “continuer” (Schegloff, 1982), “reactive token” (Clancy et al., 1996), “minimal response” (Fishman, 1983), and “response token” (Gardner, 2001) have been used to describe similar listener activities. The term “backchannel”, coined by Yngve (1970), has been widely used in the research of the response activity of listeners in conversation (e.g. Cutrone, 2005; Iwasaki, 1997; Kita & Ide, 2007; Kogure, 2007; Maynard, 1986, 1990, 1997; Oreström, 1983; Ward & Tsukahara, 2000; White, 1989). However, as Gardner (2001) points out, the definitions of backchannels are rather inconsistent across

various studies, and thus there is often limited potential for comparison of results. Furthermore, head movement in face-to-face conversation has often been ignored, and even when it is included, there has not been a consistent coding scheme applied to these non-verbal elements of backchannels.

In the current investigation, a backchannel is defined as follows (see Ike (in preparation) for detailed definition and discussion of backchannels):

1. A backchannel is a short vocal and/or non-vocal utterance by the listener to the content of another interlocutor’s speech. Head movements such as nodding and head shakes are included as long as such movements display one of the backchannel functions. That is, the head movement does not contradict what the speaker is saying, nor answer any particular question.
2. A backchannel does not require the floor. That is, it does not initiate the direction of conversation.
3. Acknowledgement of a backchannel is optional.
4. Main functions of backchannels are categorised as continuer, acknowledgement, agreement, judgement, and emotional reaction.

Following these criteria, backchannel instances are identified in the current investigation.

Data

The conversational data were collected in 2007, in Japan and Australia, and all the interactions were both audio- and video-recorded. Participants were Japanese English speakers with an English teaching background and/or a postgraduate degree in applied linguistics. Of the total of twenty participants in the data collection, eight female Japanese English speakers were selected for a detailed analysis of backchannels to avoid gender

and proficiency related issues. The English speaking proficiency of the Japanese participants was informally assessed by a native Australian English speaker using International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking band descriptors (IELTS, 2009). All the participants were assessed as competent in daily conversation (i.e. higher than band score of six). In addition, three female Australian English speakers were also included as a comparison group.

The data used for analysis are narrative-style dyadic conversations, in which one of the participants narrates a short comedy film to the interlocutor, playing the primary speaker role, and the other participant plays the primary listener role. The participants in each pair knew their conversation partner very well, as they were either friends or close colleagues. The duration of the narratives ranges from 2 minutes 16 seconds to 6 minutes 13 seconds, and the total duration of the data is 46 minutes 6 seconds. All the conversation data were transcribed following the discourse transcription system of Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming and Paolino (1993), with additional coding of head movement and the primary speaker's eye gaze shift (see Appendix).

In addition, the study by Bavelas, Coates and Johnson (2002) is also used where possible for more general comparison between varieties. The conversation data analysed by Bavelas et al. are similar in genre, and are thus considered comparable with the two varieties of English under investigation.

Analysis

A total of 1065 backchannel instances were identified in the data. In this section the frequency, types, and discourse contexts of backchannels in Japanese English are examined. In order to see the distinctiveness of the feature, the frequency and types of backchannels are compared with backchannel usage in other

available varieties of English, Australian English and Canadian English.

Frequency

The frequency of backchannels in Japanese English and Australian English were measured in two ways: average duration and average number of words between backchannels (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of backchannels

	Japanese English	Australian English	Canadian English
Average seconds between backchannel	2.5	3.1	3.5
Average words between backchannels	6.5	12.7	N/A

Japanese English speakers (more precisely, listeners) produce one backchannel every 2.5 seconds on average, while Australian English speakers produce one every 3.1 seconds and Canadian English speakers only average one every 3.5 seconds. Perhaps due to the nature of the conversation genre—that of narrative-style—the average length of time between backchannels in each variety of English is much lower than what has been recorded in previous studies (cf. White, 1989). Nevertheless, it is clear in the current data that Japanese English speakers use backchannels more often than Australian English and Canadian English speakers.

Since the data also show that the speech rate of Japanese English is slower than that of Australian English, the frequency was also compared in terms of the average number of words

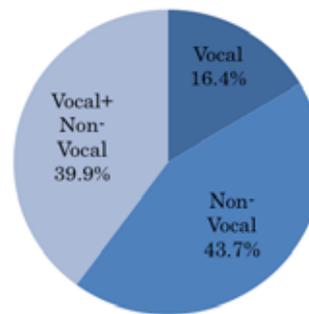
between backchannels. There is a greater difference between Japanese English speakers and Australian English speakers (note that no comparable data is available for Canadian English). Japanese English speakers produce one backchannel every 6.5 words on average, while Australian English speakers produce one every 12.7 words. These findings indicate that Japanese English speakers use almost twice as many backchannels as Australian English speakers for the same amount of information, supporting the findings of earlier studies by Maynard (1986, 1990) and White (1989). The degree of frequency difference may not be accurate given the small sample size in the current study, but it is clear that Japanese English speakers use backchannels more frequently than speakers of other varieties of English.

Types

The backchannels in the current English conversation data are categorised in three broad types: Vocal type, where the backchannel consists of a vocal utterance alone; Non-Vocal type, where the backchannel consists of head movement alone; and Vocal+Non-Vocal type, where the backchannel consists of a vocal utterance accompanied by head movement. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these categories across the two different varieties of English. (No comparable data is available for Canadian English.)

Non-Vocal backchannels are the preferred backchannel type in both varieties of English as more than half of the backchannels in Australian English and nearly 44% of the backchannels in Japanese English are this type. The primary difference between the two varieties lays in the use of vocal backchannels. While in Australian English more than 40% of the backchannels are an independent vocal utterance, a vocal utterance is more likely to be accompanied by head movement in Japanese English. As a result, nearly 40% of the backchannels in Japanese

Japanese English



Australian English

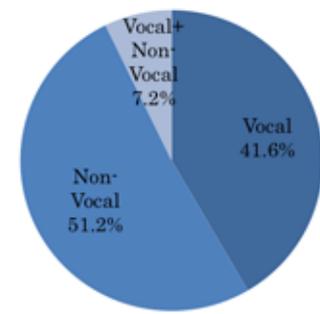


Figure 1. Usage of three broad categories of backchannels

English are Vocal+Non-Vocal type. Put another way, an audio backchannel (Vocal) and a visual backchannel (Non-Vocal) often coexist (Vocal+Non-Vocal) in Japanese English, while in Australian English such instances are rather rare at only 7.2%.

It is noteworthy that almost 85% of the backchannels in Japanese English involve head movement. This suggests that head movement in backchannels in Japanese English is distinctive for its high frequency.

Discourse context

Backchanneling is not a random activity by the listener. Previous studies have found that backchannels are often placed at a grammatical completion point (GCP) and at a noticeable pause (Clancy et al., 1996; Lee & Mukai, 1998; Maynard, 1987, 1990, 1997; White, 1989). Meanwhile, Maynard (1997) found that Japa-

nese backchannels are more frequently initiated by the speaker's head movement than backchannels in American English, and Bavelas et al. (2000, 2002) found that most backchannels in Canadian English are elicited by the speaker's eye gaze shift.

Taking these previous findings into consideration, three discourse contexts for backchannels in Japanese English were examined in the current study: speaker's backchannel cue, grammatical completion point (GCP), and intonation unit (IU) boundary.

Speaker's backchannel cue

As mentioned above, backchannels are found to be used as a response to the speaker's invitation. This means that backchannels are often the second part of an adjacency pair (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), with the backchannel cue being the first part. In the current investigation, the primary speaker's gaze shift and head movement before identified backchannels were marked in order to see if there was such a relationship between the speaker's action and the listener's backchanneling.

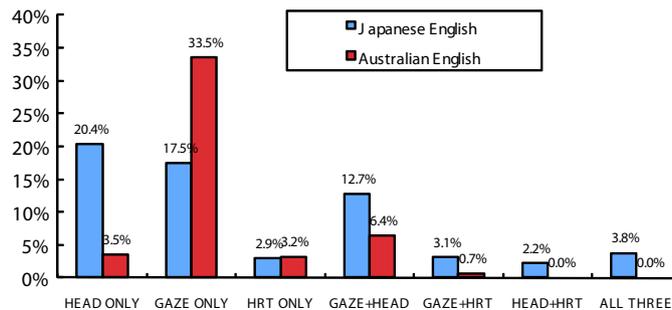


Figure 2. Percentages of backchannels initiated by backchannel cues

Moreover, as studies on Australian English suggest that high rising terminals (HRTs), that is, high rising intonation towards the end of an utterance (e.g. Gardner, 2001; McGregor & Palethorpe, 2008; Fletcher & Harrington, 2001), often elicit listener's minimal responses, HRTs were also marked.

Figure 2 shows that, of all the backchannel instances analyzed, 62.6% in the Japanese English data and 47.3% in the Australian English data were invited by one or more backchannel cues from the primary speaker.

It is clear from Figure 2 that the primary speaker's gaze shift (shown by GAZE ONLY, GAZE+HEAD and GAZE+HRT) is the dominant backchannel cue in Australian English, with 33.5% of backchannels occurring in response to gaze shift alone and overall about 40% of the backchannels being invited by backchannel cues that involve gaze shift. On the other hand, head movement seems to be the most influential backchannel cue in Japanese English, occurring as the sole backchannel cue for 20.4% of the backchannels, and overall in over 39% of the backchannel cues that involve head movement.

Somewhat surprisingly, HRT does not seem to have a significant role as a backchannel cue in either variety of English, with the percentages at around 3% where it is the only backchannel cue, and only at about 4% in Australian English and 12% in Japanese English when all backchannel cues involving HRT are considered.

Grammatical completion point and intonation unit boundary

A grammatical completion point (GCP) is a point where the utterance can be cut off without causing grammatical problems. A typical example is at the end of a sentence, but a sentence can have more than two GCPs if it has multiple clauses.

The percentages of backchannels placed at GCPs are very similar between Japanese English and Australian English: 60.7% and 57.9%, respectively. According to Clancy et al. (1996), only 36.6% of the backchannels in Japanese conversation are placed at a complex transition relevant place (CTRP), and 45.1% of the backchannels are placed at a CTRP in American English conversation. A CTRP is either a GCP, such as the end of a sentence, an IU boundary, which is at the end of a single coherent intonation contour (Du Bois et al., 1993), or a combination of a GCP and an IU. Given the fact that the CTRPs in their study are identified by both IU and GCP, the current study of narrative speech presents a much higher rate of backchannels at GCPs both in Japanese English and Australian English. It should be noted, however, that this may be due to the genre differences and differences in coding scheme between the studies.

There are overlaps between the backchannels at GCPs and backchannels in response to backchannel cues. A backchannel may be elicited by the speaker's backchannel cue, and placed at a GCP, as shown in the example below.

Example 1. Saki & Akina

Line	Speaker	Text
1	AKINA;	(H) he found the,
2		(0.3)
3	AKINA; →HRT	car, \ /
4	→GAZE	*I don't know which is his <car or> **not.
5	SAKI HM; →BC1	*NOD
6	→BC2	**NOD

In the example above, Akina is the primary speaker, describing a scene of a film to Saki, and Saki is the primary listener. In

line 3, Akina gives a backchannel cue (HRT; marked by (\ /)) at the end of her utterance, which is also a GCP. In response, Saki gives a non-vocal backchannel (NOD) in line 5, overlapping with the start of Akina's next utterance (the start of nodding is marked by (*)). Then in line 4, Akina shifts her gaze towards Saki while talking (<car or>), and this invites Saki's second backchannel in line 6, overlapping the end of the utterance, which is the next GCP.

Furthermore, these two points are around the IU boundaries. An intonation unit is a chunk of utterance that is produced in one intonationally inseparable sequence. Saki's first backchannel in line 5 is at an IU boundary after the completion of Akina's IU in line 3, and the second backchannel in line 6 is placed at the end of Akina's next IU in line 4. It is noteworthy that nearly 30% of the backchannels are placed at IU boundaries independent of any backchannel cues.

In sum, the clear pattern that emerges from the data is that backchannels occur at grammatical completion points and intonation unit boundaries, as well as occurring in response to a speaker's backchannel cue. The fact that almost 95% of the backchannels in the Japanese English data occur in at least one of these three discourse contexts strongly argues that backchanneling activity is not only the listener's work, but also a result of collaborative work between the speaker and the listener.

Collaborative backchannel behaviour in Japanese English

The collaboration between the speaker and the listener becomes most evident in a certain type of backchannel behaviour, called a "loop sequence" in studies of Japanese conversations (cf. Iwasaki, 1997; Kita, 2009; Kita & Ide, 2007; Kogure, 2007). Iwasaki defines a "loop sequence" as "a turn-taking pattern consisting of a consecutive backchannel and back-backchannel expres-

sions, produced by different speakers" (Iwasaki, 1997, p. 673), and shows the high frequency of loop sequences in Japanese conversations in comparison to Thai and American English conversations. In such an interaction, there are multiple exchanges of backchannels and short backchannel-like utterances. Kita and Ide (2007) suggest that this stems from the cultural custom of establishing rapport between conversation participants. The current data show that loop sequences are present quite frequently in Japanese English conversations too.

A simple example of a loop sequence is shown below.

Example 2. Saki & Akina

1	SAKI;	and one,	
2		(0.5)	
3		<bounc>ed?	
4	AKINA;	→1 *yeah, /	
5	AKINA HM;	→1 *NOD	}backchannel
6	SAKI;	→2 **m hm, /	}acknowledge-
7	SAKI HM;	→2 **NOD	}ment
8	SAKI;	and the other one, \ /	

In this example there is an exchange of short, backchannel-like utterances between the primary speaker, Saki, and the listener, Akina. In response to Saki's backchannel cue in line 3 (gaze shift and HRT), Akina gives a combined vocal (*yeah*) and non-vocal (NOD) backchannel in lines 4 and 5, marking the start of a loop sequence. Then, before Saki resumes her narrative story, she produces another combined short, backchannel-like utterance in lines 6 and 7. These two short utterances look very similar to each other, but the functions of each utterance are different. While Akina's utterance is a backchannel, showing understanding, Saki's utterance shows acknowledgement of

Akina's backchannel, and is not a backchannel to the content of Akina's utterance.

Head movement plays an important role in such loop sequences too. The next example shows how head movement is used in order not to interrupt the flow of the primary speaker's narrative.

Example 3. Minami & Sayuri

1	MINAMI;	[and h]e was looking around and,	
2	SAYURI;	[um],	
3	MINAMI;	(H) inside the car <under the> car,	
4		* (H) **and then he finally found the baby,	
5	SAYURI HM;	→ *NOD	}backchannel
6	MINAMI HM;	→ **NOD NOD NOD	}acknowledge- ment

In this example, a loop sequence is present in lines 4 to 6, but it does not include any vocal utterance. The primary speaker, Minami, gives a backchannel cue (gaze shift) in line 3, and in line 5, Sayuri responds with a nod, which functions as a backchannel. Minami then acknowledges Sayuri's backchannel by giving three consecutive nods in line 6, while she continues her story (shown in line 4). Unlike the previous example, where there is an audible exchange of utterances and thus the narrative story is briefly interrupted, Minami is able to continue talking while being engaged in the backchannel interaction. The use of head movement both by the speaker and by the listener enables the conversation participants to be actively engaged in the interaction without causing any delay in the content of the story, and, at the same time, to establish rapport with each other.

In addition, a head movement can have more than one function in such loop sequences, as shown in Example 4.

This example shows a lengthy loop sequence in which there are five nodding instances between the speaker, Natsu, and the listener, Tsubaki. The first nod by Tsubaki in line 4, along with a vocal utterance in line 5, acts as a backchannel. Natsu gives back a nod in line 6 while she continues to talk. This second nod functions as an acknowledgement of the previous backchannel. Quickly following this nod, Tsubaki produces another backchannel, the third nod in line 7. Natsu acknowledges Tsubaki's second backchannel with the fourth nod in line 8, which also functions as another backchannel cue, inviting Tsubaki's final nod in line 10.

A head movement, especially when produced by the primary speaker, often shows multi-functionality, which enriches the interaction as well as results in more frequent backchannel instances in Japanese English conversation. An ordinary conversation, where the primary speaker and the primary listener switch between the participants more frequently, would certainly show

much more complex use of head movement and backchannel interaction. Clearly more research needs to be done on the use of backchannels in order to fully understand this distinctive feature of Japanese English.

Conclusion and implications for English teaching

This paper has examined the use of backchannels in Japanese English in terms of frequency and types. Although the data size is relatively small and there certainly needs to be more corpus research, the current data show that, in general, Japanese English speakers use backchannels much more frequently, and that they use combined types of backchannels (Vocal+Non-Vocal) more frequently than speakers of Australian English. It has been shown that almost 95% of the backchannels in Japanese English occur at grammatical completion points, intonation unit boundaries, and/or in response to a speaker's backchannel cue. In addition, the multi-functionality of head movement in a loop sequence in Japanese English enables conversation participants

Example 4. Natsu & Tsubaki

1	NATSU;		(H) and <he tried>, to run away.	
2				
3			*(H [] but] **su ***ddenly, /	
4	TSUBAKI HM;	→1	*NOD	}backchannel
5	TSUBAKI;	→1	[m hm], /	
6	NATSU HM;	→2	**NOD	}acknowledgement
7	TSUBAKI HM;	→3	***NOD	}backchannel
8	NATSU;		****(H) those mother** ⁵ s,	
9	NATSU HM;	→4	****NOD	}acknowledgement & backchannel cue
10	TSUBAKI HM;	→5	* ⁵ NOD	}backchannel
11	NATSU;		began to move.	

to readily engage in the conversation, and thus rapport between the participants can be established effectively.

Backchannel behaviour is an important part of Japanese conversation, where rapport between the speaker and the listener is highly valued. The current study suggests that the same conversation strategy is transferred into English conversation, and it is argued that backchannel behaviour in Japanese English is a distinctive feature that reflects the cultural and social customs of Japanese.

Turning to the use of English as an International Language (EIL), part of being a successful communicator is understanding about the nature and function of distinctive features across different varieties of English. Much attention has been paid to Outer-circle varieties of English (e.g. Kachru, 1985, 1992) in the recent World Englishes movement, but there has been little discussion of the existence and the value of Expanding-circle varieties of English such as Japanese English. It is true that there are always issues of language proficiency of the speakers and the limited functions of English within communities in the Expanding-circle, which makes it difficult to study each variety properly. However, the limited functions of English in these contexts do not mean that a variety cannot or is not developing. As Morizumi (2009) correctly states, if we cannot express the way of thinking or feeling that has been shaped through Japanese culture, Japanese English would not have any distinctive identity, for it would not accurately represent what we think and how we feel. Backchannel behaviour is an example of such cultural identity that has been transferred into Japanese English. As an English educator, it is important to show learners that English is no longer a borrowed language from “native” speakers but a language that is developing as a new variety in each speech community. Properly understanding how we use the language and how others use the language will make learners successful cross-cultural communicators.

In order to provide such a learning environment, each variety must be investigated in detail. Discourse strategies in various speech acts and subtle conversation strategies such as backchannels need to be closely examined in addition to grammatical features, as these non-grammatical features often contain cultural value and social customs to a greater degree.

Bio data

Saya Ike has obtained her MA in Applied Linguistics from University of Melbourne, and is currently working for her PhD at the same university. Her research interests are in varieties of English that are emerging in Second and Foreign language environments. <say_a_kero@hotmail.com>

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Appendix

Reference list of Discourse Transcription Symbols

Meaning		Symbol	Comments
Participation	speaker	NAME;	semicolon following name in CAPS
Sequence	word sequence		left to right order marks temporal sequence (Intonation Unit (IU))
	turn sequence		top to bottom order marks turn sequence
	overlap	[word]	left square brackets aligned vertically
	overlap (backchannel)	*word	Backchannel starts at the marked utterance
Pause	pause, timed	(1.2)	pause duration in seconds
Vocalism	in-breath	(H)	audible inhalation
Unit Boundary	Intonation Unit	<u>LINE</u>	one new line for each Intonation Unit
Boundary Intonation	final	.	intonation signals finality (period)
	continuing	,	intonation signals continuation (comma)
	appeal	?	intonation signals appeal
Contour	rise	/	global rising contour
	fall-rise	\ /	unitary falling-rising contour
Non-vocal event	nodding	NOD	backchannel head nodding
	shaking	SHAKE	backchannel head shaking
	gaze shift	<word>	the speaker shifts gaze towards the listener