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The functions of active listening responses

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ABSTRACT

In the literature, an interlocutor's active listening responses such as "hmh" are often defined as "continuers", serving to prolong another interlocutor's turn. However, to date, experiments on the effect of non-interruptive active listening responses on a conversational partner's duration of talk have given contradictory results. Studies have shown one interlocutor's active listening responses to correlate sometimes with longer and sometimes with shorter turns of another interlocutor. To investigate this contradiction, the effect of a confederate's active listening on German participants' (N = 32) duration of speech was tested individually in an experiment simulating two significant conversational contexts extracted from the literature: explaining and socializing. The effect of active listening responses on the duration of talk interacted significantly with the conversational context. When socializing, the confederate's active listening led participants to talk longer. Whereas in the explanatory context, this effect was absent, indicating that the function of active listening responses is context-dependent.

1. Introduction

If two or more speakers talk simultaneously in a conversation, all but one soon stop talking. A single speaker holds the floor while the other interlocutors may continue to participate in the conversation as listeners. Listeners are not silent. They commonly utter "hmh", "uh-huh", "yeah", "ok", "right", and the like, without interrupting the speaker. Early on, Malinowski (1923) called this phenomenon "pathic communication". Following Yngve's (1970) extensive treatment of the phenomenon as "backchannels" or "backchannel responses", it became of interest to a plethora of scholars, many of whom chose their own labels for those responses (e.g. Bavelas et al., 2000; Brunner, 1979; Dittmann and Llewellyn, 1968; Krauss et al., 1977; Krauss and Weinheimer, 1966; Kraut et al., 1982).

Some of those labels are primarily descriptive in the sense that they do not presuppose the effect the sounds may have on the speaker's utterances; other labels denote the sounds' function. Examples of descriptive labels are "accompaniment signals" (Kendon, 1967), "verbal listener responses" (Dittmann and Llewellyn, 1968), "minimal responses" (Fishman, 1978), "hearer signals" (Bublitz, 1988), "reactive tokens" (Clancy et al., 1996), "neutral monitoring responses" (Müller, 1996), and "minimal feedback" (Holmes, 1997). Examples of terminology that implies why such sounds are uttered, that is, what function they serve in conversations, are "accompaniment signals" (Kendon, 1967), "acknowledge acts" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982), "newsmakers" (Heritage, 1984), "acknowledgement tokens" (Jefferson, 1984), "receipt tokens" (Atkinson, 1992), and "affirmative responses" (Hirschman, 1994).

In the remainder of this paper, we will label non-turn-interrupting listener's responses such as "hmh," "uh-huh," and "yeah" in English *Active Listening responses (ALs)*. Here, the term is used in a theory-neutral manner, not implying the sounds' function as we regard their function as an open empirical question. Other terminology might imply a theoretical background. The term "back-channel", for example, alludes to the existence of several communicative "channels" (Yngve, 1970), or the label "receipt token", implies that those sounds represent – or might be exchanged for – something else (e.g. a message) that has been received (Atkinson, 1992).

Explicit definitions of ALs largely accord with the effects anticipated in the labels. Examples are "signals of continued attention "(Fries, 1952, p. 49), responses that serve "to display continuing interest" (Zimmerman and West, 1975, p. 108), responses signaling "attention to what the speaker is saying" (Mott and Petrie, 1995, p. 328), or responses "primarily used to indicate to the speaker that the listener is attending to what is being said" (Roger and Nesshoever, 1987, p. 248). Presupposing that the labels and definitions correctly identify the function of ALs, most studies (e.g. Dittmann and Llewellyn, 1968; Duncan, 1974) concentrate on what ALs are a function of, that is under what circumstances they occur in conversations, rather than on what functions ALs may have. However, the controlled experiments that have investigated the function of ALs have generated contradictory results, implying that uncritical presupposition of the sounds' function might be misleading.

Sannomiya et al. (2003) observed listeners' ALs to induce a speaker

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to keep talking, resulting in longer turns, whereas Krauss and Weinheimer (1966) and Ohmori and Doi (2000) found that ALs induced the speaker to stop talking, resulting in shorter turns. Those contradictory results suggest that at least one more variable influences the effect of ALs. ALs have been of continuous research interest in plenty of disciplines, and findings have benefited applied settings. Elucidating why experimental results have been contradictory, would, for example, benefit a plethora of interview settings in qualitative research (Bradburn, 2016; Bryman, 2015; Mann, 2016; Silverman, 2016). Identifying variables that moderate the reinforcing (or punishing) function of ALs could also inform research aiming at improving police interrogations (Kelly et al., 2016), artificial intelligence development (Bevacqua et al., 2010), clinical settings (Bailly et al., 2016; Brinkmann, 2014), media contexts (Ungerer, 2000), as well as in foreign language learning settings (Wolf, 2008). Bangerter and Clark's (2003) interpretations of conversations between two partners who jointly complete puzzle-like tasks, suggest that ALs may have a variety of functions. Here, we conduct a systematic experimental investigation of the interaction between possible additional variables and the functions of ALs. This investigation may potentially make communication in the settings mentioned above more effective.

The purpose of this study is an experimental differentiation of the functions of ALs to illuminate the hitherto puzzling (Sannomiya et al., 2003) problem of why studies of the effect of a listener's ALs on the speaker's duration of speech have produced disparate results. The labels and definitions of ALs discussed above suggest that the conversational context might constitute a variable that modifies the effect of ALs. Thus, the experiment aims at clarifying in which contexts a listener's ALs induce a speaker to keep talking and in which contexts ALs induce discontinuing talk. Our hypothesis guiding the search for those explanatory context variables is informed by the two most recurrent function-implying labels of ALs: "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982) and "receipt tokens" (Atkinson, 1992). Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine in a controlled experiment if and under what circumstances one interlocutor's ALs induce shorter talking (signaling "receipt" (Atkinson, 1992) or "understanding" (as e.g. suggested in Krauss and Weinheimer, 1966; Kraut and Lewis, 1984)), and under which circumstances ALs are "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982) inducing longer talk (signaling that the listener "pays attention" (Mott and Petrie, 1995) and is "interested" (Schegloff, 1982)).

The hypothesis tested in the present study is, given that structurally equivalent[1] ALs can differ in function, frequent ALs should lead to shorter speaker turns when the speaker *explains* something to the listener. Whereas frequent ALs should induce longer speaker turns when the objective of the conversation is to *socialize*. Thus, to test if this hypothesis, which is derived from non-experimental linguistic scholarly work, can explain the empirically evident contrary effects of ALs on duration of talk, the experiment takes a verbal behavior approach (Skinner, 1957), testing the actual function of a listener's ALs on the duration of a speaker's talk in an explanatory situation and in a socializing situation.

[1] There is a large body of research on ALs based on their *structural*, context independent, characteristics. Minimal responses such as "hmh" are assumed to indicate understanding of what has been said so far (Bavelas et al., 2012). "Okay" is regularly implicative of a shift in activity (Drummond and Hopper, 1993) and occurs, for example, in medical interactions to mark movement from one phase of the consultation to another. "Yeah" can indicate alignment with a display of stance and "right" can show the listener is following an argument that has been presented so far (Garrod and Pickering, 2007). However, it remains unclear whether and how the conversational context may influence the function of these structurally identified sounds.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The first independent variable, *situation*, was operationalized by two different instructions given to establish different "conversational contexts". The second independent variable, "presence of listener's ALs", was manipulated by a confederate's rehearsed ALs. Participant's duration of speech was measured as dependent variable.

To test in which conversational contexts one interlocutor's ALs influence how long another interlocutor speaks, a confederate, who pretended to be another participant, was ostensibly assigned the role of a listener. The confederate either remained silent or uttered ALs while a participant who was assigned the role of the speaker, reported upon a video she/he had seen. One participant was tested at a time. Two different instructions preceded the confederate - participant interactions to model different conversational contexts.

Both instructions were identical apart from their last sentences. First, the experimenter orally instructed all participants with the following statement "Please watch one video at a time using the headphones provided. Then, report to 'the other participant' what the video was about." Then, 17 of the participants were further instructed along the way to "just talk as long as you feel like" (condition "socialize"). While the remaining 15 participants were casually told "Please *explain* the content of the video to make her [nodding into the direction of the confederate] *understand* what the video is about" (condition "explain"). All participants were exposed to the confederate's ALs, namely German "aha", "ja" and "hmh", during half of their video reports (trials) and were either tested with instruction "socialize" or instruction "explain". The confederate was silent during half of the trials and during the other half, she uttered as many ALs as seemed possible for her without appearing unnatural.

The rationale behind the present 2 × 2 design testing the effect of ALs within participants, while testing the effect of instruction between participants, was to avoid the hitches that occurred in a pilot study. When testing the procedure in the pilot study, the effects of both levels of the independent variables on talking times were examined between subjects and within subjects. On the one hand, large inter-participant variability in talking times, which was not a function of any measurable variable, occurred, which argued against between-participant testing only. On the other hand, exposing the same participants to both instructions – which was done by asking them to return for another session during which they talked to another confederate (to justify that they had to report upon the same videos again) – also had to be excluded because having reported upon the videos before produced carry-over effects. Moreover, participants indicated that they found it tiring to talk about the videos again. Results from the pilot study also revealed that it was prudent to refrain from showing the same participant a different set of videos from the same series during a second session because the individual videos produced high variability in talking times.

2.2. Participants

Thirty-two native German speakers enrolled in the Bachelor's program in psychology at a University in Germany, participated in exchange for course credit. Course credits could also have been earned in alternative ways. None of them had participated in a study examining verbal behavior before. They were recruited via the institute's mailing list. Participants aged 18–37 years with a mean of 22.5 years. Two thirds of the 32 participants were female. The confederate was a 36-year-old female psychology undergraduate who was trained for her task.