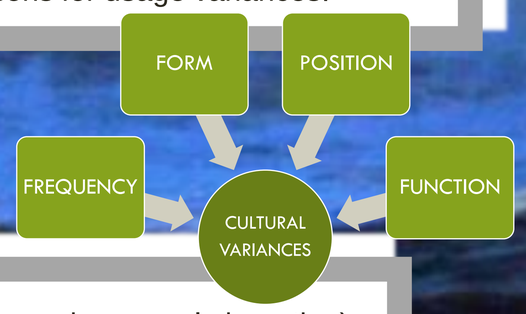
BACKCHANNEL CUES between

Native & Non-Native English Speakers: A Discourse Analysis

PURPOSE

To identify and analyze backchannel usage between native and non-native English speakers in social communication using discourse analysis procedures and to suggest reasons for usage variances.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Does backchannel usage during English discourse differ between native Spanish speakers and native English speakers, and if so, what is the nature of these differences (e.g. frequency, position, function, form)?

Does the data suggest that factors such as L1-L2 transfer, English proficiency, power imbalance, or linguistic competency account for these differences and warrant further research?

BACKCHANNEL CRITERIA

- Unsolicited Utterance
- Comprehension Signal
- Participation Signal
- Dialogue Procession Cue
- Little Semantic Meaning
- Optional & Independent

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Backchannel form variances below the word level (e.g. pharyngeal phonation) may impact backchannel functions and shape discourse.
- Backchannel cues are a subcategory of interpersonal discourse markers which acknowledge prior speech, indicate participation, and signal discourse continuation.
- L2 fluency of ESOL students may be impacted by teachers' usage of backchannel cues, and the effects of this usage may fluctuate with varying cultural values regarding backchannel cueing.
- Backchannel cues are optional and independent of sentence structure.
- Backchannel knowledge often transfers from a high frequency language to a low frequency language; however, this rule may not apply if the transfer significantly violates cultural norms of politeness.
- Backchannel function may transfer from L1 to L2.
- Backchannel frequency for Germans and Chinese is relatively low, Americans moderate, and Spanish, French, and Japanese high.
- Backchannel usage may be dependent on both listener and speaker discourse factors such as prosodic cues (e.g. low pitch or rate change).
- Backchannel cultural variances include form, position, frequency, and function.

METHODOLOGY

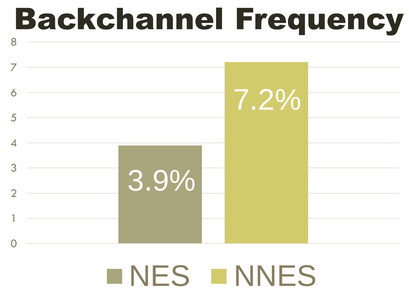
Oral dialogues between a non-advanced, non-native English speaker (NNES) and a native English speaker (NES) were recorded during after-school mentoring/tutoring sessions. An established, ongoing relationship between the participants promoted casual, natural, and low-anxiety conditions. However, a significant power imbalance in terms of age, authority, English proficiency, and education level was present. To further promote natural conversation, no prompts were used. Conversation spontaneously flowed and centered on school related topics. The final analysis included eighteen minutes of recorded dialogue, transcribed and analyzed for backchannel usage. Contrastive analysis focused primarily on backchannel frequency, form, position, and function.

PARTICIPANTS

NES	NNES
Monolingual American with Spanish & French Background	Adolescent High-school ELL
Forty-four Years Old	Migrated to U.S. 2-3 Years Prior
Graduate Level Education	Native Spanish-speaker from Central America

RESULTS

Backchannel Frequency



Per word volume, the NNES tended to use backchannel cues much more frequently than the NES, an 85 percent increase. This data may be representative of an L1-L2 knowledge transfer since research suggests that Spanish speakers tend to use backchannel cues at a higher frequency than American native-English speakers. The increased usage could also represent a coping mechanism for new language learners who are striving to increase comprehension between speakers of different languages. More research could confirm whether this frequency trend is consistent with similar participants and whether backchanneling usage decreases with English proficiency.

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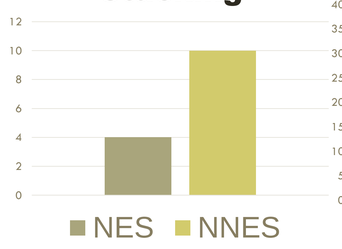
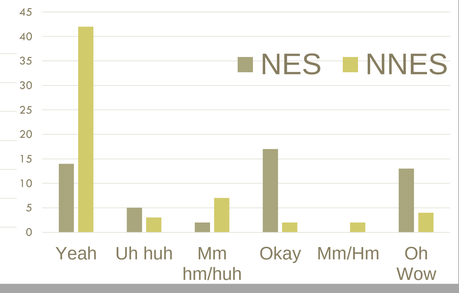
Backchannel Stacking

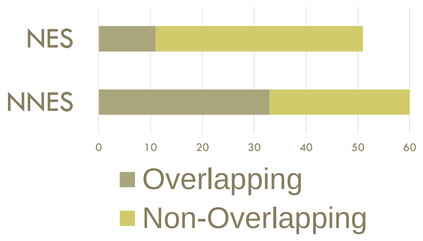


The NNES tended to rely heavily on *yeah* while the NES preferred to use *okay* and *oh wow*. The data suggests that L1-L2 transfer may have occurred since research shows that *sí* is by far the most common backchannel cue used by Spanish speakers. The NNES was also 2.5 times more likely to stack cues suggesting more L1 transfer.

Backchannel Form



Backchannel Position



Backchannel position if often highly culturally dependent. While some cultures value overlapping speech as a signal of participation and comprehension, other cultures may view overlapping speech as interruptive or even rude. The NNES tended to engage in considerably more overlapping speech than the NES, with approximately half of the backchannel cues being overlapped. Only about a quarter of the NES's backchannel cues were overlapping. This evidence warrants more research in overlapping practices of American English speakers and Spanish speakers to determine if ESOL instruction should account for these cultural differences.

Backchannel Function

Though backchannel cues carry very little meaning, the six forms could be grouped semantically. Noticeably, the NES used a higher percentage of backchannels for simple acknowledgement while the NNES tended to use more affirmative cues. Research has revealed serious miscommunications, sometimes even resulting in legal action, when affirmative cues are inappropriately used.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

- L2 fluency may be impacted by ESOL teachers' usage of backchannel cues as students' cultural values regarding backchannel cueing varies. ESOL instructors should consider their own use of backchannels with multicultural students, understanding that fluency may be improved when usage correlates with students' L1 usage.
- ESOL instructors should become familiar with backchanneling rules (e.g. frequency, form, function, position, prosodic features, and signaling) to support language learners' development of backchannel competence within L2 cultural norms. For example, teaching students overlapping speech patterns can improve competence.
- Lack of linguistic competence in backchannel usage can easily result in speaker mischaracterization. Absence or misuse within cultural norms is often recognizable and can result in distressed communication. Direct instruction in backchannel usage can improve intercultural relationships and thus increase overall L2 exposure.

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