BACK-CHANNEL BEHAVIOR IN THAI AND AMERICAN CASUAL TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract

Although back-channel behavior is universal, its usage and use vary from one culture to another. The purpose of the study was to investigate the similarities and differences in back-channel behavior by Thais and Americans in terms of frequency, types, locations and functions. The data consisted of 10 hours of telephone discourse collected from 60 same-sex dyads, 30 American and 30 Thai pairs. The data revealed that Thais employed back channels more frequently than Americans did but the difference existed only between the male groups. The overwhelming majority of back channels in both groups fell within the short utterance category. The location where back channels occurred the most in both Thai and American English was at clausal units. The study also showed that in both groups the most frequently displayed function of back channel was understanding.

Keywords : conversational analysis, discourse analysis, verbal communication

Introduction

Back-channel behavior is a verbal or nonverbal response provided by the listener to show his/her participation and/or understanding. The term 'back channel' implies that in conversations there are two channels operating at the same time. The 'main channel' is the channel through which the speaker or the person who holds the floor sends messages. The 'back channel', on the other hand, is the one over which the listener provides useful information without taking the floor (White, 1989). Although back-channel behavior seems to be an insignificant communicative behavior, misunderstandings can occur if it is misused, as shown in the following excerpt.

....a tired husband returns from the office, sinks gratefully into his easy chair and opens the evening paper to the sports page. His nagging wife, however, wishes to unburden herself of the accumulated troubles of the day and begins an extended monologue. Routinely, she leaves a slot of silence and he dutifully inserts 'yes, dear', until, dimly aware that all is not as it appears to be, she says, 'Are you ignoring me?' and he replies 'Yes, dear'. (Schegloff, 1972, p. 379)

Types of Back Channels

Based on Duncan & Fiske (1977) and Kubota (1991), back channels can be divided into five types:

1. Short utterances: Included in this group are expressions, such as 'I know', 'yes', 'right', 'okay', 'fine', 'oh', 'gosh', 'wow', 'No way' and the like.

2. Sentence completions: The listener completes a sentence that the speaker has begun when he has some idea of or can think of what the speaker

is going to say.

    A: It actually goes from 170 billions

    B: *To 270?*

    A: To 270 billions per year.

3. Short questions: While listening the listener sometimes asks the speaker to repeat what he fails to hear or to reconfirm what he has heard. These questions are often shortened by omitting repeated matter.

    A: I have to work tomorrow.

    B: *Tomorrow?*

4. Brief restatements: The listener restates an idea that has just come into the mind of the listener. The idea is related to the speaker's preceding thought. This type also includes instances when the listener repeats or summarizes what the speaker has just said.

    A: Yeah, he's nice.

    B: *Yeah, he's nice.*

5. Laughter

Locations of Back Channels

According to White (1986), back-channel responses can occur at the following locations.

1. Hesitation pauses: Hesitation pauses are pauses through which a speaker self interrupts.

    A: And she has never seen snow except on the tip of

    B: *Uh-huh*

    A: What is it..Mauna Loa?

2. Filled pauses: Sometimes the speaker self interrupts using filled pauses which are pauses filled with 'uh', 'um', 'like' and the like.

    A: He wanted to do that weird like

    B: *Yeah*

    A: I don't know the weird thing.

3. Conjunctions: Conjunctions include 'and', 'but', 'so', 'or', and 'then' in different positions within a speaker's talk.

    A: I'm getting to the point where I don't think I really need my parents'y'know? I don't need their money that much...to keep me under their control and stuff..so...

    B: *Yeah...that's hard.*

4. Clausal units: Back channels can occur at clausal units.

    A: It's very nice there not like Waikiki.

    B: *Yeah.*

5. Y'know? and Right?

    A: I talked to Mike today for a little while, right?

    B: *yeah*

6. Speech overlap: The listener sometimes sends back channels while the speaker is speaking. This happens when the speaker does not provide the listener with an opportunity to insert back channels or when the listener sends a delayed back-channel response or when the listener does not wait until the speaker pauses.

    A: Yeah which I don't know, if that means he's out of military, or military

    B: [Uh-huh

    A: [is paying for him to school, or...]

Functions of Back Channels

Based on Maynard (1986) and Ohira (1994), the functions of back channels can be categorized as follows.

1. Continuer: Continuer is justified when the listener forsakes the opportunity to take a turn in order for the speaker to finish the idea being conveyed.

    A: Then

    B: *Huh?*

    A: He went to school.

2. Display of understanding: This function is identified when the speaker says something unknown to the listener or when confirmation of the listener's understanding is necessary.

    A: Many people will go there like Mary, John.

    B: *Uh-huh*

3. Agreement: When the speaker talks about ideas or known facts, the listener provides a back channel to show agreement with the speaker. Agreement is mostly observed at the end of turn or near the semantic completion point.

    A: It's a psychological matter.

    B: *Right right right.*

4. Request for clarification: The listener asks the speaker to repeat what he fails to hear or to reconfirm what he has heard.

    A: Except it's extremely slow.

    B: *Extremely slow?*

5. Display of emotional response: This function

is identified when the listener sends exclamatory expressions, indicating surprise or disagreement, or laughs.

> A: I'm planning on it.
> B: *Cool*
> A: I turned in twenty-five pages to Gordon before I left.
> B: *Oh great*

Although back-channel behavior seems to be universal, actual types, functions and operations of back channels tend to be different from one speech community to another (Maynard, 1986). Thus, contrastive analysis of interaction in different speech communities is needed. This study attempts to provide some insights into the norms and patterns of back-channel responses in Thai. In addition, back-channel strategies in Thai were compared with those in American English.

Materials and Methods

The data consisted of 10 hours of telephone discourse collected from 60 same-sex dyads, 30 American and 30 Thai pairs. The Thai subjects were undergraduate students from Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University and Thammasart University whereas the American subjects were undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The subjects were asked to record a 20-minute telephone conversation with a friend of his or her own nationality and gender. To maintain some level of naturalness, they were instructed to talk about anything.

The first five minutes of the conversations were ignored to avoid the effect of subjects' being aware that their conversations were recorded. Only the next ten minutes of each conversation were transcribed. One native

speaker of English and one native speaker of Thai checked the accuracy of the transcribed English and Thai conversations. The researcher inspected the verbatim transcripts and employed the definition, types, locations and functions of back channels specified to produce an initial classification.

To establish interrater reliability, one-minute of transcribed discourse was randomly selected from each conversation. These protocols were independently scored by the researcher, one Thai rater, and one American rater. Simple percentages of agreement were as follows: Thai data, 93.9% and American data, 90.5%.

Results and Discussion

Frequency of Back Channels

The overall frequency count for the back channels across the 30 ten-minute interactions of the Thai speakers was 1,781. In the American English data back-channel behavior occurred significantly less frequently, a total of 1,473 times. However, the difference was found between the male groups, not between the female ones. The mean of the total number of back channels employed by Thai males was 31.57 compared to 21.27 for American males. (Table 1)

Since the differences in back-channel frequencies only existed for males, the greater number of back channels produced by Thai males might have been a result of their interactional behavior. In looking at the contexts which influenced the production of back channels, some interesting style variations were found. Great numbers of back channels were found in pairs in which the interactional style was narrative. As suggested by Blau (1986), narratives or conversational turns for which

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Frequencies of Back Channels by Groups and Sex.

	Thai	American	Mean of Sex
Female	27.80 (6.88)	27.83 (9.90)	27.82 (8.38)
Male	31.57 (12.12)	21.27 (9.84)	26.42 (12.04)
Mean of Group	29.68 (9.87)	24.55 (10.26)	

Figures in brackets are standard deviation values.

successive main channels are produced by a single interlocutor are favoring contexts for back channels. The speaker, during the course of narrative production, looks for listener responses as she proceeds with the next utterance. The narrative interactional style is illustrated in the following exchange.

A: You can get software well you can get software that doubles your ram via your hard drive
B: *Right*
A: It's called the ram doubler
B: *Uh-huh*
A: And basically just a computer program that just utilizes some of your hard drive space and to a ram
B: *Ah ha*
A: So I mean that y'know just for your information
B: *Yeah*

Types of Back Channels

Interestingly, for both Thais and Americans the ranking of types of back channels with respect to frequency was the same. The overwhelming majority of back channels in both languages fell within the short utterance category. The second and third most used categories were laughter and short questions. Brief restatements and sentence completions were the fourth and last choices, respectively. (Table 2)

The most frequently used short utterances in Thai included 'อ๋อ', 'อือม์', 'เหรอ' whereas the most typical ones in English were 'aha', 'uh huh', 'mhm' and 'yeah'. Both Thais and Americans used short utterances as the most frequent type of back channel because short utterances "are simple in their content and that they do not in themselves involve the speaker's claim to the floor" (Kendon,

1967, p. 43). In addition, short utterances, when inserted at any provided pause, are more appropriate than longer back channels including short questions, brief restatements, and sentence completions because longer back channels might overlap with the speaker's utterance or interfere with the speaker's planning of the next utterance.

Laughter is one type of back channel which displays consensus among interlocutors (Jefferson, 1979). When a speaker laughs, it means that s/he understands the message and signals his/her personal response as well. Laughter is also used to build rapport during the interaction. Laughter between two can indicate a dyadic bond. Failure to respond to a speaker's utterance or laughter can be considered a lack of attention or disagreement. Although laughter sometimes overlaps with the speaker's speech or laughter, this overlap is not considered an interruption.

Of all types of back channels, sentence completions were employed with the least frequency in both language groups. Infrequent use of sentence completions in both groups was probably due to the fact that it was not easy for a listener to predict what the speaker was going to say. S/he needed to have some ideas about the issue in order to be able to complete the statement. Therefore, s/he just waited for the speaker to finish the sentence or sent short utterances to encourage the speaker to continue. In the following interchange, the speaker self interrupted because he could not think of the word to finish the sentence. The auditor at the same time had some idea about what the speaker was going to say. Therefore, he completed the sentence for the speaker.

A: It's like, it's like...
B: *It's like you wanna get in or not.*

Table 2. Means of Types of Back Channels by Group.

Type of Back Channels	Thai	American
Short Utterance	23.17	18.35
Laughter	3.12	3.60
Short Question	2.32	2.03
Brief Restatement	0.87	0.33
Sentence Completion	0.22	0.23

A: Yeah.

A: *(laugh)* Oh god.

Locations of Back Channels

The findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the number of back channels located after clausal units, with Thais sending feedback at this location more often than Americans did. As White (1986) suggested, the listener sent back channels at clausal boundaries to acknowledge the receipt of the underlying proposition, clause by clause and to signal comprehension of information presented by the speaker.

A: เออแล้วอาจารย์ ที่สำคัญคืออาจารย์เขาไม่ให้ไป

B: อือ

A: อาจารย์เขาบอกว่าอะไรวะ แบบเฟอะฟะ กิจ
　　กรรมเฟอะฟะ

B: เออวะ

In the excerpt above, the first back-channel token 'อือ' was used by the listener to show understanding, and the second back-channel response 'เออวะ' indicated B's strong agreement with A.(Table 3)

It was also found that back channels occurred after 'y'know?' And 'Right?' which are equivalent to 'ใช่มะ', 'ใช่ปะ' in Thai. It is not surprising that listeners sent back channels after these tokens. As suggested by Brown (1977), a speaker used 'y'know?' at the end of an utterance to check if the listener was following his argument. That is, 'y'know?' and 'right?' are essentially requests for confirmation, either that the listener agrees with the speaker's statement, has understood it, or merely is continuing to listen attentively to the speaker.

Few back channels were found to occur at filled pauses, including 'um', 'uh', 'like' in English and 'แบบ', 'แบบว่า' in Thai. This is probably because the listener did not want to distract the speaker's thinking by sending back channels at this location. As noted by Maclay & Osgood (1959), filled pauses may be used by the speaker to keep control of the floor while he is planning the immediate constituent to complete the utterance. Beattie & Barnard (1979) also found that participants in telephone conversation employed filled pauses as a mean to maintain a turn. Nevertheless, if the listener could predict what

Table 3. Means of Locations of Back Channels by Group.

Location of Back Channels	Thai	American
Clausal Unit	26.52	19.83
Y'know?,Right?	1.10	1.05
Speech Overlap	0.85	1.83
Hesitation Pause	1.07	0.72
Conjunction	0.05	0.85
Filled Pause	0.10	0.27

the speaker was going to say, s/he might complete the utterance by him/herself. Consider the following excerpt for example.

A: No he's just he's just seven foot one
　　when every other guy was like...

B: *Six eight*

A: Six eight yeah

Functions of Back Channels

For both groups, the most frequently displayed function of back channel was understanding. In

the following exchange, A told B about the size of a plant. B signaled his understanding by sending back channels after each idea unit. As suggested by Heritage (1984), short utterances like 'mm' function like a change-state-token, signaling that the listener has changed status from that of an uninformed participant to an informed one.

A: คราวที่แล้วมันขนาดดินสอเอง คราวนี้มันจะเกิน
　　'Last time the tree was pencil length. This time it's taller.'

B: อือม์

'Uh-huh'
A: แต่จะไม่ จะไม่เกินฟุต
'But it's not taller than a foot.'
B: อืือม์
'Uh-huh'

However, a researcher must be aware that listeners do not have to really understand a message. As noted by Maynard (1990), back channels merely express the listener's claims of understanding. (Table 4)

The analyses revealed a statistically difference in the use of back channels to display emotional response, with Americans displaying emotional response when employing back channels more often than Thais did. The main reason accounting for this is the topic of discourse. American speakers seemed to talk about something new or surprising to the listeners. As a result, the listeners used back channels to express their emotional response.

Table 4. Means of Functions of Back Channels by Group.

Function of Back Channels	Thai	American
Understanding	17.58	11.82
Emotional Response	5.08	7.48
Agreement	2.55	2.98
Request for Clarificaiton	3.27	1.92
Continuer	1.20	0.35

The following excerpt illustrates the use of back channels to show emotional response.

> A: Does Chuck know that you've been attracted to him?
> B: Yeah I think. I brought a note to him in class.
> A: *No way.*

Based on the findings, Americans appeared to have different conversational devices to show their emotional response. One was the use of assessments which were evaluative utterances, including 'good' and 'cool' (Heritage, 1984). Another two devices to signal emotional response included newsmarks and 'oh' receipts (Nofsinger, 1991). Newsmarks were utterances "that specifically treat a prior turn's talk as news for the recipient rather than merely informative" (Heritage, 1984, p. 340). They included expressions of surprise, such as 'my goodness' and partial repeats of the prior statement like 'Oh, did she?', 'Oh really?'.

Now let us look at the use of back channels for agreement. American females in the present study were found to use back channels to show agreement more frequently than American males though the difference was not statistically significant. The difference might be attributable to the difference in the interactional

style as suggested by Aries (1987). The interactional style of the American women tended to be more social-emotional, supportive and encouraging than the men's style.

Another function of back channels is request for clarification. Examining questions which were used to respond to a statement, we found that there were two types of questions: short questions and echo questions. Take the following excerpts for instance.

> A: That's okay 'cause I'll just ride my bike there to the union if you guys don't wanna go.
> B: Oh. It's pasta bar.
> A: *It's what?*
> B: It's pasta bar.

The excerpt above illustrates the use of short question which is shortened by omitting repeated matter. It is used when the listener is not clear in some respect. In the following interaction, the speaker told the listener about a girl he was dating. This type of response question is called an echo question (Leech & Svartvik, 1994). The listener used an echo question to ask the speaker to reconfirm what he had just heard probably because he did not believe his ears.

> A: She is pretty good actually I mean
> B: *She was pretty good?*

A: She was all right, y'know?

Pedagogical Implications

Since there are both similarities and differences in the use of back channels between Thais and Americans, the results of the study have pedagogical implications concerning cross-cultural pragmatics and communication as follows. First of all, language learners of Thai or American English should be encouraged to focus on interactive aspects of conversation in addition to the language of conversation. The teacher can use textbooks, instructional videos or audio-tapes of authentic conversations so that language learners become familiar with the process of interaction. Teachers can also arrange an activity for the students to compare back-channels across cultures. In addition, learners should learn how to use different types of back channels depending on the context. For instance, in a particular situation, assessments such as 'oh lovely', 'that's interesting', might be more appropriate than single short utterances because assessments provide the speakers with a referential message without acting as a claim for a turn. Learners can start by using short and simple back channels. Later, complicated ones such as short questions or brief restatements can be introduced and practiced. The timing of the insertion of back channels is also important because frequent use of back channels is not as important as proper use of back channels. Back channels should be sent at appropriate junctures without interfering with the continuation of talk. Last but not least, textbooks concerning conversational skills in English or Thai should explain what back-channel behavior is and how to use those back channels in an interaction.

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