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Journal of Pragmatics 70 (2014) 152–164

journal of PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Addressee backchannels steer narrative development

Jackson Tolins *, Jean E. Fox Tree *

Psychology Department, Social Sciences II, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, United States

Received 29 January 2014; received in revised form 10 June 2014; accepted 16 June 2014

Abstract

Brief addressee responses such as *uh huh*, *oh*, and *wow*, which are called *backchannels*, are typically considered reactive phenomena – devices that respond in various ways to what was just said. Addressees, in providing backchannels, actively shape story telling in spontaneous dialogue (Bavelas et al., 2000). We contrasted generic backchannels with context-sensitive specific backchannels within a collection of face-to-face dialogues and in a narrative completion experiment. The analysis demonstrates that storytellers respond in distinct patterns to the two categories of backchannels. After generic backchannels, they provide discourse-new events. After specific backchannels, they provide elaborative information on previously presented events. Results from an experiment support this analysis, indicating that people reading transcripts of the conversation predict a similar pattern of story continuation following generic versus specific backchannels. We conclude that addressee responses are not only reactive, but proactive and collaborative in the shaping of narrative.

Keywords: Backchannels; Dialogue; Narrative; Addressee; Collaborative language

1. Introduction

When people tell stories to one another, as is common in spontaneous conversation, one conversational partner frequently speaks for extended periods, during which the other interactant can, and often does, provide a variety of comments on the story. These *backchannels* include verbal responses, such as *yeah*, *oh*, *okay*, or *mhm*, and visual displays, such as facial expressions, nods, and gestures (Bavelas and Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve, 1970). Transcript (1) presents an example story telling, in which a student, S2, described a cinema course that he was enrolled in. As S2 described a movie-watching event to his addressee, S1, S1 actively participated in the interaction, providing three instances of verbal backchannels, in lines 7, 10, and 13 (all transcripts are of speech collected in our laboratory and are presented in broad Jeffersonian transcription).

(1)

1	S2:	We watched a movie called Chun King Express last night
2	S1:	Oh ya:. I've-=
3	S2:	=It was crazyness
4	S1:	Did you like it?
5	S2:	It was ki:nd of intense they- they set it up i:n like- how it's like meant

* Corresponding authors. UC, Santa Cruz, 1156 High St., Santa Cruz, CA 95064, United States. Tel.: +1 612 802 9067; fax: +1 831 459 3519.
E-mail addresses: jtolins@ucsc.edu (J. Tolins), foxtree@ucsc.edu (J.E. Fox Tree).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.06.006
0378-2166/

6 to be watched so it was like <36 millimeter> or something like that
7 S1: Mhm
8 S2: And if you do it like that you gotta do like all the different reels and
9 you gotta connect. u:m
10 S1: Mhm
11 S2: I think they like left out a reel or something cause the movie like
12 comple:tely didn't make sense at all [and was all like-
13 S1: [Really

From a unilateral perspective on language processing, in which comprehension and production are seen as distinct and isolated processes, backchannels are likely to be viewed as unnecessary, or at best superfluous. Indeed, a number of studies of backchannels have used optionality as a key definitional criterion (e.g. Ward and Tsukahara, 2000). Typically, research in this vein has focused on backchannels as a means of signaling turn taking goals – specifically, as a means to avoid taking over the floor from the current speaker. This has lead to a view of backchannels as supportive, but not central. They are, in essence, a secondary message, as the label *backchannel* implies. In this conceptualization, backchannels have also been referred to as *reactive tokens* (Clancy et al., 1996), *response tokens* (Gardner, 2001), and *accompaniment signals* (Kendon, 1967). Addressees are seen as passive recipients of information, with backchannels being used to display addressees' acceptance of speakers' planned multi-turn utterances. We will refer to theories of backchannels within these paradigms as *reactive backchannelling theory*.

Another conceptualization of backchannels is that they are central to conversational success, demonstrating the producer's active participation in not just turn taking, but in the development of the speaker's talk. In dialogue focused on joint activities such as referential card tasks or building models, backchannels serve as *project markers* of particular types: *acknowledgement tokens*, *agreement tokens*, or *consent tokens* – each of which makes different comments on the ongoing talk (Bangerter and Clark, 2003). Acknowledgement tokens such as *uh huh* recognize what the speaker said as a contribution to the conversation, agreement tokens such as *right* indicate alignment with the speaker's position, and consent tokens such as *okay* indicate agreement to a joint plan of action. By providing a particular token at a particular point in the interaction, the addressee actively steers the ongoing collaborative task in a particular direction. A speaker's role involves not only talking, but actively monitoring addressee's backchannel communications as a means for altering his or her own talk in a precisely timed manner (Clark and Krych, 2004). In this conceptualization, addressees are active participants in the joint construction of spontaneously developing dialogue, which we will call the *proactive backchannelling theory*.

For the proactive backchannelling theory, addressee behaviors are actively involved in the unfolding activity. At the same time, speakers actively monitor addressees for these responses and adjust their talk accordingly (Clark and Murphy, 1982; Clark and Krych, 2004). This holds true not only for explicitly task-oriented dialogues but narration as well. Storytellers may take up their addressees' backchannels in a number of ways, ratifying and incorporating these responses into the development of the narrative (Norrick, 2010a,b, 2012). When addressee responses are controlled experimentally, the types of backchannels provided to the speaker shape the narrative content (Bavelas et al., 2000). In dyads where addressees did not provide context-specific assessments such as *wow* or nonverbal displays such as grimacing, speakers told qualitatively worse stories with significantly less climactic endings. In a similar study, addressee affective displays, such as smiling or frowning in response to the speaker, modulated the level of abstract language present in the speaker's talk (Beukeboom, 2009). So in both explicitly goal-directed, object-oriented tasks and in narrative story telling, backchannels function beyond simply responding to previous talk or signaling acceptance of a planned multi-utterance speaker turn. Instead, addressee behaviors are involved in the moment-by-moment collaborative production of talk.

The present report extends the study of the proactive role of backchannels in co-telling, focusing on spontaneous narratives occurring in the context of face-to-face conversation. From an inductive and qualitative analysis of conversation, we establish specific hypotheses about the relation between backchannel types and speakers' continuing talk, which we then test using an experimental paradigm. While the influence of backchannels on speaker talk has been previously explored at a more global level of narrative analysis (Bavelas et al., 2000; Beukeboom, 2009), the current in-depth analysis of conversational sequences coupled with experimental findings show how backchannels affect the discourse-level development of the directly subsequent talk.

2. Perspectives on backchannels

The study of backchannel communication strategies has a long history (see e.g. Dittmann and Llewellyn, 1986; Duncan and Fiske, 1977; Fries, 1952; Yngve, 1970). Across this literature, continued research has been motivated by an interest in what types of information backchannels provide. Research on backchannel communication has focused primarily on two aspects, functional distinctions between different categories and the organized placement of backchannels within the sequential conversational structure.