Back-channelling: 
The use of yeah and mm to portray engaged listenership

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Abstract
This paper is concerned with the use of back-channels to portray engaged listenership. Specifically, the aim of the research was to investigate the uses of yeah and mm as back-channelling utterances to show engaged listenership. The research focused on the different back-channel functions that can be identified and the locations at which they occur. Data was analysed from the Griffith Corpus of Spoken Australian English (GCSAusE) and some data collected by the researcher. The key findings suggest that yeah and mm can function as continuers, alignment tokens and agreement tokens but mm seems to be weaker in respect to conversational engagement. Also, the functions of yeah and mm can be ambiguous. Further research should investigate whether cultural or gender issues have an effect on how people portray engaged listenership by back-channelling.

1. Introduction

In real life communication, there is a constant need for speakers to both self-monitor their own speech production and to monitor the reaction of their interlocutors. There is a need for listeners to ensure that their interpretation of the speaker’s communicative intention in fact matches what he wanted to say. And occasionally, there is a need for both speakers and listeners to solve problems as they crop up.

(Faerch 1982)

Back-channelling skills are important for people wishing to be able to function as supportive and engaged listeners in a conversation. There is no doubt that there has been some disagreement among researchers who have focused on back-channels; there has also been some dispute in regard to how to name this pragmatic phenomenon (Drummond 1993b; Gardner 1997, 2001; Jefferson 1983). However, there is agreement that the importance of the listener cannot be forgotten in the literature, as the listener is both a recipient and a co-constructor of interactive talk (Gardner 2001).

This study will first give an insight into the importance of listenership and the ways in which a listener can project effective listenership through back-channels. It will also discuss back-channeling in general. Secondly, it will analyse interactional data from the Griffith Corpus of Spoken Australian English (GCSAusE), along with a personally collected and transcribed conversation. The latter illustrates how the back-channels yeah and mm are used by listeners in conversational discourse to show engaged listenership and at which locations these pragmatic acts occur within a conversation. Finally, it will discuss the findings and submit suggestions about the implications, plus recommendations for further research.
2. Literature Review
In discussing the importance of the listener in a conversation, Zimmermann (1991) claims that the quality of a conversation depends largely on what takes place in the person to whom words are directed. In order to act as an active, supportive and polite listener, one should in general signal an interest in what the speaker is saying (Zimmermann 1991). This notion of politeness in hearer-oriented speech acts has also been addressed by some politeness theorists (Brown 1978). Svennevig (1999) claims that speakers and listeners are being polite by, for example, showing attentiveness in orientation to each other and using self-orientated comments to show alignment. In this research, the term ‘engaged listenership’ will be used to describe the desire of the listener to portray active, supportive and polite listenership. Of course, this term does not ignore the fact that listeners are in fact both speakers and listeners (Farr 2003). These comments or listener responses should be given at times when the other person seems to be welcoming it, and in many cases these times are marked by prosodic features of the speaker’s utterances.

Listener responses are often referred to as acknowledgment tokens (Drummond 1993a) or back-channels (Yngve 1970). This study will use the term ‘back-channels’ or ‘back-channelling’ because the recipient turns do not take the conversational floor. White (1989) explains that the term ‘back-channel’ refers to the ‘main’ channel being the person who is holding the floor - the speaker - and the ‘back’ channel being the addressed recipient of the talk - the listener - who gives information without claiming the floor. Back-channels can be verbal or non-verbal expressions such as the nodding of the head (White 1989) or gazing (Fellegy 1995; Young 2004). Back-channels are typically mono- or bi-syllabic responses of a restricted number of types (Gardner 2001) such as uh-huh, mm, mhm and yeah, and are also known as response tokens (Gardner 2001), minimal responses (Fellegy 1995), reactive tokens (Young 2004) and continuers (Zimmerman 1993). They “control turn-taking, the negotiation of agreement, the signalling of recognition and comprehension, management of interpersonal relations such as control and affiliation, and the expression of emotion, attitude, and affect” (Ward 2006).

The research in back-channelling initially only included non-lexical utterances e.g. mhm, but later included sentence completions, requests for clarification, brief statements, and non-verbal responses (Duncan 1974). It is now common to speak of three categories: non-lexical backchannels, which are vocalic sounds that have little or no referential meaning, such as mhm; phrasal backchannels, which are typical expressions of acknowledgment and assessment, such as really; and substantive backchannels, being turns with referential content such as a repetition or a clarifying question (Iwasaki 1997).

A considerable amount of attention has been given to back-channel utterances in particular: yeah and mm (Drummond 1993a, 1993b; Gardner 1997, 2001; Jefferson 1983). Gardner primarily addresses mm and yeah and notes that “such unobtrusive response tokens as yeah, mm hm, okay and mm turn out to be exquisitely complex, in a way that is still becoming apparent” (2001, p.1). He makes four major distinctions or sub-classes of back-channels: continuers, which function to hand the floor back straight away to the prior speaker (e.g. mm and uh huh); acknowledgements, which claim agreement or comprehension of the prior turn (e.g. mm and yeah); newsmakers, which mark the prior turn as newsworthy; and change-of-activity tokens, which
mark a movement towards a new topic or action in a conversation (e.g. okay and right). It can be seen that according to Gardner (2001), mm can function as both a continuier and an agreement token, whereas the function of yeah is primarily as an agreeing utterance.

This research paper will concentrate on analysing the non-lexical verbal back-channels. In particular, it will look at the two main back-channel utterances, yeah and mm, and their uses in portraying engaged listenership.

3. Analysis of the interactional data

The analysed data in this research project consists primarily of a conversation between two female friends but is supported through examples collected from the GCSAusE. The Conversation Analysis approach was applied in order to detect significant features such as pitch, stress, overlapping, loudness and intonation. It is important to transcribe every single utterance of a conversation, as an absence of these items in the transcription might have great significance in the analysis of the meaning.

The analysis of the interactional data yielded three different functions of back-channelling through the use of yeah and mm: continuers, alignment tokens and agreement tokens, which will now be further discussed.

3.1. Continuers

As stated, the analysis found that yeah and mm can both be used as continuers. The former was seen as the most commonly occurring utterance in the data. In the private conversation the use of yeah occurred 32 times, whereas mm only occurred nine times. The use of yeah as a continuier as can be observed in the following example:

1. A: but just you know you feel like you can open up to 'em and (.)
2. B: yeah
3. A: they understand what (0.5) you’re trying to say like (0.4)
4. [there’s no-
5. B: [yeah and ] they don’t judge you for it=

Two female friends are conversing here about their relationships to their friends. In line 3, Speaker A resumes speaking after she recognizes that Speaker B has uttered a continuier. As can be seen in this example, the utterance yeah is often used after the speaker has not completed an utterance followed by pause. Speaker B recognizes that the story-telling is still in progress and uses yeah as a continuier to show low speakership incipiency (Drummond 1993b) and signals the speaker to continue with the telling in progress.

In the next example, data from the GCSAusE, another example can be seen of yeah being used by the listener as a continuier. J is using yeah as an overlapping utterance in order to show interest in the topic and to signal the speaker to keep going (Fellegy 1995). Also, N’s utterance contains a number of pauses and repetitions, which might signal that N is thinking about what to say. In this respect, J encourages N by using continuers.

1. N: I was like .h ↑this is the first time ever that
2. i’ve only had two weeks to do: (.) an assign[men]t= 
3. J: [yeah:] 
4. N: =oh less than two weeks [now=.
5. J: [yeah: 
6. N: =because they made that [on TU:esda:y, 
7. J: [↑When is she gonna put it up?

The focus will now shift to how listeners portray their listenership through the use of the back-channelling utterance *mm*. In the following example, Speaker B is showing low speakership incipiency by signalling the speaker to continue with the storytelling. As has been seen with the use of *yeah*, the listener uses a continuer after an incomplete utterance followed by a pause. Therefore, Speaker B signals to the other speaker an interest in the storytelling in progress. However, a significant difference is that unlike *yeah*, which somewhat portrays an opinion about an utterance, the use of *mm* seems to be more neutral and less opinionated (Gardner 1997). It could be said that listeners feel that *yeah* signals a greater engagement in the conversation.

1. A: =like .hh and she’s- she’s really sweet she can be really sweet .hh 
2. but she’ll do: things sometimes that (1.3) re:ally make you think (1.2) that 
3. she’s try:ing to: (1.5) push you ↓do: wn or- or (0.5) 
4. B: >^mm< = 
5. A: =um (2.0) >I: don’t kno:w< like just .hh yeah I- I- there was a couple things 
6. that sh:ee’s do:ne wou-

As continuers, both *yeah* and *mm* can be used either after complete utterances or in between pauses or breathing by the speaker. Also, both utterances can be used as an overlap, without giving the impression of being rude. Moreover, overlapping might resemble a higher engagement in listenership (Farr 2003).

### 3.2 Alignment

On the other hand, *yeah* was also used to enact alignment. In the same example, we can observe that Speaker B (line 5) uses *yeah* to signal that she shares the same thought but also continues with more talk in the same turn, to show that the listener is actively listening and contributing to the conversation.

1. A: they understand what (0.5) you’re trying to say like (0.4) [there’s no-] 
2. B: [yeah and ] 
3. they don’t judge you for it=

Here, the listener is aligning with the speaker to signal a shared opinion. However, this example may be ambiguous, as the use of *yeah* could also be seen as a continuer. Even though the listener continues with more talk in the same turn, he/she does not take the floor; rather, the speaker resumes the storytelling.
The use of *mm* can also occur as an aligning back-channel utterance, as can be observed in the next example.

1. A: = courses with um () like women who have been in (1.1) domes- in violent
2. relationships or .hh families that have been violent and stuff and she does
3. like positive assertion and like [non] violent communication and stuff=
4. B: [<>mm<]

Here, the use of *mm* is overlapping the storytelling of the speaker. The listener shows alignment with the speaker without making any judgments. The back-channel utterance *mm* could easily be replaced by *yeah* without changing the meaning. In this respect, this example could be ambiguous, due to the possibility of regarding it as a continuier by the listener.

*Yeah* is more commonly used as an alignment token and can be followed by more talk in the same turn, to show interest by adding a statement. The use of *yeah* in this instance appears to be more common after utterances rather than in overlapping.

3.3 Agreement

A less ambiguous example of the use of *yeah* as a token of agreement can be seen in the next example:

1. A: =but this probably got to do a lot with the superficiality of the
2. relationship? .hhh
3. B: yeah
4. A: because it- because it’s superficial you can have those little superficial meanings like () when you get together every now and ↑the::n =

Here, Speaker A is perhaps requesting the listener to give a token of agreement with A’s current utterance by a question-like rising contour at the end of the utterance, followed by a brief pause in the form of breathing. The listener back-channels to the speaker by agreeing with her before the speaker resumes with the storytelling.

Again, the following example shows the use of *yeah* as an agreement token by J, to signal that J agrees with N’s utterance. However, J does not take the floor and signals N to progress with the storytelling.

1. N: ↑oh was just thinking that uh
2. he’s the guy that used to run:
3. [Guci] =yeah:=
5. N: No [I saw him a couple of times
4. Discussion
The analysis of the interactional data gives an insight into how listeners back-channel by using yeah and mm to portray engaged listenership. The findings of this research article are to some extent cohesive with Gardner’s (2010) findings about yeah and mm. The first significant result is that listeners make more use of yeah as a back-channelling device than mm. One of the reasons for this might be that the use of mm is weaker and more neutral than yeah (Gardner 1997) and that listeners might feel that yeah signals a greater active engagement in the conversation.

Overall, the analysis found three different functions of yeah and mm as a back-channel utterance to signal engaged listenership: continuers, alignment tokens and agreement tokens. Yeah and mm can both function as continuers and can be interchangeable, however, the use of yeah would be less neutral and might signal higher speakership incipiency than mm (Gardner 1997). Also, we have seen that while yeah and mm are both used to express alignment, yeah is used more frequently in this instance. The use of mm as an agreement token has not been found in this data. According to the literature review, an agreement token which is similar in sound and more favourably used in this instance would be mhm, which in meaning would be closer to yeah (Gardner 2001).

Another general but important finding is that the back-channel functions that carry yeah and mm can be ambiguous. There is a fine line between these differences and at times they can be difficult to distinguish. This finding is also consistent with those of many researchers who have dealt with back-channels. Looking only at the term ‘back-channelling’ and its different uses that are apparent in the literature (Gardner 2001), it is understandable that there is a fine line between the functions of back-channelling. In this view, the distinctions between back-channels seem to blend into each other. For example, this research has made a distinction between alignment and agreement, because agreement seems to be more opinionated.

In this respect, one of the limitations of this research might be the quantity of data. It would be of interest to compare results taken from a larger range of data. Also, the use of yeah and mm (including all other back-channel utterances) are, for example, dependent on the speakers’ relationship to each other, as back-channels control the management of interpersonal relations such as control and affiliation, and the expression of emotion, attitude, and affect (Ward 2006). At the very least, there seems to be a shared view about the importance of back-channelling in regard to the management of conversations and, even more importantly, to the importance of engaged listenership in a conversation. In this respect, there is much more to back-channels as a pragmatic act in a linguistic sense. The psychological effects cannot be dismissed and should be incorporated into further research.

It is important to note that this research has only focused on back-channel utterances and their functions in Australian English. Backchannel communication is present in all cultures and languages, but the frequency and the use of utterances may vary (White 1989) and confusion might occur if speakers are unfamiliar with the backchannel utterances of the opposing speaker. However, this is also strongly affected by other factors, including the personalities of the speaker and listener, the context, and the culture (Tannen 1986).
Another factor that might have an effect on showing engaged listenership by back-channelling might be gender (Ward 2006). It is apparent in gender studies that women are said to use these utterances to signal support and engaged listenership, while men use them to signal agreement and inattentiveness (Fellegy 1995). In this respect, further study should incorporate both cultural and gender issues in regard to how one uses back-channelling to portray listenership.

In conclusion, the findings of this research have contributed to the importance of the listener in a conversation. Back-channel utterances are important, as they are one of the few indicators that shed some light on one of the central features in a conversation: the listener.

References


