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# BACKCHANNELLING IN PERSIAN: A STUDY OF DIFFERENT TYPES AND FREQUENCY OF BACKCHANNEL RESPONSE

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**Abstract**

In a conversation, the listener isn't totally silent; He or she produces some vocalizations to show his or her attentiveness, without asking for the turn. These vocalizations which are called "backchannel" have different types and functions in different cultures and languages. This study aims to determine the type and frequency of backchannel responses used in Persian language based on Maynard's classification. The corpus of the study is 2 hours of conversation, recorded in the dormitory of a university in Tehran. The result of the study shows the most frequent words used as backchannel responses and the functional type of different forms of backchannel response.

**Keywords:** *Backchannel response, Persian, frquency.*

## Introduction

Logically in a dialogue, one of the interlocutors holds the floor or turn and has the chance to speak, but the other listener or listeners are not totally silent; they produce occasional vocalization or short utterances in Order to show their attentiveness and help the conversation go on. By these vocalizations, the secondary speaker doesn't mean to interrupt the primary speaker, or in technical terms "take the floor", on the other hand he or she wants the primary speaker to keep holding the floor. Yngve (1970) defines backchannel as "the responses and reactions that a listener gives or the secondary speaker gives when the primary speaker is speaking.

Back channeling has got a crucial role in communication. Though it is present in all languages, the frequency, types and context of back channel using varies among different languages and cultures. Thus, In order to communicate effectively, knowledge of the norms of backchanneling is necessary; otherwise, there might be some miscommunication among the speaker and the listener. To attain this goal, thorough descriptions must be given as to the forms and norms of backchanneling in different languages and cultures. Although there might be individual differences concerning use of back channels, the researchers must look for unified patterns across languages. This study focuses on the use of backchanneling in Persian, aiming to determine type and frequency of backchanneling in students' talk.

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**Review of Literature**

Backchanneling or BC is a universal feature of human languages but it differs across languages and cultures (Heinz, 2003). Backchanneling can be verbal or non-verbal. Non-verbal backchannrls such as laughter, nodding, gaze are also used by the interlocutors but the focus of this paper is on verbal backchannels. First studies on this phenomenon were conducted by Fries (1952, Sharifi and Azadmanesh, 2011). He analyzed a corpus of Telephone conversations in which he distinguished a set of "listener responses". The term "back channel" was coined by Yngve (1970, p.568, ibid). Extensive research has been carried out ever since in order to analyze back channeling across various languages and cultures (e.g. Beach and Lindstorm, 1992; Maynard, 1986, 1989, 1990a, b; Oresrom, 1983; Philips, 1983, Heinz, 2003). Backchannels may be verbal or non-verbal, ranging from nods to 30-second utterances, still the researchers are split as to consider them turns or not (ibid) . Also there has been a debate over the terms used to describe this phenomenon. Scheglof (1982) classified non-lexical terms such as *uh huh* based on their interactive function ( Sardegna and Molle, 2010) . He used this term such utternances allow the primary speaker to continue after the harer exhibits his understanding that an extended unit of talk will follow. Ward and Tsukahara (2000) prefer the term "backchannel feedback" and Clancy et al. (1996) call them "backchannel signals" (ibid). They also use the term "reactive expressions" to indicate tokens such as *really, yeah, okay, sure, man.*

Heinz (2003) compared backchannel responses of Grmans, Americans and German-American bilinguals. In this study participants'use of backchannels was documented by recording conversations. Frequency analysis, a standard means of analysis in backchannel studies (e.g., Clancy et al, 1996; Kubota, 1991; White, 1989, Heinz, 2003). This study was conducted to establish a total number of backchannel responses generated per participant and number of specific backchannel forms generated by participant. One of the aims of this study was to determine the potential differences in the backchannel use among Germans and Americans. The results of the study showed that Germans produce fewer backchannel responses and place these responses less frequently in overlapping positions than American speakers do. Also, the native Germans who become proficient in English produce more backchannels and more often overlapping with than do monolingual Germans.

Backchannel behavior helps to maintain a successful conversation. According to the communication Accommodation Theory, developed by Giles and colleagues (1973) (Heinz, 2003). Individuals regulate their communication behavior in a way that evokes listener approval. In other words the interlocutors want to express solidarity or linking. Such accommodation is made possible by BC behavior.

Use of backchannels in Japanese has been studied by many researchers (White, 1989; Maynard, 1997; Cutrone, 2005, Cutrone, 2010). These studies have shown that Japanese EFL speakers' backchanneling behaviors differs to that of native English speakers in many respects, and these differences sometimes lead to miscommunication, negative perceptions and stereotyping. Cutrone (2010), presents a general account of the backchannel tendencies of native English speakers for the purpose of assisting Japanese L2 English learners. Four dimensions of backchanneling were described as follows: frequency, variability, discourse contexts favoring backchannels, and form and function. The results of this syudy shows that Japanese English speakers tend to use backchannels considerably more compared to native speakers. In terms of variety Jeapanese speaker used a smaller variety backchannels than native English speaker.

Maynard (1997), White (1989) and Cutrone, 2010) have identified grammatical completion points and pauses (especially occurring simultaneously) as primary discourse contexts favoring backchannels in American English. Another issue regarding backchannel use in Japanese is the interest of Japanese people in creating simultaneous talk with the primary speaker, while this feature isnot present in American's speech. In terms of forms and functions, Heinz lists six functions, following Maynard (1997): (1) continuer, (2) understanding, (3) support and empathy, (4) agreement, (5) emotive, and (6) minor additions. In this study, this categorization has been used to analyze Persian backchanneling. These functions have been listed below with specific forms for each one (Cutrone, 2010).

**Continuers**

This type of backchannel intends to show the primary speaker that the secondary speaker is listening carefully and the preimary speaker can continue. The following example demontrates use of this type of backchannels functions:

*A: I want to take this course*
*B: Mm hmm*
*A: Next term*

According to Gardner (1998) ( Cutrone, 2010), items such as Mm hm and Uh huh with a fall rising intonation contour are prototypical continuer. In persian, "Uhum" and "ahan" belong to this category.

**Display of understanding of content**

In such cases, the secondary speaker intends to show that he or she understands the primary speaker. The following is an example of such cases (Cutrone,2010) :

*A: you have to go two blocks B: Mm hm*
*A: then turn left at the video store B: Uh huh*
*A: It's a few stores down on the right side B: I see*
*A: You can't miss it*

In this example the secondary speaker by *Mm hm* and *Uh huh* which are continuers, wants to show the the primary speaker that he wants him/her to continue, and when B understands the direction he shows his understanding by the BC *I see.*

**Agreement**

In this type of BC, the secondary speaker reacts to questions posed by the primary speaker.

*A: You said you sow the accident yourself B: (Nodding)*
*C: I knew it.*

Nodding reaction of Speaker B is like an affirmative answer to the question A poses. Ito (2007) ( Cutrone 2010) Includes statements like *I think so too* and *That's exactly true* in this category. Other examples of this function of BC are *You're right, How true, I agree, Right* and *Yeah* (Blundel et al. 1982, Cutrone 2010).

**Support and empathy toward the speaker's judgment**

In such cases the listener or the secondary speaker responds by showing support or empathy to an evaluation made by the primary speaker. For example (Cutrone, 2010) :

*A: Hw quit his job again*
*B: It's going to be hard to find a new one*
A: *Yeah*
*B: He'll have to apply...*

Here, A feels the need to provide support to B's evaluation *It's going to be hard to find a new one.* That's why A uttered the backchannel *Yeah.*

**Strong emotional response**

This is when the secodary speaker answers the primary speaker with something more than a continuer or support. The following is an example of this type of BC:

*A: I scored 3 goals in the game on last Sunday B: Excellent!*
*A: I hope I can keep progressing*

*WoW* and *great* are other backchannels belonging to this category (Goodwin, 1986, Cutrone,2010).

**Minor addition or request for information**

In such cases, the secondary speaker adds something to what the primary speaker has just said or completes whats he has said or asks for clarification. The following is an example of this function:
*A: John will likely be back in April B: Really.*
*A: Yeah, the government is reducing troops in the gulf.*

In this example (Cutrone 2010) speaker B requests more information regarding the issue by saying really with a rising intonation.

The number of studies focusing on Persian backchanelling is few. Sharifi and Azadmanesh (2011) have investigated the speaker's cues inviting backchannel responses in spontaneous Persian conversations. This study concerns lexical, grammatical, prosodic and semantic factors which are involved in backchanneling in the Persian conversations. They have focused on the factors involved in eliciting backchannel response from the secondary speakers. For example the lexical item "khob" (ok) with a specific intonation (rising) at the end of an utterance has been identified in this study as a clue for the secondary speaker to step in and produce a backchannel response, or the so-called pseudo-tag questions like "Mage naw" have been mentioned by the others as another lexical factor which aims to elicit a backchannel response. They also argue for the elicitation of backchannel responses at the points of grammatical completion. In this study, out of 23 BC (backchannel) recorded by the researchers, 147 occurred at the grammatical completion points at the sentence or clause level. Among this 147 BCs 112 had a falling pitch, 12 had a falling pitch followed by a pause and 23 had a rising pitch. When it comes to the semantic factors, the results of this study shows that in most of the

cases the backchannel response given was overlapping with the primary speaker. But in some cases the listener only reacted to the semantic content of the speaker's utterance and show his/her attitudes. The nature of these semantic contents closely depends on the context of the utterance and cannot be predicted. Other BCs that were due to some semantic factors were asking for clarification and giving suggestions. Though, few studies have focused on categorizing Persian backchannels based on Maynards model.

This study aims to identify type, frequency ans forms of backchanelling in Persian, by analyzing the spontaneous conversations recorded in a graduate student dormitory. To achieve this, current study purports to answer the following questions:

1. How frequent are different types of Persian backchannels according to Maynard's categorization?
2. Which backchannel forms are included under each category?

**Methodology**

**Corpus**

The compiled corpus for this study was 2 hours of talk collected from 6 rooms in the dormitory of Allame Tabatabae'i University in Tehran. Most of the data has been gathered by the researcher but some parts also have been recorded without his presence by the speakers themselves.

The participants of this study were 24 graduate students in the dormitory of Allame Tabataba'i University. These students were all male and the the recording was done with their permission and consent. The participants have been chosen non-randomly but they are controlled for L1. Most of these students are speakers of different accents of Persian and they're all highly educated.

**Data analysis procedure**

The collected data was transcribed and then analyzed for the backchannel function type, frequency which the interlocutors tend to use them. In order to do so, Maynards model (Maynard,1997 Cutrone 2010) has been used. He classifies backchannel functions in the following 6 categories:

1. *Continuers*
2. *Display of understanding of content*
3. *Agreement*
4. *Support and empathy towards the speakers's judgment*
5. *Strong emotional response*
6. *Minor addition or request for information.*

The backchannel responses were classified under these categories and the frequency of each one was counted.

**Result & Discussion**

According to our definition of Backchannel response, a total of 134 of BC responses were detected in the two-hour-long corpus of this study which were of 31 forms altogeather. These forms were categorized into 6 types based on their function, following Maynard's (1997) classification of different functions of BC response. Table.1 represents these categories along the frequency of BC types

**Table.1** Categories and frequencies of BC response

| **Frequencies types** | **Frequency of types** | **percentage** |
|---|---|---|
| **Continuers** | 4 | 12.9 % |
| **Display of understanding** | 7 | 22.5 % |
| **content** | | |
| **Agreement** | 4 | 12.9% |
| **Support and empathy** | 3 | 9.6% |
| **Strong emotional response** | 5 | 16.1% |
| **Minor addition and request for** | 8 | 25.7% |
| **information** | | |
| **total** | 31 | 100 |

The backchannel responses that are used as continuers in Persian are [Ahan] (Uh huh), [Are] (yeah), Mm hm, and [khob] . These are used whenever the secondary speaker wants the primary speaker to go on.

The BCs used to display understanding of content in Persian are [bale bale] , [Ahan] (ahan), [are] (yeah), Mm hm, [taghriban] (almost) , [are are] ( yeah yeah), [ha] ( got it) and [doroste] (That's right).

Backchannel used to show agreement in Persian according to our corpus are [tabiyatan] (naturally), [are dige](yeah off course) and [daghighan], (exactly).

[jalebe] (It's interesting), Valla (Swear to god), [Afaring] (Afarin), are the BC's that were used by participants to show their emotional support of what the primary speaker was talking about.

In order to show strong emotional response to what the primary speaker was saying, the Persian speaker used backchannel responses such as [Na baba] (no way), [tsk, tsk ,tsk] (nonpulmonic stop produced by inhaling air, usually accompanied by head shaking), [shuxi nakon] (you gotta be kidding me) , and [ax, ax , ax] (ouch ouch ouch) and [ajab] (wonder) . These BCs are used to react to the strong emotional point in the primary speaker's speech.

The last category of BC responses according to Maynard (1997, Cutrone 2010) are backchannel responses used add some points and ask questions for further information [jeddi?] (seriously?), [chera?] (why), [key?] (when?), [haa?] (what?) , [E?] (really?), [chi?] (what?) and other short questions or statements thst the non-primary makes without intending to take the turn.

The results of the study shows that the most frequent backchannel type in Persian is the sixth category in Maynard's classification of six backchannel responses; that is minor addition and information request. Such BCs intend to add something to the conversation without aiming to take the floor to speak. Different forms of these functions in Persian were presented in result section of this paper. As you can see there some forms function for more than one type. These forms are differentiated among these types based on intonation. For example [are] (yeah) is used as a BC to let the primary speaker continue or for agreement. These are in line with Uemtaso's findings on English backchanneling (2000, Cutrone, 2005).

The dominance of this type of backchannel response is due to cultural features of Persian speakers. Such features vary from culture to culture, making differences between languages in terms of backchannel responding. There are other studies conducted to unravel the categories of backchannel responses in other languages such as Japanese and to compare them to other languages and cultures. Heinz (1997) showed that in Japanese agreement type backchannels are used more unlike English (Maynard, 1996) and Persian which has been studied here; in which "minor addition and information request" is the most frequent type.

**Conclusion**

Backchanneling is a universal feature in human languages but it's highly culture dependent. In order to communicate well in a language, a learner needs to be aware of the backchanelling norms in a language, this study covered the classification of

backchannel responses and the frequency of these responses according to Maynard's classification of backchanneling response. This study can have implications for developing educational material for **Persian** learners and developing pragmatic awareness for Persian learners. The results of this study also could be utilized in teaching backchannel response to EFL learners who have Persian as their L1 to determine the roots of their errors and identify the potential for transfer from L1 which is Persian. Similar studies could be carried out for other languages to compare them with Persian and English and the use of backchannel response could be analyzed based on this functional categories.

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