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PREVIEW

BACKCHANNEL RESPONSES AS CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES IN
BILINGUAL SPEAKERS' CONVERSATIONS

by

Bettina M. Heinz

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication Studies & Theatre Arts
(Communication Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Diane Badzinski

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DISSERTATION TITLE

BACKCHANNEL RESPONSES AS CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES IN

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**BACKCHANNEL RESPONSES AS CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES IN
BILINGUAL SPEAKERS' CONVERSATIONS**

Bettina Marianne Heinz, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1998

Chair: Professor Diane M. Badzinski

Backchannel responses appear to be a universal behavior, but specific backchannel behaviors are particular to language and culture. As such, they offer themselves to test central assumptions of Communication Accommodation Theory, in particular, assumptions relating to the processes of convergence and divergence.

Researchers have identified linguistic and cultural differences in regard to the frequency, type, and placement of backchannel responses. This study examines differences in American English and German backchannel behavior and investigates backchannel behavior in interactions between monolingual and bilingual Germans.

Study 1 documents significant differences in the frequency and placement of backchannel responses among monolingual German speakers and monolingual American English speakers. Results show that Germans produce fewer backchannel responses and place these responses less frequently in overlapping positions than American speakers.

Study 2 finds that native Germans who have become equally proficient in American English produce a higher number of backchannel responses and more often in overlapping positions than monolingual Germans when they speak to other native Germans in German. This pragmatic interference, for which some evidence exists in cross-linguistic studies, contradicts basic assumptions of Communication Accommodation Theory.

Implications of inappropriate backchannel behavior could include reduced communication efficiency, negative interpersonal perception, and the potential for miscommunication. Implications of these findings for Communication Accommodation Theory and future research on backchannel responses are discussed. (Keywords: communication accommodation theory, German, intercultural, interpersonal, pragmatics)

PREVIEW

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Chapter I

General Introduction

Conversational management between two individuals lies at the heart of the study of interpersonal communication. Scholars consider conversation "the most immediate and determinative context of communication" (Dore, 1979, p. 360). Interpersonal communication researchers continue to study everyday conversations in dyadic encounters (e.g. Duck, 1994; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Kellermann, 1991; Williams & Giles, 1996).

Interlocutors can choose from a plethora of conversational management strategies to reach their conversational goals (Berger & Jordan, 1992; Daly & Wiemann, 1994), to maintain, stop, or prolong a conversation (Drummond & Hopper, 1993a; Levinson, 1983), or to express certain attitudes, beliefs (Motley & Reeder, 1995), or emotions (Aune, Buller & Aune, 1996).

One of these strategic devices is the use of backchannel responses. In almost any conversation, the interlocutors will reach a point where one speaker will "take the floor" and the other will focus on listening. Through verbal and nonverbal messages, such as "uh huh" or head nods, those listening to another's telling indicate that they are listening, that they acknowledge that the other speaker has the floor, and that

they want the interaction to continue in this vein (Drummond & Hopper, 1993a).

Yngve (1970), who coined the term "backchannel," describes the types of messages he considers to be such backchannel responses:

If you are listening on the long distance telephone and stop sending the expected short reassuring messages, the other person, when he has the turn, will soon come to a grinding halt and say something like, 'Hello, are you still there?' And the husband who buries his head in the newspaper, and carefully listens to what his wife has to say, while he neglects to send any messages in the back channel, will soon find himself accused of not paying attention to what his wife is saying although he has heard and understood her every word. (p. 568).

This notion of backchannel behavior is, presumably, a universal feature of human communication (Levinson, 1983). This type of feedback, which is essential to a successful conversation, may be explained by Grice's Cooperative Principle. According to Grice (1971), a set of underlying assumptions guides human participation in conversations. Levinson (1983) summarizes Grice's Cooperative Principle in the following manner: "[M]ake your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 101). Grice's point was not that humans always

enact these principles, but that these principles are adhered to at some level (Levinson, 1983). Providing backchannel responses can therefore be conceptualized as a required contribution when one interlocutor is telling a story or holding the floor and the other wants this alignment to continue for the time being.

Although the behavior itself may fall under a universal principle, specific backchannel behaviors are particular to languages and cultures. Research indicates linguistic and cultural differences in regard to the frequency, type, and functions of backchannel responses (e.g., Beach & Lindstrom, 1992; Maynard, 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Oreström, 1983; Philips, 1983).

Bilingual individuals have access to two language systems and/or cultures, and therefore also to two backchannel systems. But the exact relationship of backchannel responses to language, culture, and communication has yet to be specified (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996; Kubota, 1991). Access to two language systems sometimes leads to the phenomenon of codeswitching in bilingual speakers, that is, the use of two languages in one conversation. Traditionally, researchers have examined codeswitching in reference to lexical items. However, conversational strategies are part of language- and culture-specific conversational training. Therefore, bilingual speakers have access to two sets of conversational

strategies. A particularly interesting question, and one that has rarely been investigated, is what happens to individuals who have become equally or more proficient in a second language when they talk to others of their first culture in their first language? Do they exhibit the backchannel behaviors of their first culture, their second culture, or a mix thereof?

The question is grounded in applied concerns. As a native German who has been living in the United States for more than a decade, I maintain continuous contact with two cultures: the U.S. culture in which I live and work, and the native German culture in which I participate through mail, e-mail, phone calls, and visits. Over the years, accompanied by a progressive immersion in my second language, I have become aware of an intriguing phenomenon related to interpersonal communication between myself and other members of my native culture. In dyadic interactions, I sometimes follow U.S. English (hereafter referred to as English) pragmatic conventions while speaking German.

One could consider this phenomenon, if documented, simply a matter of second-language dominance, lack of first-language competency, or second-to-first language transfer. However, to relegate this observation to linguistic processes, and to thus place it into the realm of linguistic studies would mean to ignore its implications for interpersonal communication.

Many individuals who move to another culture and become immersed in that culture's language and communicative practices maintain contact with their families and friends through telephone conversations. Since participants in telephone conversations lack access to nonverbal information other than prosodic (i.e., related to the rhythmic and intonational aspects of language) features, utterances become even more salient. Providing appropriate backchannel responses, as Yngve (1970) observes, is crucial to the success of a telephone conversation, and the interactant is likely to make a number of attributions about the other's interest level, attention, and acknowledgment based on his or her backchannel responses.

This observation gains more weight in light of a few studies (Clancy et al., 1996; Tao & Thompson, 1991) suggesting that those who become equally or more proficient in a second language may use backchannel responses from their second language in first-language conversations.

This may seem counterintuitive. One might suspect that these interlocutors would still use their first-language backchannels when they talk to other first-culture members. Accommodation theory, a widely tested theory about the motivations and perceptions associated with individuals' communicative choices, predicts that, in general, individuals will accommodate others by approximating their communicative pattern, if they want to express solidarity or liking,

enhance communication efficiency, or get social approval (Chen & Cegala, 1994). The choice of linguistically inappropriate backchannels would constitute divergence, which is generally negatively evaluated. It would seem likely that when bilinguals speak to family, friends, or acquaintances in their first language, they would seek to converge speech patterns to stress the bond they share.

Intriguingly, some studies show that perhaps this is not the case. Empirical evidence for such a phenomenon stems mostly from linguistic studies. Rarely have communication scholars addressed such a transfer of pragmatic language features, although both the applications and the promise of theory-building seem rewarding. An empirical investigation into this phenomenon guided by accommodation theory thus might help explain the phenomenon, update the theory, or both.

Thesis Statement

This dissertation uses accommodation theory as a general framework for examining backchannel responses and integrates selected research in discourse and conversation analysis into this framework. The purpose of this dissertation is to test and develop accommodation theory by examining backchannel responses in first-language interactions of bilingual individuals. My review of the literature leads me to hypothesize that monolingual native German speakers will

produce backchannel responses different in frequency, form, and type from those produced by monolingual native English speakers. In a direct test of accommodation theory, I further hypothesize that native German speakers who have become balanced bilingual speakers in English will accommodate by producing backchannel responses following English rather than German patterns in conversations with other Germans. In other words, these speakers would maintain or diverge, rather than converge, in their communication behavior. Such behavior would contradict basic predictions of accommodation theory.

I have chosen to contrast German and American backchannel behaviors for several reasons. First, Germany and the United States are important political, military, and economical partners. A large number of individuals is bilingual in regard to these two languages, and thus stands to directly benefit from any results. Similarly, miscommunication could lead to serious political, diplomatic, or economic tensions. Second, German language and communication scholars have built a strong body of research on pragmatic conversational features, often in comparison to English pragmatic conversational features. Third, I am familiar with both languages and cultures and thus have the expertise to conduct this study. Finally, a body of research exists on American backchannel behavior and select other languages, but to date no study apparently has compared American and German backchannel responses.

Rationale

Why should it matter to communication scholars if bilingual speakers use second-language backchannel responses in their first-language interactions? This study is warranted by four areas of applied and theoretical concern, including the number of individuals affected by it; theoretical contributions to interpersonal communication, communication studies at large and other disciplines; and applied considerations.

First, efforts to understand the relationship between language, culture, and communication seem increasingly important to the residents of the "global village." Human migration continues to occur at an accelerating pace across the globe (Weiss, 1992), and more and more people speak a first, second, and perhaps third language. Worldwide, the use of two or more languages within one community is the rule rather than the exception (Gal, 1979). Global markets and telecommunications link individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Weiss, 1992). Interethnic marriage, interethnic adoptions, transmigration, and international study are on the rise. Recent figures show a total of 419,000 international students in the United States (Lamphere, 1993). These trends increase the possibility that individuals may find themselves using different languages in separate conversational encounters. The number of bilingual and

trilingual individuals is growing worldwide. In the United States, according to the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 32 million people were bilingual (English and another language) in 1993, with that number expected to grow. Although the number of bilingual speakers worldwide can only be estimated, such estimates usually suggest that one half or more than half of the world's population is bilingual (Kandolf, 1997).

Second, conversational strategies, such as backchannel selections, are not merely linguistic features of an interaction. They are also aspects of the communicative event, in this case, of the dyadic interpersonal communication taking place. A communication perspective can provide the complex framework needed to explain specific language processes as they manifest themselves in interpersonal interactions. Scholars from various disciplines have been examining language, culture, and communication processes for decades. Linguists have studied language acquisition, bilingualism, and language competence. Psychologists have studied identity formation. Sociologists have examined group identity formation and language socialization. Social psychologists, sociolinguists, and psycholinguists have approached the study of these processes from more specifically defined parameters of investigation. Yet, most of these research efforts do not investigate the occurrence of these speech events in the communicative,

situated context in which they actually occur. Giles and Wiemann (1993) point to the growing need to study the communicative dimensions of language use and note that in the 1990 *Handbook of Language and Social Psychology*, more than one-half of the 27 chapters were written by communication scholars. This dissertation's interpersonal communication approach to the study of language processes in bilingual speakers helps bridge knowledge from various disciplines. The documentation of an apparently divergent use of conversational strategies should aid in the testing and development of accommodation theory. If the theory is accurate, then the need of bilingual speakers to diverge from their family and friends in conversations needs to be explored. If the theory's predictions do not apply to this communication event, then the theory needs to be examined closer and revised.

Third, the study of pragmatic features of conversations is timely (Levinson, 1983). Pragmatics is a healthily growing area of study in interpersonal communication research as evidenced by the popularity of journals, textbooks, and scholarly publications in this area. For example, a 1996 discussion of backchannel behaviors dominated the lang-use (lang-use@vm.templed.edu) discussion list moderated by Anita Pomerantz at Temple University for several weeks. Although the contribution of a single dissertation can only be minute, it can add a building block in the search for universal

conversational principles. Any empirical evidence of universal communication principles, of course, would contribute much to the knowledge of the human species itself. By building on Chen and Cegala's (1994) work on testing micro- and macro-level linguistic and discourse indices, this study directly contributes to current extensions of accommodation theory. Specifically, this study will show whether backchannel behavior can serve as an index of accommodative behavior in interactions.

Fourth, a number of direct pedagogical and political applications may arise from this study. The study of how language, culture, and communication patterns intersect in interpersonal communication appears very important in light of policy and legal choices educators, administrators, and legislators have to make. A better understanding of these processes may enable policy-makers to ground their decisions in science rather than political clout or popular sentiment when making decisions related to bilingual education, designation of official national languages, parents' rights in regard to children's first languages, and funding of English as a Second Language programs.

Determination of specific linguistic and cultural differences in backchannel responses would be helpful in second-language programs, cultural adaptation workshops, and inter- or cross-cultural communication pedagogy. Such pragmatic principles are traditionally not incorporated into

linguistic or cultural training, despite their obvious importance for conversational success. Once a body of research has been established, scholars may be able to identify problems in cross-cultural communication or any dyadic encounter involving individuals who are fluent in more than one language. By specifically addressing the communicative strategies exhibited by those who have become proficient in a second language, this dissertation addresses the interpersonal needs of a group of individuals whose needs are rarely considered in research rationale since the focus of most studies is on adapting individuals to host cultures. This research bias leaves out of sight, however, that those individuals continue to have ties with intimates, family, and friends in their native culture and will continue to communicate with them in their first language.

Approach

This dissertation examines backchannel behavior from a social scientific approach to interpersonal communication. The robust and empirically validated premises of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), as developed by Giles and colleagues over the past 20 years (Giles & Coupland, 1991; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973; Williams & Giles, 1996) offer a sound framework for interpreting previous research and guiding future studies on dyadic interactions involving language and culture. CAT is a major