Backchannels in Japanese telephone and face-to-face conversation

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Japanese conversation shows frequent use of backchannels compared with its occurrence in English (Maynard 1986). I found that backchannels play a more important role in telephone conversation, where speakers are not able to rely directly on listeners' non-verbal reactions, than do those in face-to-face conversation. The present paper offers an analysis of how the backchannel device is used differently in telephone as opposed to face-to-face conversation, based on videotaped and tape-recorded data

The data in the present study consist of 3 audio taped telephone and 3 videotaped face-to-face conversations. In each conversation, the same respondent related the same story about her own experience to the interlocutors in as much the same manner as possible. The 15-minute segments of each conversation, 90 minutes in total, in which one respondent played the role of the primary listener, were transcribed and used for analysis.

The present paper analyzed the difference between telephone conversation (TC) and face-to-face conversation (FC) in terms of backchannel type, frequency, context such as co-occurrence with overlapping, pause and sentence final particle, *ne*. With respect to type, the most commonly used backchannels are *un* (TC : 62%, FC : 65%), *aa*, (TC : 7%, FC : 13%) and *soo* (TC : 7%, FC : 6%). It is interesting that people use *haa* and *ee*, which are more formal than *aa* and *un* (McGloin 1997), more frequently in TC than in FC. These results show that people use similar type of backchannels in both TC and FC, but may choose a formal backchannel more often when they speak on the phone.

More frequent use of verbal backchnnels is observed in TC than in FC; the ratio is 1.37 times higher than in FC. I found a relationship between respondents' age and frequency of backchannels. That is, in both settings, respondents of the same age group as the speaker used backchannels most frequently, the younger group second, and the older group used the least backchannels among them. Although the total number of

backchannels used in TC and FC is different, the relationship between age and frequency is the same in the two settings.

In certain context, TC and FC differ in their rates of occurrence. First, TC has fewer occurrences of overlapping backchannels than does FC. Listeners in TC respond to pause bounded phrasal units (PPU) with verbal backchannels more frequently than those in FC; in TC, once every 1.69 of PPU, while in FC, once every 2.4 of PPU draws a response. Third, listeners in TC more frequently respond to the final particle *ne* with verbal BC than those in FC; 36.7% of occurrences of *ne* is responded in TC compared to 26.9% in FC. In general, listeners verbally react more sensitively to such contextual cues as PPU in TC than they do in FC. In other words, in TC, speakers expect more frequent feedback from their listeners for successful communication.

The reason why different listening behavior is expected is explained by the setting difference. That is, in TC only verbal responses are available while non-verbal feedback also is available in FC. I have found certain evidence to support this by analyzing head nods in FC. In FC, a total of 465 nods were used as backchannels, of which 265 co-occurred with verbal backchannels and 200 without. Therefore, we can assume that the speaker in FC received a total of 492 (292 + 200) backchannels either verbally or non-verbally. Furthermore, if we include nods in FC, 59% of PPU in TC and 57% of PPU in FC received backchannels. Listeners in FC do react to PPU almost at the same rate as those in TC, but listeners in FC may use both verbal and non-verbal backchannels, while TC listeners can only use verbal backchannels.

The findings in this study are crucial in predicting when listeners utilize backchannels in the two settings, and in understanding how backchannels are actually used. The present study emphasizes the importance of formal instruction in backchannel as conversation strategies by providing evidence of how backchannel use differs in TC and FC.

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