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ON THE FUNCTIONS OF BACK-CHANNELLING\*

Discourse studies, the survey of the spoken language, have attracted the attention of an increasing number of linguists during the past few decades. Verbal communication has been investigated from various angles by psycholinguists, socioinguists and other scholars dealing with human behaviour, as well as language teachers. In this paper some of the listener's verbal reactions to statements will be examined in natural conversation.

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"A Corpus of English Conversations" edited by Jan Svartvik and Randolph Quirk (1980) has been employed during the research. This is a large collection of non-edited English conversations available in transcriptions as well as on computer tape. The material provided in this paper follows the original except that the markings of certain voice characteristics as "booster" have been removed as the phonetic aspects of back-channelling are out of the scope of this study. Left in, though, are the following symbols:

S.1.2.	text number
A, B, a, c	speakers
> A	speaker identity: speaker continues where he left off
* and +	overlapping talk

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(laughs)		contextual comment
◀ ▶		incomprehensible, unclear utterances
TONE	{ ■	end of tone unit (TU)
UNIT	{ //	onset
[ ] , { }		subordinate TU
NUCLEUS	{ yes	fall
	{ yes	rise
	{ yes	level
STRESS	{ 'yes	normal
	{ •yes	heavy
PAUSE	{ yes • yes	brief pause (of one light syll)
	{ yes - yes	unit pause (of one stress unit or "foot")

A CAPITALIZED WORD is one that carries the stressed tone.

All the utterances are numbered for identification.

## 1. Back-Channels (Being "on the same wavelength")

The co-operative behaviour of the listener is demonstrated by his using feed-back signals to assure the speaker of his sympathy, interest and understanding. Without such devices communication cannot be kept on for long; a passive, silent, or "disobedient" listener (cf. Henne 1978:124) will soon cause a break-down in communication. In his chapter discussing turn-taking, Oreström (1983) distinguishes between two types of utterances, speaking-turns and back-channel items /the latter term is taken from Yngve (1970:574) /. He defines a turn as "the continuous period of time during which a person is talking" (1983:23). According to Henne (1978:127) a speaking turn conveys new information and expands the topic. Back-channel items, on the other hand, in Watzlawick et al's (1967) terms, have a relatively low value on the content level but a relatively high value on the relationship level of communication. They are direct signals of the listener role, indicating that the listener does not claim to have the floor but that he is interested and active in participating and thus contributes to the success of communication.

The views on the exact function of the listener's short, spontaneous reactions like m, mhm, mm, yes, yeah, okay, right, I see, I think you're right, ect. slightly differ with different linguists, and terms also vary with different authors.

Bellack (1966:18-19) speaks of "reacting moves" which, in their status are very special. Their occurrence does not mean that the prior speaker's statement has been replied to. Nor need anyone follow it, or take it that a reply to it is due. Goffman (1981:28) employs the terms "back-channel cues" and "keep-going signals" ( as gee, gosh, wow, hmn, tsk, no! ), while Duncan discusses "auditor backchannel signals" (1973:38-39). Good (1977) calls ms and yeahs "informationally minimal" items considering them as realizations of the "parity principle", which in his terms means that by using such signals the listener demonstrates his role as equal partner rather than his attention. Crystal and Davy (1975), on the other hand, argue that the primary function of backchannels is to reflect the listener's attention.

Coulthard, Montgomery and Brazil (1981:24-25) provide a detailed



(yes) { that's a (good) point/thought  
I think so, too

etc.

In view of Stubbs' analysis we assume that some supports are not merely back-channel items (Stubbs did not use this term here) but imply a borderline between those and agreement, i.e. they indicate a transition between feedback signals (BCH-s) and the listener's opinion i.e. agreement, which has propositional content and that such a contribution of the second speaker (previously being in the role of the listener) is a speaking turn.

In this study we will rely on Oreström's classification of backchannels as well as use Stubbs' discussion of supports and propose some modifications as well as a scale along which the second speaker's utterances can be arranged according to the extent of his intellectual involvement in the first speaker's utterance. Thus we are supposed to arrive at a stage where the second speaker claims for a speaking turn and expresses his agreement with the previous speaker on what he has said.

As exclamations and exclamatory questions, though back-channel items, are of purely emotional character, and as such, cannot be included in the cline offered in Table 1. they will not be discussed here.

For the labels suggested by Stubbs (1983) and Oreström (1983) seem to be ambiguous in the name functional glosses will be used here instead, partly in accordance with Stubbs, to indicate the difference in the function and semantic content of the items in question as well as the different degrees to which the second speaker is involved in the conversation regarding his intellectual and emotional attitude. Table 1. provides the summary of the possible semantic contents of back-channelling as well as the overlapping functions of the linguistic devices used for feedback signals and agreement. The horizontal scale beginning with a broken line and ending in a gradually increasing number of straight lines is meant to imply the strength of support on the part of the listener /=second speaker/.

The more he gets involved intellectually the stronger his support of the previous utterance appears to be.

Table 1.

FUNCTION	CHANNELS	AGREEMENT
	<p>"I'm still listening"</p> <p>"I understand what you've said"</p>	<p>"It's a good point"</p>
Common semantic feature	<p>s u p p o r t</p>	
	<p>Audition markers</p> <p>yes, no quite right Ok, fine ah, ah</p> <p>I see I know</p>	<p>Repetition</p> <p>Sentence Completion</p> <p>Restatement</p> <p>yes no quite</p> <p>That's right That's it That's a point</p> <p>I agree I think you're right</p>

REALIZATION

Common semantic feature

FUNCTION

1.1 "I'm still listening" - Audition markers

The verbal reactions of the listener are at the lowest level on the involvement scale here. These items, undoubtedly, have no propositional content, they just prove that the listener has accepted his auditory role and that he is willing to assure the speaker of his "presence" and interest.

Stubbs labels this move "acknowledge", including three exponents of the category yeah, uhuh, and mm.

Unlike Stubbs' observation that these items have falling tone and mid or low pitch we have found that sometimes, on the contrary, the attentiveness of the listener is marked by rising intonation ( cf. (1) and (2) below ).

(1) A ... 207 //what SEEMS to me 208 an //EQUALLY  
firm 'statement of Chirk POLICY 209 in  
//Carver College NEWLYN 210 in the //summer  
of 'nineteen sixty'-one from Dan 'ROSS \* - \*  
211 //you SEE

B 212 \* // [mm] \*

>A 213 \*\* - \*\* [ə] //which was ALSO <<stating>>  
a firm

B 214 \*\* // YEAH \*\*

S.1.2

(2) A 355//well there have been a couple of - [ə]  
inchoative - [ə : ə] but abortive CALLS -  
356 [ə :m] //from PETERBOROUGH 357 //to  
my HOME 358 \* . \* [ə : ]

B 359 \* // AHA \*

S.1.2

(3) B ... 22 ...//Malet has produced a [ə :m] a  
 REVISED CONSTITUTION 23 // FOR 24 [ɔ̃ 1.7  
 //School of YIDDISH 25 in //which • [ə :m]  
 the main POINT 26 of //my • of //my [ m ] //what  
 triggered the whole thing OFF 27 \* was when \*  
 A 28 \* // YES \*

S.1.2

It must be noted that the same items seem to appear in different functions in conversations, so it seems to be sensible to include them simultaneously into different sub-classes. This holds for aha and yes e.g. We take it that with rising tone they both imply audition /as in (2), (3) above/, whereas with falling tone the same items imply understanding as well as listening and they will be included in 1.2, too.

Such items as uhuh, mm, yeah, etc, may occur in different places within the first speaker's utterance, either at the end of a clause or in the middle of it, but in most cases at the end of tone units. Stubbs claims (1983:190) that they often simply fit into the phonological rhythm of the discourse.

1.2 "I understand what you've just said"

There are some rejoinders by which the listener not only implies his interest but also claims his understanding of the message of the preceding utterance. The semantic feature "support" is stronger here than with "audition markers". In our example (4) speaker 'a' is not only carefully listening but also thinking together with 'A' (see his vocalization [ə : ] in 455), and when 'A' manages to find out the name of the restaurant he confirms it by his supporting utterance [ə h ə ]. The listener's ('a') utterance in 457 seems to be akin in its semantic features to "I know" /1.2.2/ or "I remember now".

(4) A ...451 we // WENT for a meal // AFTERWARDS [ə  
 452 // at • [ə :m] - - - // OH [ə] ---  
 453 // place in • BAKER Street [ə] 454 that's



// RATHER 'similar to the - - Van GOGH.

a 455 [ə :]

A 456 // < Fingal's CAVE >

a 457 [ə h ə]

S.2.12

1.2.1. One-word-utterances

Understanding on the part of the listener is quite often shown by a one-word utterance as yes, right, quite, okay, fine, good, ah, ah, no, etc., but sometimes several items are combined, cf. (5), (6)

(5) B 1199 and they < 'd > be //marking all SORTS of stuff  
 1200 be // cause they 'can't do the stuff  
 \* THEMSELVES 1201 \* I must //watch the TIME  
 Reynard

A 1202 \* < // QUITE > 1203 // { m } \*

S.1.1

(6) B 256 and \* and [ə] \* he //cannot commit

A 257 \* // YES \*

B 256 himself as FAR 258 as //Dan Ross \* would  
 have done had he been in [ m A l ] Dan Ross's  
 DIVISION - \*

A 259 \* [ m . m . m ] // RIGHT 260 // YES \*

S.1.2

Fine and good besides being back-channel items involve some evaluative force (cf.(7) ), which is obviously due to their lexical meaning.

(7) >B ..... 51 \* //this 'is the main < BEDDING >

52 and there's \* pro//vision for

A 53 \* // YES . 54 // YES . 55 // YES \*

>B 52 separate BUDGETING and { // SO on } -

56 so //that's <sup>↘</sup>OK ☐  
 A 57 // GOOD ☐

5.1.2

<sup>↘</sup>Ah and <sup>↘</sup>ahā imply the same as I see (cf.1.2.2)

(8) A 482 and I'm //quite • <sup>↘</sup>SURE {it's <sup>↘</sup>UNSHAKEABLE☐} -  
 484 \* //unshakeable \*  
 B 485 \* << <sup>↘</sup>AH☐ >> \*

5.1.2

(9) A 1 it went off //very very <sup>↘</sup>SMOOTHLY☐ 2 \* << at >> \*  
 B 3 \* // <sup>↘</sup>AHĀ☐ \*

5.1.2

Peculiarly enough no appears in our corpus not only as a device for disagreement and agreement with a statement in the negative but also as a back-channel item:

(10) A 103 (--laughs) //I don't <sup>↘</sup>KNOW what happened ☐  
 104 because while <sup>↘</sup>I'VE been 'job hunting ☐  
 105 I //haven't been in touch with <sup>↘</sup>ANYBODY ☐  
 106 ex//cept those who have got in touch with <sup>↘</sup>ME ☐  
 a 107 yeah -  
 A 108 and //she <sup>↘</sup>HASN'T ☐ •  
 a 109 no

5.2.12

When uttered after a statement containing a negative verb form no can function as a variant of BCH yes. The BCH function of no can be detected in (11) where it is reinforced by BCH quite.

- (11) A 1058 [ə] ob//jected to THIS ■ . 1059 //merely  
on the grounds of ■ APPROPRIATENESS ■  
1060 ■ //not because I I [ə] ■ think ILL \* << OF  
him ■ 1061 I've >> \* //certainly no REASON ■  
B 1062 \* // NO ■ . { // NO ■ } . { // QUITE ■ } \*

S.1.2a

### 1.2.2 Complete Clauses

Two rejoinders belong here: I know and I see. The former suggests "this is no news to me", while the latter connotes "this is news to me" ( cf. items ah and ahā in (8), (9) ).

- (12) A 1179 << well to //start off at >> half COCK ■  
1180 //you KNOW ■ . 1181 \* << //it's [ s ] >> \*  
STÜPID ■ \*\* - \*\*  
B 1182 \* << I //KNOW ■ \* 1183 \*\* I //KNOW ■ >> \*\*

S.1.2a

- (13) a 553 and you're from Lincoln ■ - -  
A 554 //YES ■ 555 I'm //NEAR Lincoln ■ - -  
a 556 near Lincoln  
A 557 //YES 558 I //AM ■ . 559 I //go to  
'school at HORNCastle ■ - .  
a 560 I see .

S.3.5b

### 1.2.3 Repetition

Though not typical of back-channelling, in our corpus, repetition with falling tone has been found a possible device to indicate listening and understanding on the part of the listener.

- (14) B 439 if //I catch the one TWENTY-EIGHT { from  
VIC//TORIA } 440 //that \* gets me in at  
about half past TWO \* 441 <> and >> I // get to  
A 442 \* <> and you'll //then y ou'll //get your >> \*  
> B 441 the \* BANK \* { you //SEE }  
A 443 \* // YES \* . 444 // get to <> the >> BANK  
445 // YES

S.1.1

Partial repetition intensified by of course in (15) shows B's intention to assure A not only about his understanding but also his willingness to support and confirm what A has said. BCN item exactly functions as a preface to B's utterance.

- (15) A 840 because I mean \* \* finalists 'are  
B 841 \* // [ m ] \*  
A 840 [ faɪn ] and they actually \* \* ' DO \* \*  
'finish <> then >>  
B 842 \* \* EX//ACTLY \* \* - 843 of //COURSE they  
'do \* 844 \* << 3 to 4 sylls >>

S.1.4

We propose this example as a borderline case between back-channelling and agreement.

1.2.4 Sentence completion

The listener sometimes thinks together with the current speaker and he is ready to demonstrate that he not only follows and understands what he has just heard but can also find out the oncoming part of the previous utterance. Though not claiming for a turn, he is willing to actively participate. Sentence completion is done through interruption (16), or at the end of a tone unit (17), ignored (17), or accounted (16) by the first speaker.

- (16) B 83 and //curiously enough on that OCCASION ■  
B4 the \* //person \*  
A 85 \* // Steven \* Peel SUPPORTED you ■ .  
B 86 //YES ■ . 87 most //CURIOUS ■

S.1.2

- (17) B 1058 if //you take a statistical analysis of  
the people who PASS ■ 1059 you'll //find that  
it is 'this QUESTION ■ . 1060 \* < which > \* .  
A 1061 \* on //which \* they are . //YES ■  
B 1062 they're //PASSING ■ 1063 on \* // < that > \*  
QUESTION ■

S.1.1

1.2.5 Restatements

The propositional content of the previous statement is sometimes repeated by way of reformulation. The listener is interpreting what he has heard in his own words.

- (18) B 553 [ə :m] that [ðə : ] //they [ə m]  
wanted to DEAL ■ . 554 in //each CASE ■ 555 with  
the //relevant CONFESSOR ■ - 556 //rather than  
'with [ð i] . \* [ð i . ð i] VICE-PRESBYTER ■ \*  
A 557 \* //YES ■ . 558 the //head of the \* INSTITUTION ■  
559 \* //YES ■ \*  
B 560 \* //YES ■ \*

S.1.2

Yes in 557 above can be considered as a BCH item and utterance 559 is of the same function. Not so in the case of yes in 560. It is very likely to express agreement, confirmation provided by speaker 'B'. This function

of the first speaker's reaction to the second speaker's ('A') back-channelling seems to be even more obvious in example (19) below (see utterances 855-9)

(19) A 852 they always  $\ll$  sort of [ə]  $\gg$  PRECEDED  
 their REMARKS ■ 853 with  $\ll$  things  $\gg$  //this  
 sort of [ə m] · LAUTHORITATIVE J ENDOURSEMENT (3)  
 854 you //KNOW ■ · 855 I \* always \*  
 c 856 \*  $\ll$  just [ə m]  $\gg$  \* bit of [ə] phatic - \*\* -  
 CONTENT so to speak ■ \*\*  
 >A 855 \*\* yes it //IS { //ISN'T it ■ } ■ \*\* - 857 //YES ■ ·  
 858 //YES ■ - - 859 //YES ■ - -

### S.1.3

Restatements by the second speakers in the above cases seem to be called forth by the first speakers' hunting for the right word. Similarly to sentence completion restatements themselves may have quite strong elicitive force and stimulate the first speaker to confirm the listener's interpretation (cf. (16) and (19) ). In view of its function the restatement uttered by 'c' in (19) can be regarded as a move similar to checking-up (cf. Stenström 1984:84), where the functional gloss to c's restatement could be "do you mean...?" or "do I understand you correctly?". This assumption is endorsed by the fact that 'A' (855-7) finds it necessary to provide confirmation.

To sum up what the first part of this study has set out, we have discovered that some feedback signals such as certain restatements and sentence completions e.g. seem to go beyond the phatic function of back-channelling. They affect the first speaker's contribution, and as such operate as what we would call pseudo-turns. We also assume that there are borderline cases when back-channel items also function as means of agreement (see partial repetition in (15) and ECH-s in (20) ).

(20) B 1151 [ə :m ] -- << only >> if you //LIKE  
1152 I'll //cover your to //save you  
TROUBLE ■ • 1153 //cover your answer in my  
LETTER <<1 syll>> ■ 1154 or • //write a joint  
\* LETTER \*  
A 1155 \* I'd \* //better I'd //better I'd//  
better WRITE ■ • 1156 << I //shan't feel \* • \*  
I'm ignoring his LETTER ■ >>  
B 1157 \* // YEAH ■ \* 1158 // NO ■ - 1159 << // OK ■ >>

S.1.2a

In the conversation above (20) 'B' reacts by uttering three BCH items (1157-9). Yeah seems to be a feedback signal to A's utterance: "I'd better I'd better I'd better write". No is obviously a response to A's second utterance: "I shan't feel I'm ignoring his letter", while OK expresses understanding of the situation and A's intention as well as B's assent and agreement with A, moreover, B's withdrawal from his previous offer.

2. "I understand what you have said and I think it is a good point"

In Stubbs's (1983:190) terms this category is called 'endorse'. "It is a move which backs up, adds weight to, approves, upholds, chimes in with, ratifies or recognizes as relevant previous talk" (Stubbs (1983:190) ). For characteristic structures see pp24-25.

In our corpus it has been found that certain BCH items are capable of indicating the listener's (= second speaker's) attitude to identify himself with the previous speaker's view. These items either appear independently, as in (21), (22), or accompany the second speaker's remark as a preface (24) or as a frame, i.e. in final position, functioning as a signal of the end of the turn, cf. (25), (26).

(21) B 153 //this I think { OSCAR } feels ALSO ■ 154 << or >>  
\* //so \* I GATHERED ■ 155 + from + • //ALEC ■

156 on the //PI<sup>h</sup>ŋŋ  
 A 157 \*//YES \* 158 + //YES \*

S.1.2

The function of 'yes' is rather ambiguous in some utterances, but it seems to be reasonable to suggest a functional gloss to YES (157) as follows: "I agree" or "I think so, too". This can be explained by the fact that YES (157) is uttered right after B's supposition that "Oscar feels also", it is a prompt reaction most likely to display A's agreement.

The same seems to hold for A's reaction in (22). By his utterance he not only provides feedback to B but also implies his agreement to B's supposition.

(22) B 403 [m] // [hm] - - 404 //well I suppose  
 Roy can make a good case ANYHOW 405 \* (-laughs)\*  
 A 406 \* // yes \* QUITE - -

S.1.1

'No' may function as a BCH item indicating agreement to a statement in negative form.

(23) B 535 I've //not \* discussed this with {HIEM}  
 at ALL - 536 << 2to 3 sylls >> \*  
 A 537 \* // NO . 538 // NO . 539 // NO . 540 // NO -  
 541 [ʔʔ] // NO 542 I \* //wouldn't be at ALL  
 surprised 543 I //think you're RIGHT \* THERE  
 544 << 4 to 5 sylls >> \*

S.1.2

In (23) above the listener (A) after expressing his intensive interest and understanding by saying 'no' several times takes his turn and gives way to his opinion and agreement with B. 'No' repeated five



(27) (talking about a hieroglyph)

A 150 [ə:m] //well it was <sup>↑</sup>SOMETHING

151 //probably \* <sup>↑</sup>E \*

c 152 \* S \* equals -

A 153 //equals S log <sup>↑</sup>W

c 154 that's it [ m ] - -

S.1.11

Examples (23) - (27) can hardly be called pure back-channelling. We argue here that they represent the final category in a cline of utterances manifesting the listener's (= second speaker) interest and support, and express the largest possible extent of the second speaker's support, as well as involvement in the conversation. As in the case of back-channel items 'yes', 'quite' and 'no' in examples (21), (22) and (23) the overlapping of functions is not undetectable: we shall consider them as representatives of transition from back-channelling to expressing opinion on the part of the second speaker.

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times in A's reaction seems to indicate transition from back-channelling to turn-taking. By the time he utters the last 'no' in 541 he has taken a turn. This last item of the repetition, in my interpretation, functions as preface to A's turn, which is quite obvious regarding the fact that it is preceded by a somewhat longer pause and vocalization [ə] so much characteristic of the beginning of new turns when the speaker is hesitating or thinking about what is to come. Endorsement on the side of the second speaker is often made explicit verbally by phrases like "I agree" (24), "that's right" (25), "that's a point" (26), "that's it" (27), etc.

- (24) B 1167 [ə : ] you've //heard probably. we're  
very O<sup>Y</sup>F<sup>T</sup>E<sup>N</sup> ■ 1168 be //devilled M<sup>O</sup>R<sup>E</sup> ■ 1169 //by  
what the candidates [ə] //more by : difficulties  
of M<sup>A</sup>R<sup>K</sup>I<sup>N</sup>G ■ 1172 than //what we ought to set the  
C<sup>A</sup>N<sup>D</sup>I<sup>D</sup>A<sup>T</sup>E<sup>S</sup> { you //K<sup>N</sup>O<sup>W</sup> ■ } ■  
A 1171 //Y<sup>E</sup>S 1172 \* // that's << a D<sup>E</sup>V<sup>I</sup>L ■ I A/ /G<sup>R</sup>E<sup>E</sup> ■ >> \*

S.1.1

- (25) A 307 //then put forward as something D<sup>E</sup>S<sup>I</sup>R<sup>A</sup>B<sup>L</sup>E ■  
309 \* • [ə : ] to << for us \* to >> C<sup>O</sup>N//S<sup>O</sup>L<sup>I</sup>D<sup>A</sup>T<sup>E</sup> ■ .  
B 310 \* // H<sup>A</sup>I's right ■ - 311 // Y<sup>E</sup>S ■ \* 312 // Y<sup>E</sup>A<sup>H</sup> ■

S.1.2

- (26) A 385 but [ frə ] but from //that point of view  
it would be O<sup>U</sup>D ■ 386 because you're going  
from << the >> H<sup>E</sup>A<sup>D</sup> { of a D<sup>E</sup>//P<sup>A</sup>R<sup>T</sup>M<sup>E</sup>N<sup>T</sup> ■ } ■ 387 to  
//N<sup>O</sup>N-H<sup>E</sup>A<sup>D</sup> { of << a >> D<sup>E</sup>//P<sup>A</sup>R<sup>T</sup>M<sup>E</sup>N<sup>T</sup> ■ } ■  
B 388 well // that's << a >> P<sup>O</sup>I<sup>N</sup>T ■ 389 as //W<sup>E</sup>L<sup>L</sup> ■  
390 //Y<sup>E</sup>S ■

S.1.1

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