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## DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Korpusový výzkum prostředků backchanneling v britské angličtině s ohledem  
na faktor věku a genderu

A corpus-based research of backchannels in British English taking account of  
gender and age factors

Bc. Martina Slunečková

Vedoucí práce: doc. PhDr. Renata Pípalová, CSc.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the use of backchannels in present-day spoken British English, focusing on their distribution and function across gender and age groups. The theoretical part explores the types, functions, and sociolinguistic aspects of backchannels, as well as their role in conversation management.

The analysis is a corpus-based study using data from the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014*. It consists of two parts: the qualitative analysis examines 18 selected conversations to identify key patterns in backchannel frequency, form, function and conversational impact. The comparative analysis explores gender-related and age-related differences, considering variables such as minimal vs. non-minimal backchannels, clustering, overlap, and prompted reactions. The thesis provides new insights into how different demographic groups use backchannels, contributing to a broader understanding of listener responses, turn-taking, and interactional strategies in spoken discourse.

## **KEYWORDS**

backchannels, spoken British English, conversation analysis, gender variation, age variation, Spoken BNC2014, sociolinguistics

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá užívání prostředků backchanneling v současné mluvené britské angličtině, se zaměřením na jejich distribuci a funkci v závislosti na genderu a věku mluvčích. Teoretická část se věnuje typům, funkcím a sociolingvistickým aspektům prostředků backchanneling a jejich roli v řízení konverzace.

Analýza je korpusová studie využívající data ze *Spoken British National Corpus 2014*. Skládá se ze dvou částí: kvalitativní analýza zkoumá 18 vybraných konverzací s cílem identifikovat klíčové vzorce v četnosti, formě, funkci a dopadu prostředků backchanneling na komunikaci. Komparativní analýza se zaměřuje na rozdíly v užívání prostředků backchanneling mezi skupinami lišícími se dle genderu a věku a zohledňuje proměnné jako minimální a neminimální prostředky backchanneling, shlukování, překryv řeči a reakce vyvolané prostředky backchanneling. Práce přináší nové poznatky o tom, jak různé demografické skupiny využívají prostředky backchanneling, a přispívá k hlubšímu porozumění posluchačským reakcím, střídání replik a interakčním strategiím v mluveném diskurzu.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

backchanneling, mluvená britská angličtina, konverzační analýzy, rozdíly z hlediska věku, rozdíly z hlediska genderu, korpus mluvené angličtiny BNC 2014, sociolingvistika

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# 1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the use of backchannels in present-day spoken British English, with a specific focus on their distribution and function across different age groups and genders. To achieve this, a corpus-based study is conducted using the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014* (Spoken BNC2014). This corpus, compiled between 2012 and 2016, provides a contemporary dataset of informal British English conversations, making it an ideal resource for examining backchannel usage in natural interactions.

The theoretical background of this thesis explores various aspects of backchanneling, including its forms, functions or placement. Previous research has highlighted the role of backchannels as crucial elements of conversational structure, facilitating turn-taking, signalling active listening, and maintaining discourse cohesion. Additionally, studies on age and gender differences in backchanneling behaviours have demonstrated that these sociolinguistic factors influence how speakers provide listener feedback. This thesis builds upon these foundations, examining how these patterns manifest in a contemporary British English corpus.

The analytical section consists of two main components. First, a qualitative analysis of 18 selected conversations is conducted, where each conversation is examined individually to identify key patterns and trends in backchannel usage. Following this, a comparative analysis is performed, focusing on gender and age-related differences in backchannel use. This approach allows for both a detailed microanalysis of conversational interactions and a broader examination of sociolinguistic trends.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework, discussing key concepts and previous research related to backchannels. Chapter 3 describes the dataset and methodological approach used in this thesis. Chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis, beginning with the individual conversation analyses, followed by the gender-based

and age-based comparisons. Finally, the findings are summarized in Chapter 5, highlighting their implications and suggesting potential directions for future research.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Introduction to backchannels

The study of backchannels has inspired diverse terminologies reflecting their varied roles in conversation. Terms like “signals of attention” (Fries, 1952<sup>1</sup>), “reactive tokens” (Clancy et al., 1996<sup>2</sup>), “response tokens” (Gardner, 2001<sup>3</sup>), and “backchannel responses” (Yngve, 1970<sup>4</sup>) highlight the range of interpretations (Merau, 2024: 2). This thesis adopts the term “backchannels”, which neutrally describes speech produced by the listener (the back channel) rather than the speaker (the front channel) (Bangerter & Clark, 2003; Peters & Wong, 2015 in Merau, 2024: 2).

Backchannels are defined as brief, often optional responses directed at the speaker’s utterance, addressing its content without constituting a turn at talk or requiring acknowledgment from the speaker (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000 in Merau, 2024: 2). Ward and Tsukahara (2000: 1178) identify three criteria for backchannels: they directly respond to the speaker’s utterance, are optional, and do not necessitate acknowledgment. In face-to-face interactions, nonverbal cues like nods can substitute for these verbal responses, further emphasizing their flexibility (Carletta et al., 1997 in Merau, 2024: 2).

The study of backchannels is characterized by two dominant analytic approaches: distributional analysis and conversation analysis (Drummond, 1993: 159). Distributional analysis categorizes backchannels into uniform classes, focusing on their frequency and distribution across datasets (ibid.). In contrast, conversation analysis examines the contextual variability of backchannels, recognizing their nuanced functions within specific

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<sup>1</sup> Fries, Charles C., 1952. *The Structure of English*. Longmans, Green and Company, London.

<sup>2</sup> Clancy, Patricia M., Thompson, Sandra A., Suzuki, Ryoko, Tao, Hongyin, 1996. The conversational use of reactive tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *J. Pragmat.* 26, pp. 355-387.

<sup>3</sup> Gardner, Rod, 2001. *When Listeners Talk: Response Tokens and Listener Stance*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup> Yngve, Victor H., 1970. On getting a word in edgewise. In: *Papers from the Sixth Regional Meeting*. Chicago Linguistic Society, pp. 567-578.

interactional sequences (ibid.). Together, these methods provide complementary perspectives, revealing both the systematic and interactional dimensions of backchannels.

Backchannels were first systematically explored by Yngve (1970), who coined the term “backchannel responses” to describe brief listener utterances like “yes” and “uh-huh”. These responses signal the listener’s attentiveness and understanding while allowing the speaker to maintain control of the conversational floor (White, 1997: 322). Schegloff (1982) later introduced the notion of CON tokens, categorizing backchannels as “continuers” that encourage the speaker to proceed. Expanding on this, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) emphasized the interactional significance of acknowledgment tokens like “yeah” and “mm-hm”, illustrating how these responses shape the speaker’s narrative trajectory (Drummond, 1993: 162).

Despite their seemingly trivial nature, backchannels exhibit structured orderliness upon closer examination. Jefferson (1983: 1-2) described acknowledgment tokens as initially appearing mundane or “garbage-like” but demonstrated their potential to systematically organize conversational dynamics. Gardner (1998) reinforced this view, highlighting the conversational significance of minimal vocal responses like “yeah” and “mm-hm”. These responses enable listeners to subtly influence the speaker’s talk without interrupting, demonstrating their powerful role in managing dialogue (Gardner, 1998: 205).

## **2.2 Backchannels in the context of conversation**

Conversation is a dynamic and collaborative process where participants negotiate meaning, take turns, and balance their contributions to maintain equilibrium in communication (Yule, 1998: 71). Central to this process is the concept of the “floor”, representing the right to speak (ibid.: 72). Controlling the floor at any given moment constitutes a turn, with turn-taking governed by social conventions understood within a group (ibid.). A Transition Relevance Place (TRP) marks points in discourse where speaker changes are likely, guided by features such as prosody, syntax, or brief silences (ibid.). This system facilitates smooth transitions

in cooperative interactions, though in more contentious exchanges, it highlights competition for control of the floor (*ibid.*). This perspective aligns with conversation analysis (CA), a discipline that emerged from ethnomethodology, pioneered by Harvey Sacks and further developed by Gail Jefferson and Emanuel Schegloff (Whalen & Raymond, 2000: 431). CA focuses on the sequential organization of talk and the underlying methods participants use to achieve coherence in conversation (*ibid.*: 432).

In typical conversation, participants take turns, with only one person speaking at a time. Smooth transitions between speakers are preferred, while long silences or overlapping speech may indicate discomfort or lack of familiarity (Yule, 1998: 72). Short pauses generally signal hesitation, while longer pauses, known as “attributable silences”, may carry additional communicative weight, especially when a speaker fails to respond after being given the floor (*ibid.*: 73). Silence at a TRP is less disruptive than overlapping speech, as the norm is for one person to speak at a time (*ibid.*). Overlaps can occur when two speakers begin simultaneously, with one usually yielding, but persistent overlaps may signal difficulties in establishing conversational rhythm (*ibid.*). According to Whalen and Raymond (2000: 435), turn-taking operates as an interactional system governed by locally determined and moment-by-moment negotiated speaker selection practices. This system ensures that conversational order is preserved while allowing for flexibility in participation (Whalen & Raymond, 2000: 436).

The interpretation of overlaps varies by context. Cooperative overlaps indicate solidarity and agreement, as speakers collaboratively build on each other’s talk (Yule, 1998: 74). In contrast, competitive overlaps involve interruptions that violate conversational norms, such as waiting for a structural unit to end or a pause before speaking (*ibid.*). These unspoken rules of conversation are essential for maintaining order, and violations often disrupt the interaction (*ibid.*). Schegloff, Sacks, and Jefferson (1977) argue that overlapping speech is often resolved through systematic mechanisms that allow speakers to negotiate who will take the floor next, ensuring that turn-taking remains orderly (Whalen & Raymond, 2000: 436).

Overlap resolution strategies such as recycling utterances or momentary withdrawal contribute to maintaining interactional coherence (ibid.: 437).

Speakers seeking to maintain control of the floor may actively avoid creating TRPs by employing strategies such as filling pauses with vocalizations like “um” or “uh” and using structured expressions to signal extended turns (Yule, 1998: 75). Techniques such as listing points or introducing stories allow speakers to extend their turns and avoid interruptions, especially in competitive conversational contexts (ibid.). This aligns with Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s (1974) assertion that speakers employ various turn-constructive techniques to prevent interruptions and assert conversational dominance (Whalen & Raymond, 2000: 438).

Conversational styles vary significantly within and across speech communities, leading to potential misunderstandings. A high-involvement style features rapid speech, minimal pauses between turns, and frequent overlaps or turn completions, signalling engagement and enthusiasm (Yule, 1998: 76). Conversely, a high-considerateness style prioritizes slower speech, longer pauses, and avoidance of interruptions, reflecting a more reserved approach (ibid.). When speakers with these differing styles interact, communication may become imbalanced, with high-involvement speakers dominating and high-considerateness speakers perceived as disengaged (ibid.). These stylistic differences are often misinterpreted as personality traits, reinforcing stereotypes of reserved speakers as shy and active participants as overbearing (ibid.). Whalen and Raymond (2000: 439) emphasize that conversational norms are socially constructed and contingent on cultural expectations, meaning that deviations from these norms can lead to miscommunication and breakdowns in interaction.

Despite these variations, most conversations follow structured patterns known as adjacency pairs. These pairs, consisting of a first part and a corresponding second part produced by different speakers, create expectations for specific responses (Yule, 1998: 76-77). Common adjacency pairs include greeting-response, question-answer, thanking-response, and request

acceptance pairs (ibid.: 77). The absence or delay of the second part often carries social or contextual significance, requiring interpretation (ibid.). Insertion sequences — secondary adjacency pairs that delay the primary response — further highlight conversational complexity, as they signal conditions or considerations that shape the interaction (ibid.: 77-78). These adjacency pair structures are fundamental to the organization of sequences in conversation, as they project relevant next actions and create expectations for response patterns (Whalen & Raymond, 2000: 440).

Schegloff (1982) emphasizes the collaborative nature of conversation, where turns are shaped by coordinated and contingent decisions about who speaks next and what they will say. Each turn opens multiple alternatives — repairing previous talk, changing the subject, or maintaining the current topic — and the choices participants make in the moment influence the trajectory of the exchange (Schegloff, 1982: 89). While conversational flow may appear natural, it relies on intricate, moment-to-moment negotiations that reflect the participants' shared understanding and interactional goals (ibid.). This reflects the broader argument made by Whalen and Raymond (2000: 441) that conversation analysis is fundamentally concerned with uncovering the micro-level mechanisms that participants use to navigate social interaction, ensuring that talk remains intelligible and orderly.

## **2.3 Forms of backchannels**

Backchannels take diverse forms, reflecting their multifunctionality and adaptability in conversation. They range from simple lexical or non-lexical items, such as “yes”, “mhm”, or “uh-huh”, to more complex multi-unit forms like “oh yes, that’s right” (Tottie, 1991 in Merau, 2024: 3). The tokens listeners choose can convey subtle interactional dynamics. For instance, repeated use of the same token may signal disinterest, whereas varied tokens suggest active engagement<sup>5</sup> (Schegloff, 1982: 85).

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<sup>5</sup> In storytelling contexts, listeners often employ expressive backchannels like “Really?” or “Wow” to demonstrate interest and shape the speaker’s delivery (Schegloff, 1982: 85).

O’Keeffe (2008: 6) categorizes backchannels into minimal and non-minimal responses, providing a useful framework for understanding their varied forms. Minimal responses are typically short utterances, such as “yeah”, or non-word vocalizations like “mm” and “uh-huh” (ibid.). These often occur at phrase boundaries, serving both grammatical and social functions (Fellegly, 1995 in O’Keeffe, 2008: 9). Non-minimal responses, on the other hand, include adverbs, adjectives, or short evaluative phrases like “good”, “really great”, or “you’re not serious” (O’Keeffe, 2008: 6). Non-minimal tokens can be intensified with adverbs (e.g., “absolutely”, “definitely”) to add emphasis or negated to create alternative forms (ibid.: 8). Both minimal and non-minimal responses frequently appear in clusters, particularly at topic boundaries or conversational closures, where they highlight transitions in dialogue (Carter and McCarthy, 2006 in O’Keeffe, 2008: 8).

| Minimal responses                                                                                                                                                                            | Non-minimal responses                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• short utterances (e.g., “yeah”, “uh-huh”)</li> <li>• non-word vocalizations (e.g., “mm”, “uh-huh”)</li> <li>• occur at phrase boundaries</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adverbs, adjectives, or evaluative phrases (e.g., “good”, “really”)</li> <li>• often intensified (e.g., “absolutely”)</li> <li>• engage explicitly with content</li> </ul> |

*Table 1: Comparison of minimal and non-minimal backchannels*

The distinction between specific and generic backchannels offers another lens to examine their forms. Specific backchannels, such as “oh wow” or “really”, directly engage with the preceding content, prompting elaboration from the speaker (Bangerter and Clark, 2003: 199). In contrast, generic backchannels like “uh-huh” or “yeah” indicate attention and understanding without explicitly addressing the content (Goodwin, 1986; Stivers, 2008 in Tolins, 2014: 154). Prosodic features, such as intonation and pitch, can transform generic backchannels into specific ones, adding commentary or emotional nuance (Tomlinson & Fox Tree, 2011 in Tolins, 2014: 154). For instance, a simple “yeah” delivered with rising intonation can convey curiosity or doubt, subtly altering its conversational impact.

| Specific backchannels                                                                                                                                                | Generic backchannels                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engage with content (e.g. “oh wow”, “really”)</li> <li>• prompt elaboration</li> <li>• often prosodically marked</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• signal attention and understanding without addressing content</li> <li>• promote continuation</li> <li>• often neutral in tone</li> </ul> |

Table 2: Comparison of specific and generic backchannels

The complexity of backchannel forms extends beyond vocalizations to include their multimodal nature. Yngve’s (1970) distinction between the “front channel”, where the speaker holds the floor, and the “back channel”, where brief responses like “uh-huh” or “oh” occur during the speaker’s extended turns, highlights their primary role in conversational support (Drummond, 1993: 159). Early research by Duncan and Niederehe (1974) expanded this perspective, incorporating non-verbal elements like head nods, gestures, and facial expressions into the understanding of backchannel forms (ibid.: 160-161). However, these studies faced criticism for failing to differentiate longer backchannels from full conversational turns, which limited their functional specificity (Duncan & Fiske, 1977 in Drummond, 1993: 161).

Ultimately, backchannel forms are context-dependent and versatile. Whether minimal or non-minimal, specific or generic, or vocal or non-vocal, they enable listeners to provide feedback, maintain conversational flow, and subtly influence the trajectory of dialogue.

### 2.3.1 Multi-unit backchannels

Multi-unit backchannels (MUBs) are a significant but understudied aspect of conversational speech, consisting of multiple components that extend beyond simple acknowledgments (Merau, 2024: 2). Unlike monofunctional single-unit backchannels, MUBs introduce structural and functional variability, playing a key role in turn management and discourse interaction (Wong & Peters, 2007 in Merau, 2024: 3).

Although less researched, MUBs are widely used, comprising 22.57 % and 36.90 % of backchannels in Australian and New Zealand corpora, and 29.1 % in Italian speech, where they range from simple repetitions (e.g., “sì sì”) to complex combinations (e.g., “eh sì”) (Merau, 2024: 8). Structurally, 65.4 % of MUBs contain two units, 23.8 % three units, with a near-even split between repetitive and complex forms (ibid.). Their median duration (0.7s) is twice that of single-unit backchannels (0.34s), with 68 % lasting over 500ms, allowing for more nuanced engagement (ibid.).

Functionally, MUBs are predominantly multifunctional (60.5 %), often combining agreement, continuer, and incipient speakership functions (ibid.: 9). Shorter MUBs frequently signal speaker transitions, while longer ones serve as assessments, providing evaluative feedback (ibid.). Their strategic use is evident in asymmetric conversations, where less dominant speakers produce more MUBs to maintain engagement without challenging the hierarchy (ibid.: 13).

MUBs are particularly prevalent in spontaneous, informal conversations, where their extended and complex forms support agreement, conversational flow, and readiness to take the floor (ibid.). Repetitive forms reinforce alignment, while complex forms offer deeper feedback. Accounting for nearly 30 % of all backchannels in some corpora, MUBs highlight the richness of human communication, facilitating both interactional alignment and conversational dynamics (ibid.).

### **2.3.2 Non-verbal backchannels**

Masato Kogure’s study highlights the significant interplay between verbal and nonverbal backchannels in Japanese conversations, focusing on their role in maintaining conversational harmony and managing silence. In Japanese dialogue, backchannels such as nods, smiles, and minimal verbal utterances are integral to “loop sequences”<sup>6</sup>, which sustain cooperative

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<sup>6</sup> sequences of backchannels (Kogure, 2007: 1275)

dynamics and ensure smooth floor transitions (Kogure, 2007: 1275-1278). These elements align with the cultural emphasis on conversational harmony and mutual dependency, reflecting broader social values in Japanese communication (ibid.: 1285-1286).

Contrary to stereotypes that depict Japanese speakers as favouring extended silences, Kogure finds that silences in loop sequences are often accompanied by nonverbal activities, particularly nodding (ibid.: 1280-1281). Nods occur independently or alongside verbal utterances such as “un” (“yeah”) or “soo desu ka” (“I see”), transforming silence into an interactionally active component of dialogue (ibid.: 1281-1282). These nonverbal cues prevent conversational stagnation and signal attentiveness, fostering a rhythm that sustains interaction (ibid.: 1282-1283). The alternation of verbal and nonverbal backchannels creates a collaborative atmosphere, facilitating floor negotiations while prioritizing the other participant’s feelings (ibid.: 1287).

The rhythmic integration of verbal and nonverbal backchannels is intrinsic to the Japanese conversational style (ibid.: 1283-1285). Nonverbal elements such as nodding and smiling reinforce cultural values of mutual dependency and consideration, embodying the Japanese ethos of maintaining balance and supporting the other’s communicative needs (ibid.: 1285-1286). This dynamic reflects a deeply embedded conversational rhythm, where backchannels play a dual role in affirming the speaker’s narrative and ensuring that the listener remains actively engaged.

Kogure’s findings also challenge traditional assumptions about conversational silence. Rather than being passive or awkward, silence accompanied by nonverbal cues emerges as an active and constructive aspect of dialogue, contributing to its flow and structure (ibid.: 1287-1288). These observations underscore the need to integrate nonverbal elements into analyses of backchannels, as their influence extends beyond simple listener responses to shaping the overall conversational rhythm and harmony (ibid.: 1287).

## 2.4 Functions of backchannels

Backchannels serve a wide range of conversational functions, from expressing attention and understanding to signalling turn transitions (Schegloff, 1982; Jefferson, 1984 in Merau, 2024: 2). These responses are inherently multifunctional and context-sensitive, often fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously (Kjellmer, 2009 in Merau, 2024: 2). For example, a backchannel like “uh huh” or “yeah” may signal agreement, attention, or understanding, depending on its sequential placement and intonation (Schegloff, 1982: 80; Gardner, 1998: 210). To fully appreciate their nuanced roles, backchannels must be analysed within their conversational context, as removing them from their sequential environment risks oversimplification (Schegloff, 1982: 80).

Various scholars have proposed typologies to classify backchannel functions. Coulthard, Montgomery, and Brazil (1981)<sup>7</sup> identify three distinct supportive acts:

- Acknowledge: Responses like “yeah”, “uh-huh”, or “mmm”, typically delivered with a falling tone and low key.
- Accept: Phrases such as “yeah”, “okay”, or “oh, I see”.
- Endorse: Affirmations like “yeah, that’s a point”, or “you’re quite right”.

(White, 1997, p. 323)

Similarly, Stenström (1982)<sup>8</sup> categorizes backchannels into:

- Follow-Up Moves: Used to sustain conversation.
- Support Moves: These lack independence as turns, often overlap with the speaker’s talk, and may involve body language.

(White, 1997, p. 323)

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<sup>7</sup> Coulthard, M., M. Montgomery, and D Brazil, (eds) 1981 *Developing a Description of Spoken Discourse* London Routledge and Kegan Paul

<sup>8</sup> Stenström, A-B 1982 'Feedback' in N E Enkvist (ed) 1982 *Impromptu Speech A Symposium*. Abo Abo Akademi Foundation

Hayashi and Hayashi (1991)<sup>9</sup> propose a taxonomy based on speech acts:

- Continuers: Signals that do not require a response.
- Repairers: Signals that require a response.

They further classify backchannels into judgmental (reinforcers, claimers) and non-judgmental (prompters, clarifiers).

(White, 1997, p. 323)

O’Keeffe (2008) offers a comprehensive classification of backchannels that goes beyond traditional distinctions. Since this classification will be applied in the analysis section of this thesis, it is discussed here in more detail to provide a clearer understanding of the various functions backchannels serve in spoken interaction.

One of the key functions of backchannels is to act as continuer tokens. These responses primarily encourage the speaker to maintain their turn without interruption, ensuring the smooth flow of conversation (O’Keeffe, 2008: 17). They signal that the listener is engaged and actively following the discourse without attempting to take over the conversational floor (ibid.). Typically, they take the form of minimal responses such as “mm”, “yeah”, and “uh-huh” (ibid.: 18). Their strategic use helps prevent awkward pauses or disruptions, contributing to overall conversational fluency (ibid.: 19).

Additionally, backchannels serve as convergence tokens, which function as markers of agreement or shared understanding between speakers (ibid.: 20). These tokens often occur at points where participants align on a topic, particularly at the end of discourse units or topic boundaries (ibid.). Examples of these responses include single-word affirmations such as “exactly”, “right”, or “yeah”, as well as follow-up tag questions like “did you?” or “is it?”

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<sup>9</sup> Hayashi, T. and R. Hayashi 1991 'Back channel or main channel A cognitive approach based on floor and speech acts' *Pragmatics and Language Learning* 2 119-38

(ibid.: 22). By reinforcing common perspectives, convergence tokens play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion within conversations (ibid.: 23).

Another important function of backchannels is their role as engagement tokens. Unlike continuer and convergence tokens, which focus on maintaining or structuring the conversation, engagement tokens express a listener's emotional reaction to the speaker's message (ibid.: 25). These responses can convey surprise, enthusiasm, empathy, or even disbelief (ibid.). Common engagement tokens include interjections like "wow", "oh my God", "brilliant", or "that's nice" (ibid.: 26). These are particularly frequent in informal settings where personal experiences or narratives are exchanged (ibid.: 27). O'Keeffe (2008: 28) emphasizes that such tokens significantly enhance the emotional depth of interactions, strengthening interpersonal rapport.

Finally, backchannels can function as information receipt tokens, which acknowledge the receipt and comprehension of new information without necessarily expressing agreement or emotional engagement (ibid.: 30). These tokens act as discourse markers that help segment and organize interactions, often occurring in institutional and asymmetrical settings, such as interviews and service encounters (ibid.: 31). Common examples include "right", "okay", and "I see" (ibid.: 32). In these contexts, they confirm that the speaker's message has been understood while allowing the conversation to progress efficiently (ibid.: 33).

Gardner (1998) emphasizes the interplay between intonation and context in shaping backchannel functions:

- Continuers (e.g., "Mm hm") prompt the speaker to proceed.
- Acknowledgments (e.g., "Yeah") indicate agreement or alignment.
- Weak Acknowledgments (e.g., "Mm") signal a lack of substantive input while subtly inviting the speaker to shift topics.

(Gardner, 1998: 213–214)

Backchannels often perform several functions simultaneously, reflecting their adaptability in conversation. For instance, “mm hm” may act as a continuer while also signalling attentiveness (Gardner, 1998: 213–214). Similarly, feedback utterances such as “really?” or “oh” can encourage speakers to elaborate, fostering dynamic and interactive conversations (Allwood et al., 1993: 17). This evocative role underscores the collaborative nature of dialogue, where listeners actively shape the interaction through timely and context-sensitive responses.

#### **2.4.1 Continuers**

Continuers, such as “uh huh” and “mm hmm”, play a crucial role in conversational dynamics by signalling the listener’s recognition that the speaker’s turn is ongoing (Schegloff, 1982: 81). These tokens encourage the speaker to proceed by passing up the opportunity to take a full turn, demonstrating attentiveness and understanding (ibid.). By reinforcing the speaker’s extended talk, continuers help maintain the flow of discourse, particularly at points where turn transitions might otherwise occur. Non-verbal gestures, such as nodding, complement vocalizations in uniquely supporting the continuation of extended turns (ibid.).

Listeners use continuers to facilitate the speaker’s contributions in diverse ways, such as adding increments to ongoing sentences, initiating new sentences, or linking independent clauses with conjunctions (ibid.: 85). This flexibility highlights their essential role in bridging sentence-level extensions and multi-sentence discourse, underscoring their adaptability in various conversational contexts (ibid.).

In addition to their role as continuers, tokens like “uh huh” also function as signals of understanding (ibid.: 88). By refraining from initiating repair, listeners convey the absence of misunderstanding or disagreement, implying alignment with the speaker’s message (ibid.). However, their status as claims of understanding is less definitive, as they may

precede later repair efforts (ibid.). In contrast, their role as continuers is more consistently established, emphasizing their importance in sustaining conversational flow (ibid.).

The duality of continuers — as both facilitators of extended talk and indicators of understanding — underscores their multifaceted contribution to dialogue. Their strategic use by listeners helps speakers navigate conversational progressions seamlessly, maintaining coherence and fostering mutual engagement.

#### **2.4.2 Acknowledgement tokens “mm hm” and “yeah”**

Acknowledgment tokens such as “mm hm” and “yeah” play a crucial role in conversational dynamics, signalling attention and shaping the flow of interaction (Jefferson, 1983: 3). Jefferson’s (1983/1993) research highlights the distinct conversational roles these tokens fulfil. “Mm hm” typically signals passive reciprocity, aligning the listener with the speaker while avoiding encouragement for further elaboration (Jefferson, 1983: 6). In contrast, “yeah” often signals a readiness to transition from listening to speaking, frequently preceding topic changes or shifts in speaker roles (ibid.: 4). These distinctions reflect the nuanced and context-dependent functions acknowledgment tokens serve in maintaining conversational order and facilitating interaction (ibid.: 6).

Studies investigating acknowledgment tokens corroborate Jefferson’s findings, showing that “mm hm” and “uh huh” primarily act as passive continuers, while “yeah” frequently signals incipient speakership. Analyses reveal that “yeah” transitions into further speech in approximately 45 % of instances, facilitating teller switching, topic shifts, or elaborations (Drummond, 1993: 171-172). By contrast, “mm hm” and “uh huh” consistently function as freestanding acknowledgments, rarely leading to extended turns (ibid.: 170). Jefferson and Drummond emphasize that this functional differentiation underscores “yeah’s” pivotal role in turn-taking processes, reflecting its capacity to mark a shift toward active speakership (ibid.: 171).

Jefferson proposed a progression of acknowledgment tokens — “mm hm” to “uh huh” to “yeah” — representing increasing levels of engagement and readiness to take the floor (ibid.: 165). This progression demonstrates how listeners navigate conversational dynamics, using acknowledgment tokens to signal alignment, manage speaker transitions, or subtly influence the trajectory of interaction (Jefferson, 1983: 6). For instance, “mm hm” facilitates a topical shift without actively prompting it, while “yeah” signals a readiness to take the conversational floor, marking a clear distinction between passive and active roles (ibid.).

Acknowledgment tokens can also serve strategic purposes beyond their apparent passivity. Jefferson identifies the “perverse passive” use of “mm hm”, where recipients employ it at moments where a speaker transition might occur, subtly preserving their listening role while prompting the current speaker to continue (ibid.: 17). This strategy can elicit further talk or navigate away from sensitive topics, demonstrating how acknowledgment tokens are deliberately deployed to manage conversational flow and negotiate social dynamics (ibid.).

The functional distinction between “mm hm” and “yeah” is further reinforced by their differing conversational outcomes. “Mm hm” signals alignment as a listener and encourages continuation without inviting elaboration, while “yeah” serves as a marker of agreement and readiness to shift into an active speaker role (ibid.: 10). Drummond’s analysis (1993: 169-170) extends this understanding, showing that “yeah” can lead to minimal responses — brief acknowledgments that maintain the speaker’s focus — or full speaking turns, where the recipient transitions to active tellership. This flexibility highlights “yeah’s” dual role in conversational dynamics, capable of maintaining flow or driving further interaction.

These findings illustrate the flexibility and significance of acknowledgment tokens in conversation. Far from being mere passive markers of alignment, tokens like “mm hm” and “yeah” are integral to the collaborative construction of dialogue, enabling participants to signal alignment, manage transitions, and subtly shape the conversational trajectory. Their

deliberate use reflects the intricacies of conversational interaction, where every turn is both a response to prior talk and a foundation for what follows (Schegloff, 1982: 89).

### 2.4.3 “Oh”

The particle “oh” plays a crucial role in conversational dynamics, functioning primarily as a marker of a change in state (Heritage, 1984: 299). It signals shifts in knowledge, awareness, or orientation, often marking the listener’s acknowledgment of new information or a revised understanding (ibid.). In sequences involving informings, “oh” acknowledges the receipt of new information and indicates that the listener’s knowledge state has been updated (ibid.: 301). For instance, when informed of a new fact, a listener might respond with “oh”, signifying the transition from being uninformed to informed (ibid.). This usage is often combined with assessments, such as “oh, that’s great!” which validate the information while providing a segue to close the conversational topic (ibid.: 303).

In repair sequences, “oh” serves as a key marker signalling the resolution of conversational trouble (ibid.: 316). When a speaker clarifies or resolves a misunderstanding, “oh” acknowledges the clarification and indicates that the issue has been successfully addressed (ibid.: 317). Unlike generic continuers like “mm hm”, “oh” explicitly signals comprehension and the integration of new information, playing a pivotal role in restoring conversational equilibrium (ibid.). By marking the successful completion of repair, “oh” facilitates the transition to subsequent conversational topics, helping to maintain the dialogue’s flow (ibid.: 318).

In turn-taking and conversational alignment, “oh” exhibits a distinctly backward-looking orientation, functioning to acknowledge and summarize prior discourse (ibid.: 324). Often appearing at the start of a speaker’s turn, it affirms understanding without requiring further elaboration or confirmation (ibid.: 322). This usage of “oh” frequently curtails the current topic and signals readiness for a transition, consolidating shared understanding and smoothing turn exchanges (ibid.: 324). Unlike forward-looking markers such as “and” or

“so”, which propel conversations into new directions, “oh” reinforces alignment with what has already been said, ensuring the coherence of the dialogue (ibid.: 312).

The specific role of “oh” becomes particularly salient in counterinforming, where it acknowledges revised or corrected information (ibid.: 313). In these contexts, “oh” functions as an acceptance marker, validating the updated knowledge and aligning the listener with the revised conversational context (ibid.). This nuanced function contrasts with other backchannels, such as “yes”, which may not adequately convey acknowledgment of change (ibid.).

Overall, “oh” contributes significantly to conversational alignment by managing transitions, resolving repair sequences, and marking shifts in knowledge states (ibid.: 320). Its backward-looking nature and capacity to display comprehension make it a valuable conversational tool, particularly in balancing reciprocity and turn initiation (ibid.). By operating as both a signal of passive understanding and an acknowledgment of prior discourse, “oh” exemplifies the proactive role backchannels play in the joint construction of conversation (ibid.). These functions highlight how “oh” transcends its role as a mere reaction, shaping conversational flow and structure with precision and adaptability.

## **2.5 Placement of backchannels**

The placement of backchannels plays a critical role in shaping conversational flow and maintaining interactional harmony. Typically, backchannels occur at the end or near the end of an utterance, reflecting the listener’s ability to provide a cue — whether as a continuer, a signal of understanding, or a request for clarification — only after the speaker’s turn is pragmatically complete (Maynard, 1989 in White, 1997: 327). In White’s corpus, backchannel cues predominantly appear during short pauses, usually under a second, between parts of a turn, aligning with natural breaks in the speaker’s delivery (White, 1997: 327). Although these cues do not overlap directly with speech, their placement within these brief pauses creates the impression of a seamless conversational flow (ibid.).

Speakers often employ specific prosodic and non-verbal signals to invite backchannels. These backchannel-inviting cues include features such as pitch modulation, pauses, and changes in intonation, along with non-verbal signals like mutual gaze (Blomsma et al., 2024: 1165). These cues serve as interactional signals that highlight moments when listener feedback is expected or necessary (ibid.). The absence of timely backchannels during such moments can disrupt conversational flow, potentially signalling inattentiveness or misunderstanding on the listener's part (ibid.: 1166). This emphasizes the importance of synchrony between speaker signals and listener responses to maintain effective interaction (ibid.).

Backchannels are closely associated with transition relevance places (TRPs) — points in discourse where speaker roles are expected to shift. These shifts are guided by prosodic, syntactic, or embodied cues, allowing speakers to signal the end of their turn and listeners to respond (Sacks et al., 1974; Ward & Tsukahara, 2000; Koiso et al., 1998 in Tolins, 2014: 154). TRPs are defined as moments when utterances are pragmatically complete, enabling the speaker to either continue or yield the turn (Du Bois et al., 1993 in Cathcart et al., 2003: 52). Prosodic features such as pitch and duration often signal these moments, highlighting the dynamic interplay between linguistic structure and conversational timing (for more information see *Chapter 2.2*) (Cathcart et al., 2003: 53).

However, not all backchannels align neatly with traditional TRPs. Critics argue that turn-taking theories overly simplify the fluid nature of interaction, failing to account for contextual factors such as prosody, kinesics, and shared participant knowledge (O'Connell et al., 1990 in Tolins, 2014: 155). Non-verbal backchannels, such as nods or facial expressions, often occur simultaneously with speech, challenging their role as purely turn-coordinating devices (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011 in Tolins, 2014: 155). These simultaneous cues emphasize the listener's engagement while maintaining the speaker's turn, adding a layer of complexity to backchannel placement.

Contextual settings also influence the type and placement of backchannels. For instance, in telephone conversations, where visual cues are absent, backchannels are more reliant on auditory signals to maintain conversational flow (Chovil, 1991 in Tolins, 2014: 156). Conversely, task-oriented settings often incorporate physical actions as backchannels, reflecting the collaborative nature of these interactions (Clark & Krych, 2004 in Tolins, 2014: 156). These variations underscore the adaptability of backchannel placement in response to situational demands.

Linguistic and computational models have explored the predictability of backchannel placements. Cathcart et al. (2003) aligned their work with existing linguistic theories, associating backchannels with TRPs. Using the HCRC Map Task Corpus, which features task-oriented dialogues in Scottish English, the authors identified key predictors of backchannel placement, including pause duration and part-of-speech (POS) tag sequences (Anderson et al., 1991 in Cathcart et al., 2003: 54). For example, pauses exceeding 900 milliseconds were strongly associated with backchannels, while POS trigram frequencies — such as noun-pause sequences — proved to be reliable indicators (Cathcart et al., 2003: 54). Combining these predictors improved the model's accuracy, achieving an F-measure of 35 %, significantly better than the baseline (ibid.: 57).

Corpus-based studies by Koiso et al. (1998) and Ward and Tsukahara (2000) further emphasize the role of prosodic cues, such as pitch and duration, in identifying TRPs. Experimental research also highlights how specific and generic backchannels contribute functionally to dialogue, often prioritizing their conversational impact over precise placement (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002 in Tolins, 2014: 155). Together, these findings demonstrate that while backchannels frequently align with TRPs, their placement is highly adaptive and context-sensitive.

## 2.6 Prosodic features of backchannels

Prosodic features play a central role in eliciting and interpreting backchannel responses, shaping their function and meaning in conversational interactions. Ward and Tsukahara (2000: 1187) identify low-pitch regions lasting at least 110 milliseconds as significant predictors of backchannel occurrences. These low-pitch cues often align with moments when speakers transmit new information or signal the completion of a thought, creating opportunities for listener feedback (*ibid.*: 1186). In Japanese, such regions are frequently accompanied by lengthened vowels, disfluency markers, or particles like “ne” or “kara”, further enhancing their backchannel eliciting potential (*ibid.*).

To better understand these patterns, Ward and Tsukahara developed predictive rules based on prosodic cues, achieving high accuracy in modelling backchannel occurrences in English and Japanese conversations. Experimental validation demonstrated that these models could replicate human-like backchannel behaviour, reinforcing the hypothesis that prosodic features are crucial in backchannel elicitation (*ibid.*: 1194).

Distinct prosodic characteristics also differentiate backchannel types. Hirschberg and Litman (1993) note that specific pitch contours and durations distinguish continuers from agreements, with intonational and energetic differences playing a defining role (Jurafsky et al., 1998: 5). For instance, high pitch and energy often mark agreements, while pauses can transform continuers into acknowledgments, signalling subtle shifts in conversational dynamics (*ibid.*).

Benus, Gravano, and Hirschberg (2007) expand on this by examining the prosodic and contextual features of backchannels in Standard American English, particularly in collaborative, task-oriented dialogues. Their analysis of the Columbia Games Corpus reveals that backchannels often exhibit rising pitch contours and higher intensity compared to other affirmative functions (Benus et al., 2007: 1065).

Contextual sensitivity is another defining feature of prosodic backchannels. Rising intonational phrases from speakers frequently precede backchannels, highlighting their role as responsive elements attuned to conversational flow (ibid.: 1067). Additionally, lexical variability contributes to their prosodic predictability. For example, “mmhm” displays higher pitch and intensity slopes compared to “okay”, emphasizing how prosody differentiates seemingly similar responses (ibid.). Gender-specific interactional dynamics were also observed, with female speakers demonstrating faster backchanneling when interacting with other females (ibid.: 1068).

Gardner (1998: 217) explores how variations in intonation influence the interpretive meaning of backchannels. For example, “mm hm” with a fall-rise contour typically signals passive reciprocity, encouraging the speaker to continue. Conversely, a falling contour transforms “mm hm” into an acknowledgment, marking the end of a sequence (ibid.). Similarly, “yeah” often signals alignment but can act as a continuer with rising intonation, indicating the listener’s desire for further elaboration (ibid.: 219). Non-canonical uses, such as “yeah” with a fall-rise contour, demonstrate how backchannels adapt to contextual conversational needs, reflecting their flexibility in managing conversational flow (ibid.: 220).

Prosody also shapes the meaning of simple words like “mm” or “yes”, with variations in tone, pitch, and emphasis signalling acknowledgment, acceptance, or surprise (Allwood et al., 1993: 12). These nuanced uses underscore the adaptability of backchannels in conveying listener reactions and influencing speaker behaviour.

Collectively, these findings emphasize the pivotal role of prosody in backchannel communication. By shaping when and how backchannels occur, prosodic features enhance the fluidity and coherence of dialogue, ensuring effective listener engagement and conversational balance.

## **2.7 Backchannels in task coordination**

Backchannels play a crucial role in coordinating joint activities, facilitating both horizontal transitions (within tasks) and vertical transitions (between tasks) in conversational hierarchies (Bangerter & Clark, 2003: 197). As project markers, backchannels help ground contributions and align actions, ensuring smooth shifts between conversational levels (ibid.: 198).

Horizontal transitions, which maintain continuity within a task, are commonly marked by “uh-huh”, “m-hm”, and “yeah”, signalling comprehension and encouraging the speaker to continue (ibid.: 200). In structured interactions like the Tangram matching task, backchannels confirm shared understanding and facilitate task progression (ibid.: 207).

Vertical transitions, marking entry or exit from subprojects, often involve “okay” and “all right”, which signal structural shifts in conversation (ibid.: 199). In the Lego building task, “okay” frequently marked the start or completion of phases, guiding participants through structured activities (ibid.: 211). The adaptability of backchannels allows them to manage complex, hierarchical interactions effectively.

Task complexity and participant familiarity influence backchannel use. In early Tangram trials, “okay” was prevalent for transition management, but as participants developed shared conventions, “uh-huh” became more common, streamlining communication (ibid.: 207). This shift illustrates how backchannels evolve as collaborative interactions become more efficient.

Beyond verbal responses, Clark & Krych (2004: 66-68) highlight the multimodal nature of feedback, where verbal backchannels integrate with non-verbal cues such as gestures and object displays. In collaborative Lego assembly, builders used gestures to indicate understanding or uncertainty, prompting verbal confirmations from directors (ibid.: 71-72).

Timing was critical — prompt backchannels ensured conversational flow, while delayed responses signalled misunderstanding or the need for clarification (ibid.: 74-75).

Overall, backchannels are essential tools in managing joint activities, ensuring alignment, transition management, and multimodal feedback integration. Their adaptability across tasks and interactional contexts underscores their significance in coordinating complex conversations and reinforcing the collaborative nature of human communication.

### **2.7.1 Backchannels in spontaneous vs. task-oriented conversations**

The study by Dideriksen et al. (2019) examines how conversational strategies, including backchannels, vary between spontaneously occurring conversations (SOC) and task-oriented conversations (TOC). Their findings reveal significant differences in the frequency and function of these strategies, emphasizing the adaptive nature of communication to contextual demands (Dideriksen et al., 2019: 2).

Surprisingly, backchannels were more frequent in SOC (33.4 % of utterances) than in TOC (19 %), challenging the initial hypothesis (ibid.: 5). This suggests their critical role in fostering rapport and mutual understanding in less structured, socially oriented interactions (ibid.). These findings align with earlier research that underscores the importance of backchannels in relational maintenance, as they create a sense of shared participation in dialogue (Duncan & Fiske, 1977 in Dideriksen et al., 2019: 6).

These findings collectively emphasize the flexibility of conversational strategies in adapting to different interactional needs. This nuanced understanding of conversational dynamics offers valuable insights for psycholinguistics and the design of human-computer interaction systems (Dideriksen et al., 2019: 11).

### **2.7.2 Role of backchannels in storytelling**

Backchannels play a vital role in conversational storytelling, shaping narrative flow and structure while engaging listeners (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve, 1970 in Tolins, 2014: 152). Traditional theories view them as secondary signals of acceptance, while proactive models emphasize their role in co-constructing narratives (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000; Clancy et al., 1996 in Tolins, 2014: 153). In this view, listeners influence storytelling through feedback, making narration an interactive process (Tolins, 2014: 153).

As project markers, backchannels like “uh-huh”, “right”, and “okay” guide speakers by signalling alignment, consent, or the need for elaboration (Bangerter & Clark, 2003 in Tolins, 2014: 153). Speakers monitor and adjust their narratives in real time based on these cues, reinforcing the interactive nature of storytelling (Clark & Krych, 2004 in Tolins, 2014: 153).

Generic backchannels (e.g., “uh-huh”, “yeah”) indicate comprehension and enable seamless narrative transitions (Bangerter & Clark, 2003; Goodwin, 1986 in Tolins, 2014: 156). Specific backchannels (e.g., “oh my gosh”, “really?”) elicit elaboration, prompting narrators to enrich details (Gardner, 2001 in Tolins, 2014: 157). Unlike repair mechanisms, specific backchannels encourage expansion rather than addressing misunderstandings (Schegloff, 1997 in Tolins, 2014: 158).

The proactive use of backchannels enhances narrative quality. Affective responses such as “wow” or non-verbal cues (smiles, nods) shape the emotional tone and structure of stories (Bavelas et al., 2000; Beukeboom, 2009 in Tolins, 2014: 153). Engaged listeners provide richer backchannel feedback, improving narrative coherence, whereas distracted listeners contribute fewer specific responses, leading to weaker storytelling (Emberston et al., 2010 in Tolins, 2014: 162).

Storytelling is a joint process, with backchannels structuring discourse and prompting elaboration (Tolins, 2014: 162). Generic backchannels often pair with discourse markers (e.g., “so”, “well”), maintaining narrative flow, while specific responses shape speaker elaboration and engagement (Heritage, 1984; Norrick, 2010b in Tolins, 2014: 156). This iterative exchange reflects the co-constructed nature of storytelling (Tolins, 2014: 157).

Far from being passive acknowledgments, backchannels actively shape narratives, enriching content and bridging events. Their ability to structure discourse and engage both speakers and listeners makes them fundamental to storytelling and effective communication.

## **2.8 Multicultural perspectives on backchannels**

Backchannels vary significantly across languages and cultures, reflecting distinct communicative norms and conversational strategies. In Japanese vs. American English, Japanese backchannels function as acknowledge acts, fostering a collaborative conversational flow, whereas American backchannels often serve as accept acts or judgmental reinforcers (White, 1997: 324). Japanese speakers also use backchannels more frequently, reinforcing active listener involvement (ibid.: 327, 339).

In British and Irish English, differences emerge in response forms and tag questions. British English uses a wider range of responses, including formal expressions like “quite”, and tag questions such as “is it?”, which resemble engagement markers like “yeah” (O’Keeffe, 2008: 11-13). Irish English, by contrast, uses religious references (e.g., “Jesus Christ”) as neutral discourse markers and favours reduplication (e.g., “yeah yeah”), while British English clusters “oh” with responses (ibid.: 13-14). These distinctions can lead to pragmatic misunderstandings between the two varieties (ibid.: 25-26).

German speakers use fewer backchannels and avoid overlap, whereas American English speakers employ them liberally to signal engagement (Heinz, 2003: 1122-1123). Similarly,

Japanese backchannels occur more frequently than English ones, reflecting cultural norms of active listening (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000: 1193). Despite these variations, prosodic features such as low-pitch regions appear consistent across languages, underscoring universal aspects of backchanneling (ibid.).

In Ruruuli/Lunyala (a Bantu language), backchannels include frequent lexical and non-lexical repetitions, a rare feature cross-linguistically (Zellers, 2021: 39). These repetitions serve alignment and acknowledgment functions (ibid.: 46). Prosodic modifications enhance their role, with low pitch for continuers, rising pitch for reactions, and extended duration for evocation backchannels, which prompt elaboration (ibid.: 44-46). Notably, 78.9 % of Ruruuli/Lunyala backchannels function as continuers, a far higher rate than in English or Japanese (ibid.: 43).

These findings emphasize backchannels as central to collaborative dialogue, shaped by lexical, prosodic, and cultural conventions. Differences in frequency, form, and function underscore the potential for cross-cultural misinterpretation, as speakers interpret backchannels through their own conversational norms (White, 1997: 339).

### **2.8.1 Bilingualism and backchanneling**

In bilingual speakers, the use of backchannels often reflects a phenomenon known as pragmatic transfer, where conversational behaviours in the first language (L1) are influenced by patterns from the second language (L2). This transfer is particularly evident in bilingual Germans residing in the United States, who adopt a higher frequency of overlapping backchannels compared to monolingual German speakers (Heinz, 2003: 1132). These patterns align more closely with American conversational norms, demonstrating how bilingual speakers internalize and adapt their backchanneling behaviours to match their cultural and linguistic environment (ibid.). The result is an interlanguage pragmatic system, blending elements from both languages to create unique conversational dynamics (ibid.: 1134).

Backchannels also serve as significant markers of cultural convergence or divergence in bilingual communication. Some bilinguals adapt their backchanneling patterns to align with their L2 as a form of cultural accommodation, demonstrating a willingness to integrate into the cultural norms of their interlocutors (ibid.: 1135). Others, however, maintain backchanneling patterns consistent with their L1, whether consciously or unconsciously (ibid.). This maintenance reflects a complex interplay of linguistic transfer, cultural identity, and social context, where backchannel use becomes a means of expressing or preserving cultural affiliation (ibid.).

These findings highlight the pivotal role of backchannels in shaping bilingual communication. Beyond their functional contribution to conversational flow, backchannels influence the speaker's cultural alignment and identity within interactions. By accommodating or resisting the backchannel norms of their L2, bilingual speakers navigate the nuances of cultural integration, social interaction, and personal identity, underscoring the intricate relationship between language use and cultural context.

## **2.9 Age and backchanneling**

The study by Krepsz et al. (2020) explores how the age of a conversational partner influences backchanneling behaviour, revealing critical distinctions in the interactional dynamics between older and younger speakers. Backchannels were found to vary significantly depending on the conversational partner's age (Krepsz et al., 2020: 40). Younger speakers produced more frequent backchannels when interacting with older individuals, likely as a means of signalling attentiveness and respect (ibid.). In contrast, older speakers tended to employ fewer backchannels with younger interlocutors, possibly relying more on nonverbal cues or adopting a different approach to conversational support (ibid.: 41).

The qualitative nature of backchannels also shifted based on perceived social and cognitive dynamics. Older speakers elicited more specific and affective backchannels, such as

“really?” or “interesting”, from younger counterparts, potentially reflecting the older participants’ assumption of storytelling or advisory roles (ibid.). These findings align with broader theories on conversational accommodation and age-related adjustments in communicative strategies, where interlocutors adapt their behaviour to meet perceived relational and interactional needs (ibid.).

Interestingly, the study also highlights how backchanneling frequency and type can affect conversational flow. Younger speakers using frequent generic backchannels with older partners, such as “uh-huh”, may inadvertently discourage detailed elaborations by signalling premature comprehension (ibid.: 42). Conversely, the more measured use of backchannels by older speakers often allows conversational turns to unfold fully, fostering narrative depth and speaker autonomy (ibid.). These findings demonstrate the intricate role of backchannels in shaping conversational dynamics and highlight the importance of aligning conversational strategies with age-related expectations.

The implications of these findings extend beyond conversation analysis to fields such as intergenerational communication and discourse analysis. By revealing how age-related perceptions influence interactive behaviours, the study underscores the importance of context sensitive conversational strategies that accommodate the unique preferences and expectations of different age groups (ibid.). Such insights provide valuable guidance for improving communication across generations, fostering mutual understanding, and enhancing dialogue in diverse social and professional settings.

## **2.10 Gender and backchanneling**

Backchannel behaviour exhibits significant gender-related variations, shaped by cultural expectations, conversational context, and interpretive frameworks. Women are generally observed to use backchannel responses more frequently than men, particularly in same-gender interactions, where these responses signal attentiveness and support (Fishman, 1978 in Marche & Peterson, 1993: 797). These backchannels often reflect women’s

relational communication style, prioritizing connection and conversational harmony (Mohindra and Azhar, 2012: 24). Similarly, Krepsz et al. (2022: 135) note that women use backchannels, such as “mm-hm” and nods, to emphasize attentiveness and relational dynamics, reinforcing their tendency toward cooperative communication. Women’s frequent use of backchannels, such as “mm-hm” or “uh-huh”, aligns with their focus on relational and facilitative communication styles, demonstrating their effort to maintain conversational harmony and attentiveness (Kjellmer, 2009: 89).

In cross-gender interactions, however, the dynamic shifts. Men have been shown to significantly increase their backchannel frequency, often matching or exceeding that of women in these contexts (Bilous & Krauss, 1988 in Marche & Peterson, 1993: 799). Despite this adjustment, the interpretive rules governing men’s and women’s use of backchannels often diverge, which can lead to conversational misunderstandings. For instance, women frequently use minimal responses to signal active listening and encourage the speaker to continue, yet men may interpret these responses as agreement, potentially creating miscommunication (Marche & Peterson, 1993: 814; Mohindra and Azhar, 2012: 26). Krepsz et al. (2022: 135) also highlight this misalignment, noting that men’s less frequent backchannel use and differing interpretations can disrupt conversational flow in mixed-gender dialogues. Additionally, Kjellmer (2009: 89) observes that men tend to favour backchannel responses like “yeah” and “right”, which often align with assertive or evaluative purposes rather than relational intent. This difference further underscores the gendered variation in backchannel use and the potential for interpretive mismatches in mixed-gender settings.

Moreover, the functional motivations behind backchannel usage differ by gender. Women’s backchannel behaviour aligns with societal expectations of fostering conversational harmony, emphasizing their supportive role in dialogue (Mohindra and Azhar, 2012: 25). Conversely, men’s comparatively lower frequency of backchannels and their focus on task-oriented exchanges reflect a more hierarchical communication style (ibid.: 27). When men do use backchannels, these responses are often context-dependent and less likely to

serve relational purposes, contributing to a dynamic in which men and women may approach conversational roles with differing priorities. This disparity aligns with findings that women consistently produce more backchannels, while men's responses are shaped by task-specific goals rather than relational intent (Krepsz et al., 2022: 135).

These gendered disparities in backchannel behaviour highlight the need for increased awareness of cultural and situational factors shaping conversational norms. By understanding how men and women use and interpret backchannels differently, communicators can minimize misunderstandings and foster more effective interpersonal and professional exchanges (Mohindra and Azhar, 2012: 28). Such insights are particularly relevant in mixed-gender settings, where miscommunication stemming from divergent backchanneling styles may otherwise hinder collaborative efforts.

## **2.11 Implications of backchanneling**

### **2.11.1 Pedagogical implications of backchanneling**

Gardner (1998) emphasizes the pedagogical importance of teaching backchannels as part of conversational skill development. Despite their frequency in natural interaction — occurring over a thousand times per hour in some contexts — backchannels are often neglected in language instruction (Gardner, 1998: 205). This oversight leaves learners less equipped to manage conversational dynamics effectively.

Cross-linguistic research indicates significant variability in backchannel usage and distribution, suggesting that language learners might benefit from explicit instruction tailored to their linguistic and cultural context. By integrating backchannel teaching into language curricula, learners could develop skills to navigate conversational norms in their target language, improving their communicative competence (ibid.: 207).

### **2.11.2 Implications of backchanneling for human-machine interaction**

Blomsma et al. (2024: 1175-1176) highlight the need for human-like backchanneling in social robots and Embodied Conversational Agents (ECAs), emphasizing context-sensitive responses to pauses and prosodic shifts for naturalistic interaction. Replicating the variability and adaptability of human backchannels remains a key challenge, requiring a nuanced understanding of individual differences and conversational contexts (ibid.: 1176).

Choi, Bang, and Kim (2024: 118) address this challenge with a multitask streaming model that integrates automatic speech recognition (ASR) and backchannel prediction, improving real-time human-machine dialogue. Their transformer-based system enhances backchannel timing and accuracy, achieving notable F1 score improvements on the Switchboard Corpus, underscoring the potential of multitask learning for socially aware AI (ibid.: 121-125). As research progresses, refining backchannel prediction and response mechanisms will be crucial for developing AI-driven communication systems that interact in a way that is more natural, engaging, and responsive to human conversational norms.

### 3 Material and Method

For this study, I used the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014*, a collection of contemporary British English conversations. Since my focus was on present-day spoken British English, this corpus provided an ideal dataset due to its relatively recent compilation and the homogeneity of British English usage throughout its conversations.

#### 3.1 Material

The *Spoken British National Corpus 2014* (further referred to as Spoken BNC2014), led by the ESRC-funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) at Lancaster University, is a publicly accessible corpus designed to represent present-day spoken British English (cf. Spoken BNC2014 (Love et al. 2017)). Building on the legacy of the original British National Corpus from 1994, the Spoken BNC2014 focuses on informal, conversational data collected between 2012 and 2016 (ibid.). It features 11,422,617 words of transcribed content from 1,251 recordings, with contributions from 668 speakers (ibid.). The corpus was developed in collaboration with the English Language Teaching group at Cambridge University Press and has been available publicly via Lancaster University's CQPweb server since 2017, with underlying XML files becoming downloadable in 2018 (ibid.).

In the Spoken BNC2014, each speaker was assigned a unique numeric speaker ID, which remained consistent across all recordings featuring that speaker (Love, 2017: 89). When speaker identification was uncertain, transcribers provided their best guess (ibid.).

De-identification was integrated into the transcription process to maintain speaker anonymity. Unlike automated anonymization methods, which risk inaccuracies, transcribers manually replaced personal identifiers such as names, addresses, and social media usernames with tags (ibid.: 90). Names were substituted with gender-marked labels, such as <name F> for female speakers or <name N> for ambiguous names like “Sam” (ibid.). Social media

references were labelled as <soc-med>, while institutions and unique locations were anonymized accordingly (ibid.).

The transcription scheme prioritized preserving spoken language features. Traditional punctuation conventions were abandoned in favour of pause markers: short pauses (.) and long pauses (...) (ibid.: 91). Question marks were retained to indicate interrogative intent, even in incomplete or declarative structures with rising intonation (ibid.: 92). Unlike the BNC1994, where overlap locations were precisely marked, the Spoken BNC2014 used a simplified <OL> tag at the start of overlapping turns without specifying alignment (ibid.: 93).

Filled pauses were standardized to eight distinct forms, improving transcription consistency (ibid.: 94). Unlike the BNC1994, which allowed for twelve vocalized pause forms but still included various orthographic inconsistencies in practice, the Spoken BNC2014 reduced the permissible forms to eight distinct options, each carefully defined by its phonetic characteristics and typical discourse functions (ibid.). Transcribers were instructed to map similar variations, such as “mmm” or “mm-mm”, to the standardized form “mm” (ibid.).

Non-verbal sounds were transcribed using bracketed labels such as [laugh], [cough], and [sigh], while a new category, [misc], was introduced for ambiguous vocalizations (ibid.: 96). Singing was marked with [sing=LYRICS], where lyrics were transcribed if known or replaced with a question mark if wordless (ibid.).

The XML encoding of the corpus used structured tags to organize metadata. Each utterance was enclosed in <u> tags with attributes specifying line number, speaker ID, and transcriber confidence (ibid.: 129). Unclear words were marked with <unclear> tags, distinguishing between uncertain transcriptions and omitted words, while anonymized information was labelled under <anon> elements (ibid.).

### 3.2 Method

To maintain the consistency of my data, I deliberately excluded conversations that involved mixed genders or mixed age groups. I downloaded the XML version of the corpus and manually examined all 1,251 conversations to identify those that featured exactly two participants of the same gender and age category. Initially, I considered different age categorizations but ultimately adjusted them based on the available data, settling on the following three groups: 0–25, 25–50, and 50 and above. I ensured that both speakers in each conversation were British nationals whose first language was English. While I initially considered factors such as socio-economic background and dialect, I ultimately disregarded them to prevent inconsistencies across the groups. Conversations that included speakers who did not meet these criteria were removed from consideration.

Once I identified the suitable conversations, I categorized them into six groups: male 0–25, male 25–50, male 50+, female 0–25, female 25–50, and female 50+. From each group, I randomly selected three conversations, ensuring that each conversation involved different speakers. This resulted in a final dataset of 18 conversations for analysis. To maintain uniformity, I determined the shortest conversation in terms of the number of turns — conversation S6J8, which contained 258 turns. Therefore, in each of the 18 conversations, I analysed only the first 258 turns, ensuring a consistent sample size across all groups. In total, I analysed 4,644 turns.

For the analysis, I manually examined each conversation, identifying and highlighting all instances of backchanneling within the first 258 turns. I noted additional contextual factors such as whether a backchannel led to a speaker change or prompted a reaction. After this initial identification process, I transferred the data into Excel spreadsheets, recording key details such as the turn number, speaker ID, backchannel content, and various classification criteria. Specifically, I categorized each backchannel as simple or complex and, if complex, further classified it as creative, a combination of multiple simple backchannels, or an

iteration of the same backchannel. Additionally, I noted whether a backchannel involved repetition of a previously spoken phrase, even if it consisted of only a single word. Further classifications included whether the backchannel was minimal or non-minimal, specific or generic, and what conversational function it served. I also documented whether the backchannel was produced with overlap, whether it led to a speaker change or reaction, its word class, and instances of clustering.

Throughout the process, I repeatedly returned to the conversations, ensuring that my classifications — particularly those related to function — were grounded in the surrounding context. Backchannels often derive their meaning from the broader conversational exchange, and I was careful to consider the speaker's intent, the preceding and following turns, and the overall interaction before assigning labels. This iterative approach allowed me to refine my categorizations and ensure that my analysis accurately reflected the communicative strategies employed by the speakers.

In addition to the numerical analysis, I composed a brief qualitative summary for each conversation, aimed at capturing its overall character and highlighting patterns or noteworthy interactional dynamics observed in the data. These summaries provide contextual background — including speaker demographics, setting, and conversational topics — as well as insights into how backchannels functioned within each specific dialogue. The summary details the balance of participation, distribution of backchannel forms (simple vs. complex, minimal vs. non-minimal, generic vs. specific), and functions, while also noting the presence of clusters, overlaps and instances that prompted speaker change or reactions. By incorporating illustrative excerpts from the transcripts, each summary offers a grounded account of how listener feedback shapes and supports the unfolding interaction.

After completing the analysis of individual conversations, I consolidated the data into broader categories for comparative analysis. I created two master spreadsheets, one for male speakers and one for female speakers, along with three additional spreadsheets

corresponding to the three age groups. This structure allowed me to analyse patterns in backchannel use based on gender and age.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations in this study. Since I worked exclusively with transcribed texts, I was unable to analyse intonation, which is a crucial element in backchannel use and could influence the interpretation of certain responses. Intonation often determines whether a backchannel expresses agreement, hesitation, or encouragement, and the absence of this feature in my analysis means that some nuances of interaction might not be fully captured.

Additionally, non-verbal backchannels, such as facial expressions, head nods, and other gestures, were not considered. These non-verbal cues play a fundamental role in communication, especially in reinforcing engagement and signalling attentiveness. Since these factors were excluded, it is possible that some backchannel responses may have been misinterpreted or underrepresented in their function. Future research incorporating audio and visual data would be beneficial in addressing these limitations and providing a more comprehensive understanding of backchannel use. Another limitation of this study lies in the size and scope of the dataset. With only 18 conversations — many of which were further shortened to ensure consistency across the corpus — the analysis is based on a relatively small and selective sample, which may not fully capture the breadth of backchannel use across different contexts or speaker groups. Despite these constraints, this research offers a detailed exploration of backchannel use in contemporary British English and provides a foundation for further investigations into the role of backchanneling in conversation.

## **4 Analysis**

In this section of the thesis, I will first provide a brief analysis of each of the 18 selected conversations, highlighting key patterns and notable findings. This will be followed by a summary conclusion that synthesizes the main observations across these individual analyses. After establishing this foundational overview, I will present a comparative analysis based on gender and age, examining how backchannel use varies across these two factors and identifying broader trends in conversational behaviour. Additional data supporting the analysis — including the complete alphabetical list of identified backchannels — can be found in Appendices I–IV.

### **4.1 Analysis of the selected conversations**

#### **4.1.1 Analysis of SZ98**

The conversation features two participants engaged in a lively discussion covering topics such as family matters, social dynamics, and personal experiences. Both participants are adult females (23 and 24 years old) who appear to have a close and familiar relationship. The conversation is characterized by its balanced nature, with both speakers actively contributing to the dialogue and frequently taking turns.

In total, 68 backchannels were identified throughout the conversation, with both participants contributing to the interactive and dynamic nature of the discussion (S0439 produced 44 backchannels and S0441 contributed 24).

The most frequent backchannels were “mm” (18 instances), “yeah” (16 instances) and “ah” (6 instances). The overlapping nature of many backchannels suggests a cooperative approach to turn-taking, typical of high-involvement conversations. Fourteen instances of overlap were documented, with these overlaps frequently occurring when participants shared emotionally significant information or attempted to co-construct the narrative (ex. 1).

- (1) S0439: we were just lying in bed chatting and er not me and --ANONnameM  
obviously me and --ANONnameF erm  
S0441: >>**wow** (SZ98)

The analysis also reveals a relatively high number (9) of creative backchannels, which go beyond simple acknowledgments to express emotional alignment, surprise, or evaluation. For instance, expressions like “oh my god wow” and “good god” highlight the listener’s surprise and involvement (ex. 2).

- (2) S0441: >>they 've got chocolate cream orange cream strawberry cream  
S0439: >>**oh my god wow**  
S0441: coconut cream digestive cream (.) and custard cream  
S0439: **good god** (SZ98)

Clusters of backchannels are observed in 4 instances. These clusters serve as supportive cues for narrative continuation, often in emotionally charged exchanges (ex. 3). Clustering seems to indicate the listener’s increased attentiveness and readiness to contribute, though the participants generally take the floor directly when they want to engage, rather than relying on clustering as a signal.

- (3) S0441: luckily he 's been assessed by er mental health --UNCLEARWORD  
S0439: **oh that 's good**  
S0441: --UNCLEARWORD  
S0439: **that 's really good**  
S0441: >> housing association and domestic abuse people (SZ98)

Regarding backchannel form, 16 complex responses were identified. These include 9 instances of creative tokens, such as “so sad isn’t it?”, which mirrors the speaker’s emotional assessment and reinforces shared understanding. Additionally, 4 cases of simple

form combinations (e.g., “mm yeah”) appeared. Finally, iterations also appeared, as in “yeah yeah”.

The functions of the backchannels observed in this conversation align with established conversational strategies. Continuers (e.g., “mm”, “yeah”, “ah”) dominate with 44 occurrences, serving primarily to support and encourage the speaker without interrupting the narrative flow. Additionally, 16 backchannels function as engaged responses (e.g., “god”, “really?”, “oh my god wow”), often accompanying moments of emotional resonance, while 8 serve as convergence signals (e.g., “I know”, “exactly”, “yeah”), reinforcing mutual understanding and agreement. The prevalence of continuers indicates that the conversation primarily aims to maintain speaker flow.

In terms of minimal and non-minimal responses, 45 were categorized as minimal (e.g., “mm”, “yeah”), while 23 were non-minimal, often taking the form of evaluative phrases or longer expressions like “so sad isn’t it”. The prevalence of minimal responses suggests that the listener frequently relies on these tokens to indicate attentiveness without disrupting the speaker’s flow. Generic tokens were more frequent than specific ones (46 versus 22), suggesting a primary focus on maintaining conversational flow rather than providing specific commentary.

Instances of prompted speaker change were recorded 12 times, with two cases clearly indicating an attempt to hand over the floor (ex. 4a). Additionally, 9 backchannels prompted speaker elaboration, particularly those involving creative or emotionally salient tokens such as “oh really?” (ex. 4b). Furthermore, prompted reactions most commonly took the form of elaborations (8 occurrences), with one instance of confirmation.

- (4) a. S0439: it 's yeah and now it 's all soaking wet  
S0441: **good**  
S0439: **yay**  
S0441: --UNCLEARWORD it 's going really quickly

b. S0439: what ? the people you work with or ?

S0441: no this couple

S0439: **oh really ?**

S0441: they were like she was like oh so what 's what 's new with you ? and I was like oh I 've just been on holiday and they were like oh a holiday again ? and I was like I 've only been twice this year and they were like well alright for some is n't it ?  
(SZ98)

#### **4.1.2 Analysis of SEJ7**

This conversation takes place between two female friends (aged 13 and 14) at one of the participant's home in Linton. The discussion revolves around school life, subject choices, teachers, books, films, and extracurricular activities. The tone of the conversation is casual and friendly, with frequent instances of shared experiences, mutual understanding, and expressions of preference.

A total of 30 backchannels were identified (most frequent ones being “yeah” (11 instances), followed by “oh yeah” (7 instances) and “uh huh” (2 instances)), with S0324 contributing 18 and S0325 contributing 12. This number is relatively low, especially given that we might expect a higher frequency of backchanneling in conversations between female participants. One possible explanation is that the discussion focused on exchanging information rather than co-constructing stories. Additionally, the structured nature of the conversation, with clear turn-taking and minimal overlap, may have reduced the need for frequent backchanneling as speakers were given sufficient space to complete their turns without interruption.

In terms of simplicity versus complexity, 17 backchannels were simple, while 13 were complex, showing a higher degree of variation than in some other conversations. The presence of complex backchannels indicates a more engaged listening style, where responses contribute to the dialogue rather than just filling pauses. They mostly take the form of simple

form combination backchannels (11 instances), followed by repetitions (3 instances) and some creative or iterative forms (2 instances combined). Responses such as “oh yeah hmm” and “yeah she’s really funny” provide more than mere acknowledgment; they subtly enhance the conversational flow (ex. 5).

(5) S0324: Mrs --ANONnameF is really funny

S0325: **yeah she 's really funny**

S0324: in a good way funny though like laughing at her (SEJ7)

While overlaps are absent, there is one case of a prompted speaker change, which, however, occurred after a longer pause (ex. 6a). This suggests that the transition was not necessarily driven by the backchannel itself but rather by a momentary gap in the conversation, which the listener interpreted as an opportunity to take the floor. Furthermore, two backchannels prompted elaboration, reinforcing the idea that these were used as active engagement tools rather than passive acknowledgments (ex. 6b).

(6) a. S0325: laughing at other certain teachers

S0324: **yes (...)** erm butter where 's my is this my juice b. S0325: not going to take art

b. S0325: not going to take art

S0324: **oh okay**

S0325: because I ca n't take a humanities if I take art if I take human science with language humanities music (SEJ7)

Backchannels are predominantly minimal (25 instances) rather than non-minimal (5 instances), demonstrating a listening style that prioritizes short affirmations over extended contributions. However, the use of non-minimal backchannels (e.g., “annoying”, “Spanish”) indicates that the listener occasionally expands upon the speaker’s point, rather than simply affirming it.

Regarding specificity, 22 backchannels were generic, while 8 were specific, reinforcing the idea that most backchannels served as general affirmations rather than detailed responses. This pattern aligns with the casual, flowing nature of the discussion, where shared knowledge reduces the need for excessive elaboration.

From a functional perspective, 20 backchannels served as continuers (e.g., “yeah”, “oh yeah”, “uh huh”), ensuring that the speaker knew they were being listened to. Nine backchannels functioned as convergence markers (e.g., “oh yeah”, “good”, “Spanish”), reinforcing agreement and social alignment, and one engaged backchannel was identified (“oh okay”), adding an extra layer of enthusiasm or encouragement.

Interestingly, clustering is absent, which suggests that this conversation follows a structured, organized exchange pattern with minimal overlapping reactions.

#### **4.1.3 Analysis of SFJ2**

The conversation takes place between two female university students (aged 19 and 20) in a university canteen during a lunch break. The participants engage in a dynamic discussion covering a broad range of topics, including music, the internet, TV shows, men, celebrities, weekend activities, university, and social life. The overall tone is light-hearted, humorous, and personal, reflecting their close and informal relationship.

A total of 34 backchannels were identified in this conversation. S0275 produced 28 backchannels, while S0276 only contributed 6, showing a significant asymmetry in listener engagement. This suggests that S0275 played a more active listener role, while S0276 dominated the discussion with longer speaking turns.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of this conversation is the relatively low number of backchannels. Typically, female speakers are associated with a high-engagement

conversational style, frequently using backchannels to demonstrate attentiveness and encourage elaboration. However, in this case, the backchannel frequency is lower than expected, suggesting that other factors influence the interaction dynamics.

One possible explanation is the fast-paced nature of the conversation, which includes frequent overlaps. This rapid exchange may reduce the need for traditional backchanneling, as engagement is expressed more actively through immediate responses. Additionally, the speakers' shared background and strong familiarity might eliminate the necessity for verbal encouragement, as their mutual understanding allows the conversation to flow naturally without constant affirmations.

Despite the lower backchannel frequency, there is notable diversity in backchannel forms. The most common backchannels were “yeah” (8 instances), “oh my god” (5 instances) and “oh no” (4 instances). Unlike more minimal backchannels such as “mm”, this conversation contains a higher proportion of evaluative and emotional responses, which actively reinforce engagement and alignment with the speaker's message. This is supported by the relatively high number of non-minimal responses (19 minimal vs. 15 non-minimal). In terms of specificity, 18 backchannels were generic, while 16 were specific, suggesting a relatively balanced use of general affirmations and more contextually anchored responses.

The distribution of backchannel complexity reveals an interesting balance: 19 complex backchannels and 15 simple ones. This relatively high number of complex backchannels suggests that the listener frequently built on the speaker's statements rather than merely acknowledging them.

Regarding speaker changes, backchannels prompted a shift in speaker only 5 times. Upon closer analysis, these speaker changes often occurred during an overlapping backchannel usage, rather than as a response to a pause (ex. 7). This suggests that the listener, rather than waiting for a clear handover, sometimes used backchannels as an entry point to take over the

floor, leading to a more fluid yet competitive interaction style. Additionally, three backchannels prompted a speaker reaction, most often in the form of elaboration.

(7) S0275: >> like the see seesaw (.) ah mini seesaw

S0276: >>**yeah** (.) yeah but one that you can sit on on your own or it 's like --  
UNCLEARWORD

S0275: >>--UNCLEARWORD just so lonely (SFJ2)

The overlap patterns further support the idea of an interactive and co-constructed conversation, with 26 instances of no overlap and 8 instances of overlap. This suggests that while there is some competition for the floor, the overall interaction remains cooperative, with speakers allowing space for turn-taking.

Although there were no instances of clustering, the interaction remains dynamic, relying more on overlapping and expressive forms of listener feedback than on the rapid succession of affirmations.

In terms of function, the backchannels served primarily as continuers (17 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “oh”, “no”), engaged responses (11 instances, e.g., “oh my god”, “oh no”, “oh how lovely”), and convergence tokens (6 instances, e.g., “I know”, “oh definitely”, “yeah you do you do”). The high number of engaged backchannels suggests that, despite their lower frequency, the backchannels used were highly expressive and interactive, adding to the lively and dynamic tone of the conversation.

#### **4.1.4 Analysis of S8U5**

The conversation takes place between two male friends (both 17 years old) as they walk home from school in Slough. Their discussion revolves around school life, coursework, teachers, friends, biking, and an upcoming party. The interaction is marked by an informal and humorous tone, reinforced by shared knowledge, playful teasing, and an easy-going

conversational rhythm. A total of 65 backchannels were identified, with 39 produced by S0405 and 26 by S0555. The most frequently used ones were “yeah” (29 instances), “oh” (4 instances) and “wow” (3 instances).

One of the most distinctive features of this conversation is the high number of creative backchannels. Out of the 65 backchannels, 13 were classified as creative. Many of these creative responses add a layer of engagement beyond mere affirmation (ex. 8). In total, 20 complex backchannels were identified compared to 45 simple ones.

- (8) S0405: yeah I know --UNCLEARWORD (.) but it 's still it 's still one way like  
S0555: **yeah it 's still one way** (S8U5)

The presence of long multiunit backchannels is another significant feature of this conversation. Several instances (3) of iteration-based backchannels (“yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah”, “oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah”, “yeah I know I know I know”) create a sense of high engagement and involvement, even though overlap remains minimal (10 instances). These responses serve to reinforce alignment and shared knowledge, making the dialogue feel fluid and connected (ex. 9).

- (9) S0555: she 'll just like explode and then like come back to normal and then just explode  
S0405: **yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah** (S8U5)

The function of backchannels in this conversation leans strongly toward engagement and convergence. Of the 65 recorded instances, 12 were classified as engaged backchannels (e.g., “wow”, “what?”, “oh my god”), another 12 served as convergence markers (e.g., “yeah”, “yeah I know”, “I see”) and the rest (41) were used as continuers (e.g., “yeah”, “oh”, “uhu”). This means that many backchannels did more than just acknowledge — they actively reinforced agreement, and alignment between the speakers. For example, “yeah it’s still one way” and “oh my god” demonstrate emotional investment rather than mere passive listening (ex. 10).

(10) S0555: on the front title page

S0405: **oh my god** (S8U5)

Despite the presence of long multiunit backchannels, the majority of responses were minimal (50 instances), compared to 15 non-minimal ones (e.g., “I see”, “it’s really awkward yeah”, “yeah I know”). This suggests that while the conversation was highly engaged, backchanneling still followed a relatively brief and efficient pattern. Additionally, 14 backchannels were identified as specific compared to 51 generic ones.

Notably, “mm” is rarely used, appearing only twice. Instead, the speakers heavily favour affirmative adverbs, which appear in 29 instances. This aligns with the general trend of a more engaged and affirmational style, where speakers provide explicit agreement rather than neutral or passive acknowledgment. This preference is further reflected in responses like “yeah I see I see I see”, which combine affirmative markers with discourse elaboration.

Backchannels prompted speaker changes 8 times, showing that they were sometimes used as subtle turn-taking cues rather than just passive feedback (ex. 11a). Additionally, 7 backchannels directly prompted a reaction, with 6 leading to elaboration (ex. 11b) and 1 resulting in confirmation. This suggests that while backchannels mainly served as support tokens, they occasionally played a role in directing the flow of conversation. However, clustering occurred only once in the entire conversation, indicating that this form of rapid backchannel succession was largely absent from the interaction.

(11) S0555: g- yeah --ANONnameM them lot they always they hang out in the with the same people

S0405: **yeah I know** (.) cos --ANONnameM just --ANONnameM just go away every time that happens I du n no

b. S0405: erm (.) du n no had a (.) erm I came to school on time I this is the first time I've been to an assembly in (.) it feels like months probably just weeks though

S0555: **are you serious ? wow**

S0405: yeah I mean I give a lot of assemblies but I do n't go to them (S8U5)

#### **4.1.5 Analysis of SR9W**

This conversation features two male speakers (20 and 21 years old) engaging in a relatively reserved exchange, with only 22 instances of backchanneling. This is significantly lower than in other conversations analysed, suggesting a more structured turn-taking pattern with fewer listener responses. Both speakers contribute a similar number of backchannels (12 from S0670 and 10 from S0671), indicating a balanced level of engagement rather than one-sided affirmations.

One of the most striking features of this conversation is the lack of variety and complexity in backchannels. Out of the 22 backchannels, only two were classified as complex, although they remained relatively simple in structure — “uhu okay” and “oh right okay”. Furthermore, only three backchannels were classified as non-minimal, in contrast to 19 minimal responses, highlighting a strong preference for brief and unobtrusive listener feedback. The most frequent backchannels were highly minimal responses, including “oh” (8 instances), “yeah” (6 instances), and “okay” (2 instances), which all function as continuers. Most of these were generic in nature, with 20 classified as generic and only two as specific, further emphasizing the reserved and non-committal tone of the exchange.

The absence of multiunit backchannels or highly engaged responses suggests a low involvement conversational style. Instead of frequent affirmations or encouragements, the speakers allow longer conversational units to unfold without interruption. The low number of engaged backchannels (1 instance; “really?”) and convergence markers (1 instance; “yes”) further supports this interpretation. This pattern is reinforced by the low frequency of overlap, with only 5 overlapping instances recorded, indicating that turn-taking was generally well-regulated and non-competitive.

One of the few distinctive patterns in this conversation is the succession of five consecutive “oh” backchannels, forming a cluster (ex. 12). This repetition is notable because it deviates from the otherwise minimalistic style of the conversation. Rather than acting as a simple acknowledgment, this sequence of “oh” likely functions as a marker of processing or realization, where the listener is actively engaging with new information but not yet ready to take a full turn. This pattern may also serve a comedic function reflecting the familiar and light-hearted dynamic between the participants.

- (12) S0670: you know it 's gravity is n't one day gon na be  
S0670: like nope inverse to the sky  
S0671: **oh**  
S0670: **oh**  
S0671: **oh**  
S0670: **oh**  
S0671: **oh** I nearly I 'm so glad those bricks were there (SR9W)

Despite this moment of deviation, only one backchannel in the entire conversation prompted a speaker change, and just one prompted a reaction (confirmation), underscoring the generally passive and restrained nature of listener involvement.

#### **4.1.6 Analysis of SHSD**

The conversation takes place between two teenage males (aged 16 and 17) in an underground train in London. Their discussion covers a range of topics, including age and experience, religion, movies, TV shows, Batman, and trains. The conversation has an informal and analytical tone, with both speakers engaging in deep discussions and occasionally challenging each other’s viewpoints.

Backchannels play a significant role in this conversation, with a total of 66 instances occurring throughout. S0405 produced 34 backchannels, while S0402 contributed 32, showing a fairly balanced use between the two speakers. The most frequent backchannel

was “yeah” (42 instances), followed by “yeah yeah” (4 instances) and “mm” (3 instances). The high frequency of “yeah” suggests active engagement and affirmation, while the presence of backchannels such as “what?” and “really?” reflects the speakers’ interest in the discussion and their attempts to seek clarification or express disbelief.

The conversation exhibits a predominance of continuer backchannels (47 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “right”) followed by convergence backchannels (16 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “yeah yeah”, “oh right yeah”). There were also three engaged backchannels (“really?”, “oh yeah?”, “what?”), which were more expressive and emotionally involved, such as S0405’s “what?” in reaction to a particularly striking moment in the discussion (ex. 13).

- (13) S0402: there 's this one scene where where he shoots an arrow up into the sky right  
there 's nothing there there 's no building or whatever he just grapples away  
S0405: **what ?** (SHSD)

Overlapping speech occurs in this conversation but does not dominate the interaction, with 52 instances occurring without overlap and 14 with overlap. Unlike in some conversations where overlaps strongly indicate turn-taking competition, here, they seem to function more as a means of reinforcing engagement rather than prompting frequent speaker transitions (ex. 14).

- (14) S0402: >> because there are some people that are older than us who are stupider than  
us  
S0405: >>**yeah yeah** (SHSD)

The conversation also contains a few instances of multiunit backchannels, though they are not particularly long or complex (e.g., “yeah yeah” or “oh right yeah”). They primarily serve to reinforce agreement, occasionally adding emphasis but rarely altering the direction of the conversation. For instance, when S0405 responded with “yeah Superman”, it added emphasis to the discussion rather than shifting the conversational floor (ex. 15a). Speaker transitions in this conversation mostly occur at natural completion points, with backchannels

acting more as supportive acknowledgments rather than clear turn-transition markers. Only two backchannels in the entire conversation prompted a speaker change, and just 4 prompted a reaction (ex. 17), showing that while backchannels play a role in feedback, they rarely influence speaker dynamics directly. When they do, it is often in moments where the speaker has paused (ex. 15b).

(15) a. S0405: I think Superman 's meant to be the symbol of hope

S0402: **yeah S- Superman**

S0405: but he 's so much more boring and placid and dull

b. S0405: Superman messes up all the time too (.) does n't he ?

S0402: yeah (.) and and yeah

S0405: (...) **yeah** (.) so why do more people root for Batman ? cos he 's a more awesome hero ? or because they actually stand for what he he stands for more ?  
(SHSD)

Interestingly, several salient backchannels — those that are more expressive or evaluative, such as “what?”, “really?” or “oh my god”— were often left without explicit response. Rather than inviting further elaboration, these backchannels appear to serve as momentary reactions that acknowledge surprise or interest without necessarily prompting the speaker to expand on their statement (ex. 16).

(16) S0402: Dr like --ANONnameM tried to get rid of Dr --ANONnameN like years ago

S0405: >>**oh yeah oh my god**

S0402: well everyone just dismissed it as oh it 's a kid that 's just angry that just does n't like the teacher rather than the teacher is genuinely poor (SHSD)

The majority of backchannels used in the conversation are simple (51 instances), while 15 are complex. For example, in response to an evaluation of Batman and Superman, S0405 used “oh yeah?”, combining surprise with agreement, which encourages elaboration while also engaging emotionally with the discussion (ex. 17). Additionally, 54 backchannels were classified as minimal, while 12 were non-minimal, including more evaluative or expressive

responses like “they’re not yeah” or “really?”, which add emphasis or nuance to the interaction. Likewise, the distribution of specificity shows that 49 were generic and only 17 were specific, pointing to a general tendency toward broad affirmations rather than context-bound evaluations.

(17) S0402: yeah and th- and then then you start you see it so so many times that you start picking the faults in it

S0405: **oh yeah ?**

S0402: there 's this one scene where where he shoots an arrow up into the sky right there 's nothing there there 's no building or whatever he just grapples away (SHSD)

Additionally, there were two instances of clustering, where multiple backchannels appeared in rapid succession, reinforcing moments of heightened engagement.

#### **4.1.7 Analysis of S3M4**

The conversation takes place between two sisters (47 and 48 years old) who are on a skiing holiday in Bulgaria. The setting of the conversation is during lunch at a hotel, and their discussion revolves around skiing, social arrangements, and general observations about their environment and friends. The interaction is characterized by frequent overlaps, complex backchanneling, and highly engaged listening behaviour.

A total of 61 backchannels were identified in the conversation, with the majority (45) coming from speaker S0517 and the remaining 16 from S0525. The most frequently used backchannels were “mm” (8 instances), “yeah” (8 instances) and “oh” (5 instances). A significant proportion of the backchannels (29) occur with overlap, suggesting an engaged conversational dynamic where both speakers participate simultaneously rather than waiting for explicit turn allocation. This frequent overlap aligns with the high-involvement nature of the conversation, reinforcing a sense of closeness and shared understanding.

One of the most distinctive features of this conversation is the complexity of the backchannels. Out of 61 backchannels, 35 were classified as complex, demonstrating how the listeners provided layered responses that reacted to different parts of the speaker's utterance. These complex backchannels often include multiple elements, such as in the instance “yeah (.) oh yes yes (.) mm (.) oh well (.) yes”, where the listener engages with the speaker's turn on several levels — acknowledging, affirming, and adding emotional nuance (ex. 18).

(18) S0525: last year (.) and she was out there (.) erm and they had (.) they had a night there they went they had a day 's workshop and training then they had the night where they laid on a big party they had all the Chinese management all the Chinese production team over had everybody on stilts and big costumes and (.) but it rained but it was all outdoors which was a shame and then the following day they went to Birmingham and they had erm (.) that (.) sorry I 'm getting so they had a day workshop and in the evening they went to Birmingham (.) they were put up at hotel --ANONplace (.) had a meal (.) then the following morning Jamie Oliver 's for a breakfast meeting and then a workshop and then so they were kind of combining it with a few places which was local for her she said that was good because it was all handy for her

S0517: >>yeah (.) oh yes yes (.) mm (.) oh well (.) yes (.) it could be anywhere else anywhere in the country (S3M4)

Another significant pattern is the prevalence of speaker changes following backchannels. Twenty-five instances were recorded where a backchannel was immediately followed by a speaker taking over the floor (ex. 19a). This suggests that backchannels are not only used as supportive cues but also as transitional markers for turn-taking. Additionally, backchannels prompted a reaction from the speaker 9 times, with 7 instances leading to elaboration and two resulting in confirmation (ex. 19b).

(19) a. S0517: >>>er (.) I wonder how much they charge for that (.) privilege ? (.) this is special selection of high quality teas delivered from the best tea plantations in the world

S0525: **mm** (.) well they do something in between because it tastes like wee it was really disgusting

b. S0517: >>**gosh** (.) **oh okay** (.) **oh do you ?**

S0525: yes so she had taken a couple of outfits for that (.) erm I imagine -- ANONnameF flew in put her sparkly dress on and gave a talk and flew out again yeah (.) but they were they are all they are doing that so (S3M4)

Clustering of backchannels was observed in 14 instances, which further supports the active participation of both speakers. Unlike in some conversations where backchannels are isolated responses, in this case, clusters often appear as overlapping reactions to different parts of an extended turn (ex. 18).

Regarding the form of the backchannels, 39 were categorized as minimal (e.g., “mm”, “yeah”), while 22 were non-minimal, often taking the form of evaluative phrases (e.g., “oh that’s a shame”). Generic backchannels (38) were more frequent than specific ones (23), indicating that the listeners prioritized maintaining conversational flow over providing detailed commentary.

In terms of function, backchannels were most frequently used to signal convergence (22 instances, e.g., “mm”, “yeah”, “oh of course”), followed closely by engaged responses (21 instances, e.g., “oh”, “oh dear”, “oh wow”) and continuers (18 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “okay”). This distribution suggests that the conversation heavily relies on backchannels to reinforce mutual understanding and solidarity rather than merely indicating passive listening.

#### **4.1.8 Analysis of SMK7**

The conversation takes place between two women (aged 26 and 27) in a shared kitchen in a house in Finchley, London. As best friends and housemates, their discussion revolves around everyday topics, such as food, meal planning, weight loss, exercise, budgeting,

shopping habits, and personal experiences. The conversation has a casual, friendly, and cooperative tone, with both speakers frequently offering opinions, sharing advice, and responding supportively.

Backchannels play an essential role in this conversation, with a total of 59 instances occurring throughout. S0632 produced 30 backchannels, while S0631 contributed 29, demonstrating a nearly even distribution. The most frequent backchannel was “yeah” (18 instances), followed by “mm” (16 instances) and “no” (4 instances). The high frequency of affirmative backchannels indicates an engaged and interactive discussion style, with participants frequently affirming each other’s points or signalling attentiveness (ex.20).

(20) S0631: it 's trashy sauce yeah

S0632: **yeah trash sauce** (SMK7)

The primary function of backchannels in this conversation is continuation (44 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “oh”). Convergence backchannels (11 instances, e.g., “no”, “oh right”, “oh yeah yeah okay”) are primarily used to signal agreement. Engaged backchannels (4 instances, e.g. “wow”, “oh god”, “that’s really good”) reflect moments of heightened emotional involvement, usually in response to surprising or personally relevant information (ex. 21).

(21) S0631: so maybe it was just sitting differently so I moved it a lot and I kept getting on it and moved it around and it just kept coming up with ten six

S0632: **that 's really good**

S0631: my lowest last year was 10 five –UNCLEARWORD (SMK7)

One of the defining features of this conversation is the frequent use of overlap, with 32 backchannels occurring without overlap and 27 occurring with overlap. Unlike in competitive conversations where overlap signals interruptions or attempts to take the floor, here it serves different functions, such as reinforcing engagement, signalling attentiveness, and demonstrating alignment with the speaker. For example, when S0631 describes her

experience with weight loss, S0632 interjects with “yeah” and “mm” at multiple points, reinforcing support and subtly signalling involvement without attempting to take control of the discussion (ex. 22). This pattern suggests that overlapping backchannels are used to sustain engagement rather than alter turn structure.

- (22) S0631: I was like okay so I get off it so I gave it a kick like to see if maybe the floor or maybe it was just kind of stuck on the same weight as I got on and I got on again and it went ten stone six so I was like right better but it could be the floor

S0632: >>**yeah**

S0631: so I got I moved it around a lot and I got on

S0632: >>**yeah**

S0631: it again and I got on it again and it kept saying the same thing (SMK7)

Unlike some of the previous conversations with more frequent instances of multiunit backchannels, this exchange contains relatively few extended affirmations. There are some examples of repetition-based multiunit backchannels, such as “oh yeah yeah okay” and “no I know I know I know”, but they occur sparingly. When multiunit backchannels do occur, they appear in moments of stronger alignment or emphatic agreement, such as when S0631 confirms a shared viewpoint with “oh yes okay cool”, reinforcing agreement before allowing S0632 to continue (ex. 23).

- (23) S0632: oh is that in erm that 's February this is still January it 's the

S0631: >>**oh yeah yeah okay**

S0632: thirteenth yeah

S0631: **oh yeah yeah**

S0632: so it 's all

S0631: >>**oh yes okay cool**

S0632: it 's all good not this weekend but the weekend after (SMK7)

The majority of backchannels in this conversation were simple in structure, with 49 classified as simple and only 10 as complex. Most responses were minimal in nature — 51 out of 59 — reflecting a preference for brief, phatic tokens such as “yeah” or “mm” over

more elaborate or evaluative contributions. Additionally, generic responses (44 instances) outweighed specific ones (15), suggesting that speakers relied more on general affirmations rather than context-specific reactions.

Interestingly, some salient backchannels are often left without explicit responses. Examples include “wow” and “that’s really good”, which acknowledge a point but do not necessarily prompt further elaboration (ex. 21). This suggests that such backchannels function as standalone reactions rather than invitations for additional discussion.

There were no instances of backchannels prompting speaker changes or reactions in this conversation. This absence indicates that the backchannels primarily served as supportive cues rather than interactive triggers, maintaining conversational flow without shifting the dynamic or prompting elaboration.

The conversation also lacks clustering, with only one example present (ex. 23). Unlike other interactions where speakers respond with several affirmative tokens in quick succession, the backchannels here are more evenly distributed and contextually spaced.

#### **4.1.9 Analysis of SP4L**

The conversation takes place between two women (aged 34 and 39) in one of the participant’s home. They are discussing travel, free time, work, and holiday plans. The conversation is engaged and collaborative, with both speakers actively contributing, asking questions, and sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Backchannels play a significant role, with 70 instances occurring throughout the exchange. The distribution between the two speakers is nearly equal, with S0322 producing 36 backchannels and S0320 contributing 34. The most common backchannel “mm” (21

instances) is predominantly used as a vocalization of attentiveness, followed by “yeah” (13 instances) and “oh” (13 instances).

The primary function of backchannels in this conversation is continuation (57 instances, e.g., “mm”, “oh”, “yeah”). Additionally, engaged backchannels (8 instances), such as “gosh”, “really?” and “oh wow”, indicate heightened emotional involvement. Convergence backchannels are also present, though only with 5 instances (e.g., “yeah that’s true”, “of course yes”, “his birthday right”).

Regarding overlap, 56 backchannels occur without overlap and 13 occur with overlap. This suggests a conversation that is fluid and cooperative, rather than one marked by interruptions or competitive turn-taking. Overlapping backchannels primarily function as real-time affirmations rather than as attempts to take the floor. For example, when S0320 is discussing her accommodation plans, S0322 interjects with “oh okay”, demonstrating understanding while allowing the main speaker to continue (ex. 24).

(24) S0320: erm so we 've got one I 've got two in fact his mum found one and my friend  
's got one

S0322: >>**oh okay** (SP4L)

The conversation is dominated by minimal backchannels (60 instances, e.g., “mm”, “yeah”, “oh”). Non-minimal backchannels (10 instances), often combining affirmation with additional discourse elements (e.g., “oh that’s a shame”), signal more expressive involvement but do not necessarily prompt topic shifts. Additionally, the distribution of backchannel types shows a clear preference for general affirmations, with 58 generic backchannels compared to only 12 specific ones.

Salient backchannels occur in this conversation but do not always elicit explicit responses. For example, “of course yes” and “oh that’s a shame” reflect not only agreement but also

a degree of stance-taking, which contributes to an evaluative tone in the interaction. While these backchannels may reinforce alignment, they do not necessarily invite further elaboration, suggesting that they function more as affective markers rather than conversational pivots (ex. 25).

(25) S0320: it 's not a place you wan na go anyway actually whether you can pronounce it or not

S0322: **oh that 's a shame**

S0320: and then after that so we 're gon na go to er --ANONplace for --ANONnameF 's birthday for the weekend which is gon na be entertaining with --ANONnameM I do n't quite know how it 's gon na work and then the week after that we 're going down to (.) mm --ANONplace (SP4L)

The majority of backchannels in this conversation are simple (59 instances), with only 11 instances of complex backchannels. An example of a complex backchannel in this conversation is “oh yeah that’s true”, where agreement is reinforced through an added discourse element.

Clustering is rare in this exchange, with only two instances of rapid backchannel succession, each serving a different function. One instance leads to speaker change, indicating that the listener uses repeated affirmations as a transition tool to take the floor (ex. 26). The second cluster does not result in a shift but rather strengthens the speaker’s point through reinforcement, emphasizing alignment and shared perspective.

(26) S0322: do it more

S0320: **yeah**

S0322: beginning then

S0320: **yeah**

S0322: and then having the time afterwards

S0320: **maybe**

S0322: >>I do n't know cos I 'm trying to work out

S0320: are you gon na have you 're gon na have a celebration here as well are n't you  
? either before or after ? (SP4L)

Finally, in this conversation, backchannels occasionally influenced the direction of the interaction. Two instances of prompted speaker change were observed, where a backchannel served as a subtle cue for the listener to take the floor. Additionally, one backchannel prompted a reaction from the speaker in the form of elaboration, indicating that while rare, some backchannels did function as interactive triggers rather than passive acknowledgments.

#### **4.1.10 Analysis of SHJJ**

The conversation takes place between two men (aged 44 and 37) in Gordon Square, London, during an informal gathering. Their discussion spans a wide range of topics, including language teaching, traveling, wildlife, tourism, football, university life, and personal anecdotes. The tone is casual, reflective, and occasionally humorous, reflecting their long-standing familiarity and shared intellectual interests.

The conversation features a total of 82 backchannels, demonstrating a high level of listener engagement. S0070 produced 56 backchannels, while S0180 contributed 26, suggesting that S0070 took on a more active listening role, whereas S0180 spoke for longer periods. The most frequent backchannels were “yeah” (21 instances), “oh” (9 instances) and “right” (6 instances). Despite the high number of backchannels, the conversation remains well balanced, with each speaker contributing significantly.

One of the features of this conversation is the relatively high frequency of overlap, with 67 instances of no overlap and 15 instances of overlap. Overlapping backchannels played a crucial role in speaker changes, with several instances where the listener’s affirmation was delivered while the speaker was still finishing their turn. In these cases, the backchannel itself acted as an entry point for the listener to take over, leading to an organic transition

rather than a structured turn allocation. For instance, early in the conversation, when S0070 was describing a personal experience, S0180 overlapped by saying “oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah” before smoothly transitioning into their own related comment (ex. 27).

(27) S0070: I do n't know j- I do n't really look I just heard she was in erm the

S0180: >>**oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah** (.) I thought that as well (SHJJ)

Most backchannels in this conversation function as continuers, with responses like “yeah”, “oh” and “right” used 44 times to signal attentiveness and encourage the speaker to continue. Convergence backchannels, such as “yeah”, “okay” and “yeah yeah yeah”, appear 27 times. Additionally, engaged backchannels like “oh”, “that’s interesting” and “really?” occur 11 times, demonstrating heightened emotional involvement or surprise.

Another notable pattern is the use of multiunit backchannels, particularly those that are exceptionally long. These extended backchannels, such as “yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah” and “oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah”, serve to heighten agreement and emphasis, often reinforcing alignment with the speaker’s point (ex. 28). In some cases, these lengthy backchannels lead to a change in speaker, as they provide a natural transition for the listener to take over (ex. 27).

(28) S0180: thank you very much bye (.) I mean it is quite cheeky when someone gives they give in the spirit of giving

S0070: >>**yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah** (SHJJ)

The conversation shows a balanced use of backchannel forms, though simple responses dominate. Out of 82 total backchannels, 53 were simple and 29 complex, indicating that while brief acknowledgments are common, more elaborate forms also play a significant role in the interaction (ex. 28). A large majority (64) were minimal backchannels, such as “yeah” or “mm”, which typically serve as unobtrusive signals of attentiveness. In contrast, only 18 were non-minimal, often expressing greater evaluative content or emotional involvement (e.g., “oh god”, “really?”, “oh right”). Additionally, generic backchannels were more

frequent (56) than specific ones (26), suggesting a preference for broadly supportive feedback over context-bound responses.

Interestingly, many salient backchannels — such as “that’s interesting” or “shit” — were often left without response (ex. 29). Despite being more substantial than simple affirmations, these backchannels did not always lead to further elaboration by the speaker. Similarly, a number of engaged tokens, which indicate stronger involvement or reaction (e.g., “oh god”, “really?”), also did not receive follow-up expansion.

(29) S0180: and then they admit no and they say well sorry we do n't do donations from the door

S0070: >>**shit**

S0180: thank you (.) and then they do n't give up they say oh can you buzz me in for the other residents I said no sorry I do n't think they 're interested either (SHJJ)

Backchannels in this conversation frequently contributed to shifts in speaker roles, with 20 instances prompting speaker change. This suggests that listeners actively used backchannels to claim the floor or facilitate turn transitions. In three cases, backchannels also prompted speaker reactions, typically in the form of elaboration. Furthermore, three clusters of backchannels were identified, reinforcing listener attentiveness and encouraging continued discourse.

#### **4.1.11 Analysis of SAHB**

This conversation takes place between two male friends (both 28 years old) in a private setting — a flat in Bedford. The discussion covers a broad range of topics, including TV shows, history, musicians, food, and travel experiences. The interaction is marked by an informal and relaxed tone, reinforced by the frequent use of colloquial expressions, direct address (e.g., “mate”, “man”), and humour.

A total of 37 backchannels were identified in the conversation. The distribution between the two speakers is relatively balanced, with 21 backchannels from S0192 and 16 from S0228. The most frequent backchannels were “yeah” (14 instances), “yeah yeah” (4 instances) and “oh” (2 instances).

Unlike in highly interactive conversations with frequent overlap, this dialogue features a more segmented structure with relatively clear turn-taking. While overlap is present (5 instances), it does not dominate the interaction, and backchannels tend to be strategically placed rather than occurring as continuous interjections.

One of the most distinctive features of this conversation is the high level of creativity and iteration in backchanneling. Out of the 37 backchannels, 16 were either creative, iterative, or a combination of both (compared to 21 simple backchannels). This suggests that the participants not only acknowledge what the other is saying but actively shape the conversation by adding playful or elaborative elements. Examples of this include “Wino yeah yeah” and “oh nice”, which go beyond simple affirmations and contribute to the conversational dynamic (ex. 30). Furthermore, the overall use of backchannels leaned toward general affirmations, with 25 classified as generic and only 12 as specific.

(30) S0192: what was her name ? Amy Winehouse  
S0228: **Wino yeah yeah** (SAHB)

Another key aspect is the convergence-heavy nature of backchannels. A total of 18 instances were classified as convergence markers, reinforcing agreement and alignment between speakers (e.g., “yeah”, “yeah cool man”, “definitely”). This is further reflected in the relatively high number of non-minimal backchannels (13 out of 37), indicating that many responses contain additional layers of engagement rather than just affirmations (e.g., “exactly”, “that’s cool though”, “oh nice”). The use of vocatives like “mate” and “man” strengthens this pattern, adding a layer of social bonding and shared understanding (ex. 31).

(31) S0192: no I 'm actually quite full at the minute mate but erm (.) I will need to like have lunch somewhere before I catch the train or I 'm gon na be fucking starving on that train

S0228: **yeah cool man** (SAHB)

In addition to the 18 convergence backchannels, the conversation also included 15 continuers (e.g., “yeah”, “yeah yeah”, “oh”) and 4 engaged responses (e.g., “oh mate”, “oh nice”, “that’s cool”). This distribution suggests a strong emphasis on reinforcing agreement and shared understanding, while still allowing space for supportive listening cues and occasional expressions of emotional or evaluative involvement.

Interestingly, this conversation almost completely avoids “mm” as a backchannel, with only a single occurrence. Instead, backchannels are more dynamic, varied, and expressive, including phrases such as “yeah cool man”, “oh mate”, and “that’s cool though”. These types of responses indicate a more active rather than passive listening style.

In terms of speaker changes, backchannels led to a shift in the speaker’s role 5 times, though in most cases, turns were naturally taken rather than directly prompted. Similarly, backchannels prompted a reaction (such as elaboration) in 3 instances (ex. 32), reinforcing the idea that while engagement was high, not every response necessitated an immediate follow-up.

(32) S0192: did n't he like go swimming and like not come back or some shit ? he drowned or something in a river

S0228: **really ? oh yeah**

S0192: >>that 's what I heard (SAHB)

Despite the lively nature of the conversation, clustering of backchannels is notably absent, suggesting that while both speakers are highly engaged, they allow space for each other to speak rather than frequently layering multiple backchannels in response to a single utterance.

#### 4.1.12 Analysis of SVFH

This conversation involves two male friends (both 26 years old) who engage in a relatively cooperative but minimally backchanneled discussion. The total number of backchannels in this conversation is 42, with S0250 producing 30 instances and S0253 contributing 12. Compared to other conversations, this exchange features a relatively low number of backchannels, and those that do occur most frequently are predominantly minimal responses such as “yeah” (27 instances), “oh” (3 instances), and “mm” (3 instances).

Backchannels in this conversation are primarily continuers (28 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “oh”), allowing the primary speaker to maintain their turn without interruption. There are 10 instances of convergence backchannels, which signal alignment or agreement with the speaker’s statements (e.g., “yeah” “yeah exactly”, “yeah I know”), and 4 engaged backchannels, which indicate a higher level of emotional involvement (e.g., “oh yeah?”, “oh really?”, “wow”).

One of the most notable aspects of this conversation is the occurrence of a cluster of backchannels leading directly to a speaker transition. In this case, S0253 produces two consecutive backchannels, “yeah” followed by “yeah yeah yeah”, before taking over the floor (ex. 33). This suggests that repetition in backchanneling can serve as a subtle cue for a shift in speaker turns.

- (33) S0253: any any any book that you can read like I read in like a day I was like I could  
n't  
S0250: >>**yeah**  
S0253: >>put it down and considering nothing happens essentially  
S0250: **yeah yeah yeah** (.) same with Franny and Zooey nothing happens (SVFH)

In addition to the cluster-driven transition, this conversation includes two instances (out of the total of 4 instances of prompted speaker change) where speaker change follows a longer

pause (ex. 34). This indicates that in some cases, silence may function as a stronger indicator of turn transition than backchannels.

(34) S0250: er yeah cos she was looking for her brother

S0253: **yeah** (...) have you seen that Riot Club yet ? (...) aye ? have you seen (SVFH)

Additionally, the conversation featured 8 overlapping backchannels and 34 that occurred without overlap, pointing to a generally orderly turn-taking structure with limited floor competition. Only one backchannel prompted a speaker reaction, suggesting that while backchannels functioned primarily to support the speaker, their influence on the conversational flow was minimal.

The vast majority of backchannels in this conversation are minimal (37 out of 42 instances), including “yeah”, “oh”, and “mm”. These function as low-effort signals of engagement rather than indicators of deeper involvement. In contrast, non-minimal backchannels (5 instances) contain additional discourse markers, repetition, or emotional emphasis, such as “scouts oh (.) uh-oh” or “yeah exactly”. These forms indicate a slightly higher degree of engagement but remain relatively infrequent in this conversation.

Furthermore, the majority of backchannels in this conversation were structurally simple, with 35 classified as simple and only 7 as complex (e.g., “yeah yeah yeah”, “yeah I know”, “yeah exactly”). This suggests a clear preference for straightforward, easily integrated listener responses. In terms of specificity, generic backchannels were far more common, with 32 instances compared to just 10 specific ones.

#### **4.1.13 Analysis of S6J8**

The conversation features two participants engaged in a discussion that covers various topics, including personal experiences and shared anecdotes. Both participants are adult females (65 and 78 years old), with one (S0486) taking a more dominant role (86 instances)

while the other (S0508) primarily listens and provides backchannel responses (25 instances). The conversation is characterized by a supportive and collaborative tone, with the listener frequently encouraging the speaker to elaborate on certain points.

In total, 111 backchannels were identified throughout the conversation, with a noticeable increase as the discussion progresses. This rise corresponds with the transition to more emotionally engaging topics, suggesting that the listener becomes more active when the speaker shares personal anecdotes. In the earlier stages of the conversation, backchannels are sparse and mainly consist of simple tokens like “mm” and “yeah”. However, as the conversation develops, more complex forms, such as “oh dear” and “yeah exactly”, appear, reflecting heightened engagement and increased emotional involvement. The most frequent backchannels were “yes” (32 instances), “mm” (13 instances) and “right” (11 instances).

The analysis indicates a preference for open-class items, particularly adverbs, when the listener becomes more involved. For instance, the exclamations “oh dear” and “really?” are strategically placed during narrative peaks to signal emotional alignment and interest (ex. 35). The speaker responds to these salient tokens by extending the narrative or providing additional context, suggesting that more content-laden backchannels can function as subtle conversational prompts. In fact, backchannels that prompt speaker elaboration occur 9 times.

(35) S0508: >>no it 's okay (.) well erm (.) I was looked after brilliantly by mother for the first three years (.) as far as I was concerned it was lovely having mum all to myself but (.) it was n't of course so easy for her (.) trying to manage two very young children (.) by herself (.) my dad was in the yeomanry (.) er the --ANONplace and --ANONplace yeomanry and incredibly in nineteen thirty-nine he went to war with a horse is n't that extraordinary ?

S0486: >>**really** ?

S0508: yes (.) it was a horse called Bess and

S0486: **gosh** (S6J8)

Clusters of backchannels (16 instances) are particularly evident in moments of potential speaker transition. This clustering not only indicates active listening but also signals the listener's readiness to take over the floor. Additionally, these clusters often appear when the listener is particularly engaged or wishes to respond actively to the shared narrative (ex. 36).

(36) S0508: and she said erm (.) that (.) th- there was u- u- er when she got (.) first to erm the (.) doctor who erm (.) who did the grafts that she was (.) erm he was very shocked and he said what on earth has been happening ? and she said (.) they kept me alive she thought the co- little cottage hospital

S0486: >>**yes**

S0508: in --ANONplace

S0486: >>**right**

S0508: was wonderful

S0486: **right**

S0508: because they had

S0486: **yes**

S0508: kept her going

S0486: **yeah** (S6J8)

Regarding form, 27 complex backchannels were identified, with 9 instances involving combinations of simple forms (e.g., “oh yes”), 7 cases of iteration (e.g., “yes yes”), and 7 displays of creative or echoic responses. For instance, “yeah horrendous pain yeah” echoes the speaker's previous words and serves as a confirmation of understanding while reinforcing the emotional content of the utterance (ex. 37). Such echoic backchannels appear to build on the participants' shared knowledge, reinforcing previously mentioned information.

(37) S0508: I was er I was in such horrendous pain

S0486: >>**yeah horrendous pain yeah** (S6J8)

Additionally, the conversation demonstrates a strong preference for minimal and generic backchannels, with 80 minimal responses compared to 31 non-minimal ones (e.g., “oh thank goodness for that”, “gosh”, “oh dear”). Similarly, 80 backchannels were generic in nature, while 31 were specific. This pattern suggests that participants primarily relied on short, broadly applicable listener cues — such as “yes” or “mm” — rather than more expressive or context-dependent responses.

The functions of the backchannels reveal a predominance of continuers, with 77 occurrences (e.g., “yes”, “mm”, “right”). Additionally, 18 engaged responses (e.g., “oh”, “really?”, “oh dear”) and 16 convergence tokens (e.g., “exactly”, “oh yes”, “no no”) were documented, illustrating the listener’s attempts to signal emotional involvement and agreement with the speaker’s statements.

Finally, 22 backchannels occurred with overlap, while 89 were produced without overlapping speech, indicating a generally cooperative conversational rhythm. Notably, 16 backchannels prompted speaker change, and 9 elicited reactions, revealing that backchanneling in this exchange was not merely passive but played an active role in shaping turn-taking and encouraging further elaboration.

#### **4.1.14 Analysis of S8SH**

The conversation takes place between two sisters (aged 54 and 64) in a private setting, living room in Leeds, during a late Tuesday evening. Their discussion revolves around the BBC show *The Great British Sewing Bee*, their mother’s sewing skills, 1960s and 1970s fashion, and car parking in central London. The conversation exhibits a high level of familiarity and shared knowledge, as both participants frequently refer to their childhood, their mother’s sewing habits, and their personal experiences with sewing and clothing.

A total of 90 backchannels were identified in the conversation. S0679 produced 68 backchannels, while S0680 contributed 22, showing an asymmetrical distribution. This might suggest that S0679 played a more listener-oriented role, while S0680 was the primary speaker elaborating on personal stories and experiences.

A defining characteristic of this conversation is the heavy reliance on simple backchannels. Out of the 90 backchannels, 76 were simple and only 14 were complex. The most frequently used backchannels were “mm” (43 instances), “yes” (22 instances) and “oh” (7 instances) which indicates a minimalistic and highly supportive backchanneling style. The conversation contains very few creative backchannels — only one truly creative instance (“yes oh I know”), two cases of repeating a phrase said earlier (e.g., “oh a square neck yes”), three that combined different simple backchannels (e.g., “oh no”), and 8 iterative backchannels (e.g., “mm mm”).

Despite the prevalence of simple backchannels, some instances of clustering are present, leading to changes in speaker turns. In 6 cases, multiple backchannels appeared in quick succession, creating momentary overlaps that signalled a shift in speaking roles (ex. 38).

(38) S0679: the patt- your repeat like on

S0680: >>yes

S0679: wallpaper you have

S0680: >>yes

S0679: repeats then

S0680: >>well it does to some extent on the other hand what I have n't seen them doing particularly is opening the material out (.) erm and refolding it in a different way because mum used to refold her material so that you could get well you know one leg up one way and one leg up the other not put two legs following or something (S8SH)

Another notable pattern is the overwhelming use of minimal backchannels (85 out of 90), indicating a highly affirmational and passive listening style. The conversation is largely generic, with 87 generic backchannels versus only 3 specific ones, further reinforcing the idea that backchannels mainly serve a supportive rather than an elaborative function.

In terms of function, 78 backchannels function as continuers, ensuring the speaker knows that the listener is engaged (e.g., “mm”, “yes”, “oh”). The remaining 12 serve as convergence tokens, reinforcing agreement and alignment between the speakers (e.g., “yes”, “yeah”, “oh right”).

Interestingly, the conversation lacks many prompted reactions and does not contain any engaged tokens, indicating a passive yet affirmational listening style — only two instances where backchannels led to elaboration were identified (ex. 39). Additionally, 6 cases of backchannel induced speaker change were observed (ex. 38).

(39) S0680: >>swirly things it sounds horrendous but er and that had that again was sleeveless erm with just a plain-faced sleeve er underneath er er armhole underneath and it had a V-neck

S0679: **oh a V-neck**

S0680: i- it had a V-neck with a collar on it like a (S8SH)

Additionally, the conversation featured 27 instances of overlapping speech out of a total of 90 backchannels, suggesting a moderate level of interactional overlap that reflects active engagement without overwhelming the turn-taking structure.

#### **4.1.15 Analysis of SYX3**

The conversation takes place between two adult females (aged 55 and 57) discussing topics related to their personal experiences with cancer, medical language, and societal attitudes towards health and body awareness. The dialogue is highly structured with a significant

presence of backchannels, minimal responses, and some notable clusters of agreement tokens.

One of the most prominent features of this conversation is the overwhelming presence of minimal backchannels (82 compared to 9 non-minimal ones), particularly “yeah”, which appears 55 times, and “mm”, which is used 14 times (the third most frequent backchannel was “no” with 7 instances). This pattern suggests a conversational dynamic where one speaker predominantly takes the floor, while the other provides supportive feedback (S0282 provided 68 backchannels, while S0646 contributed 23).

A key reason for this high frequency of minimal backchannels is the nature of the discussion itself. The topic — personal experiences with illness and medical encounters — encourages extended turns of talk. The listener acknowledges, affirms, and encourages the speaker without overtaking the conversation. The predominance of continuers (80 out of 91 backchannels, e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “no”) further supports this interpretation, indicating that the listener is actively engaged yet deferring to the main speaker’s narrative. The conversation also featured 6 convergence (e.g., “no”, “yeah true”, “exactly”) and 5 engaged backchannels (e.g., “oh really?”, “oh isn’t it”, “wow”), reflecting moments of agreement as well as emotional or evaluative involvement.

There are also 6 instances of clustering. These clusters serve as reinforcement mechanisms, signalling both strong alignment and readiness to transition into a speaker change if necessary. However, in most cases, the primary speaker retains the floor even after these clusters, indicating that they are used more for emphasis rather than as cues for turn taking (ex. 40).

- (40) S0646: >>but I think one other thing is you know if if a woman knows that one of the key indicators is just this blood test I mean often the doctor will be doing blood tests for other stuff I mean you know when you first went there and they did your thyroid test

S0282: **yeah**

S0646: they could actually have just ticked another box which

S0282: **yeah**

S0646: >>would have been

S0282: **yeah**

S0646: >>CA125

S0282: >>**yeah**

S0646: and you might as well find this out

S0282: **yeah**

S0646: you know eighteen months earlier

S0282: **yeah**

S0646: so if if women know that that is t- that test exists they could just say well look you know while we 're about it why do n't we just test that as well ? (SYX3)

Although the majority of backchannels in this conversation are minimal, a few salient backchannels stand out, including “oh really?”, “oh my word”, and “wow”. These serve as evaluative markers, expressing surprise or emotional engagement with the topic. Interestingly, despite their salience, these backchannels do not typically lead to a direct response from the other speaker (ex. 41).

(41) S0646: >> but that was sort of lucky for me that it was

S0282: **oh my word**

S0646: >>cos otherwise cos I had n't got any of this bloating (SYX3)

Another notable finding is the overwhelming dominance of simple backchannels (83) compared to complex ones (8). The presence of complex backchannels, though limited, suggests moments where the listener momentarily shifts from passive acknowledgment to active contribution. Examples such as “yeah true” and “oh right” introduce a slight level of engagement beyond simple affirmation. Additionally, there were 80 generic backchannels compared to only 11 specific ones, indicating a strong preference for broadly supportive listener responses.

The conversation contains only one instance of a prompted speaker change, meaning that backchannels rarely serve as explicit cues for turn transition. Similarly, only two instances of elaboration as a prompted reaction indicate that backchannels function primarily as acknowledgments rather than as mechanisms for soliciting additional information. Finally, out of 91 backchannels, 25 occurred with overlap, suggesting a moderate level of simultaneous speech and interactive engagement.

#### **4.1.16 Analysis of SPTQ**

The conversation takes place between two men in their mid-60s. They are engaging in a discussion in a restaurant in Brighton. The topics covered range from health issues and work to politics and personal anecdotes. The interaction is dynamic and cooperative, with 54 instances of backchanneling spread between both speakers (33 by S0281 and 21 by S0355).

Backchannels in this conversation primarily serve as continuers (42 instances). These are especially seen in minimal responses such as “mm”, “yeah” and “yes” which were at the same time the most frequent backchannels in this conversation (14, 14 and 6 instances respectively). Additionally, engaged backchannels (8 instances), such as “really?”, “oh my god” and “yeah?”, are used to express emotional involvement. Convergence backchannels (4 instances) also appear, signalling agreement or alignment with the speaker’s view (e.g., “yeah”, “yes”).

One of the most striking features of this conversation is the relatively high number of backchannels that take the form of a question. Unlike typical affirmatives, these question-based backchannels (e.g., “is it?”, “does it?”, “really?”) serve not only to indicate attentiveness but also to subtly prompt elaboration from the speaker. This dynamic is seen when S0281 asks, “does it?” in response to S0355’s description of Dupuytren’s contracture,

subtly encouraging further details while still acting as a backchannel rather than a full-fledged turn (ex. 42).

(42) S0355: oh right yeah but it does get worse I mean

S0281: >>**does it ?**

S0355: >>it 's better to get it sorted out before it gets worse (SPTQ)

This conversation exhibits a moderate amount of overlap, with 42 backchannels occurring without overlap and 12 occurring with overlap. The overlapping backchannels generally do not indicate interruptions but rather serve as real-time affirmations that reinforce the speaker's point without disrupting their train of thought (ex. 42).

An interesting observation is the use of backchannels in combination with a brief pause, as in “okay (.) yeah” or “yes (.) yeah”. These combinations function as soft continuers, maintaining the flow of the conversation while also providing a subtle transition point. The presence of a short pause before the backchannel suggests that the listener may be evaluating or processing the information before responding (ex. 43).

(43) S0281: >>have to come here again (.) pity it 's so far away you could

S0355: **yes (.) yeah** (SPTQ)

Minimal backchannels dominate the exchange, accounting for 42 of the 54 instances. These include “mm”, “yeah”, and “yes”, which are used frequently throughout the conversation to signal attentiveness and alignment. Non-minimal backchannels (12 instances) tend to incorporate evaluative elements or additional discourse markers, such as “oh my god” and “yeah really?”.

Additionally, the conversation featured a strong preference for structurally simple backchannels, with 42 classified as simple and only 12 as complex (e.g., “oh right”, “oh my god”, “yeah really?”). This suggests that listeners relied predominantly on brief,

straightforward responses to indicate engagement. In terms of specificity, generic backchannels were far more frequent (45 instances) compared to specific ones (9).

Backchannels occasionally influenced the structure of the conversation, prompting speaker change in 4 instances and eliciting a speaker reaction in three cases. However, no clustering of backchannels was observed, indicating that while some backchannels shaped the dialogue, they were used individually rather than in rapid succession.

#### **4.1.17 Analysis of SCQC**

The conversation takes place between two male speakers (aged 56 and 60) during a dinner at their home. The participants engage in a discussion that covers a variety of topics, including arrangements for birthdays, a postcard from a recent holiday, and Scottish independence. The conversational tone is relaxed and familiar, reflecting their long-standing bond and shared experiences.

A total of 42 backchannels were identified in this conversation. S0265 contributed 36 backchannels, while S0264 used only 6, showing a strong asymmetry in listener engagement. This indicates that S0265 took on a more active listener role, while S0264 dominated the conversation with longer speaking turns.

One of the most striking features of this conversation is the prevalence of minimal backchannels. Out of the 42 backchannels, 41 were minimal, reinforcing a passive but engaged listening style. The most frequent backchannel used was “mm” (29 instances), followed by “oh” (5 instances) and “yes” (4 instances). There is little variation in backchannel forms, with very few instances of creative or complex backchanneling. Only one instance of creativity (repetition of a previously said phrase; “Raasay yes yes”) and two cases of combined backchannels (“oh yes” and “oh yes yes”) were identified, indicating that backchannels primarily served as support tokens rather than active conversational

contributions. The lack of diversity in backchannels is also reflected in the high number of generic responses (40 instances) compared to only two specific ones.

Despite the passive nature of the backchanneling, clustering occurs once (ex. 44a). This supports the idea that while the listener did not frequently intervene, they still played a role in managing conversational flow when necessary. Additionally, 7 backchannels prompted a speaker change, suggesting that while engagement was low in terms of variation, backchanneling was still strategically used to facilitate turn-taking (ex. 44b). However, no prompted reactions were observed in this conversation.

(44) a. S0264: there was a play on the radio actually set on erm Raasay I think it 's called

S0265: >>**mm**

S0264: >>that that long thin island

S0265: **Raasay yes yes**

S0264: about somebody who 'd built a road (.) by himself

S0265: **yes**

S0264: >>>on what do you know about that ?

b. S0265: oh now that 's somewhere I 'd like to go (.) cos it always looks very very nice it 's surrounded by water

S0264: **mm** (.) and then erm there 's another one you know where erm (.) one of those Henry the eighth queens was erm brought up (...) I du n no whether it was Anne Howard or somebody (SCQC)

Another noteworthy pattern is the presence of long pauses surrounding backchannels. In many cases, the backchannel itself does not directly prompt the transition, but rather the extended silence that follows it creates an opening for the listener to take over (ex. 45). This suggests that speaker changes in this conversation often emerge from the absence of additional contributions rather than an intentional effort to shift turns through backchanneling alone. Regarding overlaps, the conversation is mostly non overlapping, with 37 out of 42 backchannels occurring in isolation, indicating a turn-taking system that prioritizes clear transitions rather than competitive speech.

(45) S0264: >>he did

S0265: **yes** (...) and how long ago was it when you sent him that email ? (SCQC)

In terms of functional distribution, 35 backchannels served as continuers (e.g., “mm”, “oh”, “yes”). The remaining 7 backchannels functioned as convergence tokens, reinforcing agreement and shared viewpoints, particularly during moments of discussion about plans and opinions on independence (e.g., “mm”, “oh yes”, “oh yes yes”).

#### 4.1.18 Analysis of SX6V

The conversation between two male speakers (aged 60 and 64) takes place in an academic office setting and revolves around various topics, including wildlife photography, academic supervision, and job advertisements. A total of 47 backchannels were identified, with S0426 producing the majority (39) and S0427 contributing only 8. The most frequent backchannel was “yeah” (7 instances), followed by “right” (3 instances) and “yeah yeah” (3 instances). The conversation is structured around topic shifts, with one speaker primarily providing information and the other acknowledging and engaging with it through backchannels.

A striking feature of this conversation is the frequent use of iterated backchannels (8), such as “right right”, “wow wow”, “no no”, and “yeah yeah” (ex. 46). These repetitions serve multiple functions, including emphasizing agreement, reinforcing engagement, and subtly indicating readiness to take over the turn.

(46) S0427: in the stuff you know

S0426: **wow wow**

S0427: >>this is this is the secretary bird

S0426: I do n't think we 've seen birds much in –UNCLEARWORD (SX6V)

Several backchannels in this conversation are salient, such as “oh god”, “shit”, “wow”, and “oh christ god”. Interestingly, these backchannels frequently occur without prompting

a direct reaction from the other speaker (ex. 47). This suggests that they primarily function as expressions of engagement rather than as an invitation for elaboration.

(47) S0427: but they they tell me that in peak flow the water would be coming over here as well

S0426: **wow**

S0427: and if the wind is coming you would n't want to take your camera out (SX6V)

At the beginning of the conversation, engaged backchannels lead to speaker change. For instance, S0427 uses “oh god” followed by a short pause, and subsequently takes the floor (ex. 48). This pattern suggests that heightened engagement, rather than minimal backchanneling, may create opportunities for turn taking.

(48) S0426: selected from how many photos ? four hundred

S0427: >>**oh god** (.) well I I would say probably five hundred on two cameras yeah (SX6V)

Of the 47 backchannels, 15 are classified as non-minimal. This is a significant proportion, indicating that the conversation is not purely reliant on minimal acknowledgment tokens like “yeah” or “oh”. Instead, speakers often include additional elements that enhance the expressiveness of their engagement. Examples include “yes that’s right” or “oh christ god” which go beyond simple acknowledgment to signal greater involvement.

An interesting pattern observed in the conversation is that one speaker change (out of the total of 4 prompted speaker changes) follows a longer pause rather than an explicit backchannel (ex. 49). This suggests that silence can serve as a more powerful indicator of turn transition than backchannels.

(49) S0426: >>**yeah yeah** (...) by did to just the familiarity with the vehicle (SX6V)

Beyond the specific characteristics of backchanneling, several other noteworthy aspects of the conversation contribute to its overall structure. The complexity of backchannels is one such feature, with the conversation displaying a fairly even distribution between simple (26 instances) and complex (21 instances) forms. Moreover, There were 31 generic backchannels compared to 16 specific ones, indicating a greater reliance on general affirmations rather than context-specific responses.

Overlap and clustering also play a role in shaping the conversation. There are 12 instances of overlap, demonstrating moments of simultaneous speech, possibly due to enthusiasm or the natural rhythm of dialogue (ex. 48). However, there are no clear cases of clustering, meaning that backchannels tend to appear as individual responses rather than rapid, consecutive acknowledgments. Additionally, one backchannel prompted a speaker reaction, demonstrating that listener feedback occasionally influenced the flow of the conversation.

The conversation also features different functional roles for backchannels. The majority serve as continuers (29 instances, e.g., “yeah”, “right”, “oh”) while 10 instances function as convergence backchannels (e.g., “yeah yeah”, “sure”, “exactly”), signalling alignment or agreement with the speaker’s statements. Additionally, 8 instances qualify as engaged backchannels (e.g., “wow”, “oh god”, “shit”), demonstrating heightened emotional involvement, which often precedes speaker transitions.

#### **4.1.19 Conclusion**

The analysis of the 18 conversations reveals significant variation in backchannel use, influenced by factors such as speaker dynamics, conversational context, and participant engagement styles. Across different interactions, the distribution of backchannels varied considerably, with some conversations exhibiting high engagement and frequent affirmations, while others relied on minimal listener feedback and structured turn-taking.

One of the key findings was the relationship between speaker familiarity and backchannel frequency. Conversations between close friends or family members tended to feature more frequent and expressive backchannels, including creative forms, overlapping speech, and clustering. These interactions often demonstrated a high-involvement style, where backchannels reinforced engagement and emotional alignment. In contrast, discussions with more structured turn-taking, such as academic or formal exchanges, contained fewer backchannels, with minimal responses like “mm” or “yeah” dominating the interaction.

The function of backchannels also varied depending on the conversation’s dynamics. While continuers were the most frequent function across all conversations, their distribution and prominence differed. In emotionally engaged conversations, speakers frequently used engaged responses and convergence markers, reinforcing shared perspectives. However, in structured, informative exchanges, backchannels primarily served as acknowledgments rather than interactive contributions.

Another notable observation was the role of overlap and clustering in different interaction styles. Conversations characterized by high engagement and mutual involvement often exhibited overlapping backchannels, where the listener actively responded before the speaker finished their turn. In contrast, more structured interactions featured minimal overlap, with speakers waiting for clear turn boundaries before providing feedback. Clustering, where multiple backchannels appear in succession, was common in highly involved discussions, particularly at narrative peaks or moments of emotional intensity.

The complexity of backchannels also varied significantly. Some conversations relied on simple acknowledgments, while others featured complex, multiunit responses, such as combinations of multiple backchannel forms or repetitions. The presence of evaluative and emotionally expressive backchannels was more pronounced in informal settings, where speakers actively shaped the discourse through their listener feedback.

Certain backchannels stood out as particularly salient due to their form, placement, or conversational impact. Intensified backchannels such as “oh my god”, “wow”, or “really?” often played a crucial role in shaping the emotional tone of the interaction. These backchannels were more likely to elicit an immediate response from the speaker, either through further elaboration, confirmation, or a shift in topic. In contrast, more neutral backchannels such as “yeah” or “mm-hm” tended to serve a more passive role, maintaining the speaker’s flow without significantly altering the conversation’s trajectory. The reaction to salient backchannels varied across conversations, with some speakers acknowledging them explicitly, while others incorporated them seamlessly into the discourse, treating them as natural extensions of the interaction.

In terms of speaker transitions, some backchannels played a role in shifting conversational turns. While the majority of backchannels functioned as passive continuers, some explicitly prompted speaker change or elicited elaboration. However, in certain structured conversations, long pauses rather than backchannels served as the primary mechanism for speaker transition, highlighting the varying roles backchannels play depending on conversational norms.

Overall, this analysis underscores the diverse functions and characteristics of backchannels in everyday speech. While their primary function is to facilitate interaction and indicate engagement, their form, frequency, and distribution are highly context-dependent, influenced by conversational style, speaker familiarity, and interactional expectations. These findings set the foundation for the broader gender- and age-based analysis that follows, providing key insights into how backchannels operate within different social and communicative frameworks. An overview of key quantitative features across the 18 conversations is also provided in Table 3, which serves as a reference point for the subsequent comparative analysis.

| Conve<br>rsation     | Total<br>backch<br>annels | Non<br>-<br>min<br>imal<br>(%) | Spe<br>cific<br>(%) | Com<br>plex<br>(%) | Conti<br>nuers<br>(%) | Conve<br>rgence<br>(%) | Eng<br>aged<br>(%) | Pro<br>mpte<br>d<br>spea<br>ker<br>chan<br>ge<br>(%) | Pro<br>mpte<br>d<br>react<br>ion<br>(%) | Clust<br>ering<br>(%) |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Females 0-25</b>  |                           |                                |                     |                    |                       |                        |                    |                                                      |                                         |                       |
| SZ98                 | 68                        | 33.8<br>2                      | 32.3<br>5           | 22.0<br>6          | 64.71                 | 11.76                  | 23.5<br>3          | 17.65                                                | 13.24                                   | 5.88                  |
| SEJ7                 | 30                        | 16.6<br>7                      | 26.6<br>7           | 43.3<br>3          | 66.67                 | 30                     | 3.33               | 3.33                                                 | 6.67                                    | 0                     |
| SFJ2                 | 34                        | 44.1<br>2                      | 47.0<br>6           | 55.8<br>8          | 50                    | 17.65                  | 32.3<br>5          | 14.71                                                | 8.82                                    | 0                     |
| <b>Males 0-25</b>    |                           |                                |                     |                    |                       |                        |                    |                                                      |                                         |                       |
| S8U5                 | 65                        | 23.0<br>8                      | 21.5<br>4           | 30.7<br>7          | 63.08                 | 18.46                  | 18.4<br>6          | 12.31                                                | 10.77                                   | 1.54                  |
| SR9W                 | 22                        | 13.6<br>4                      | 9.09                | 9.09               | 90.91                 | 4.55                   | 4.55               | 4.55                                                 | 4.55                                    | 4.55                  |
| SHSD                 | 66                        | 18.1<br>8                      | 25.7<br>6           | 22.7<br>3          | 71.21                 | 24.24                  | 4.55               | 3.03                                                 | 6.06                                    | 3.03                  |
| <b>Females 25-50</b> |                           |                                |                     |                    |                       |                        |                    |                                                      |                                         |                       |
| S3M4                 | 61                        | 36.0<br>7                      | 37.7                | 57.3<br>8          | 29.51                 | 36.07                  | 34.4<br>3          | 40.98                                                | 14.75                                   | 22.95                 |
| SMK7                 | 59                        | 13.5<br>6                      | 25.4<br>2           | 16.9<br>5          | 74.58                 | 18.64                  | 6.78               | 0                                                    | 0                                       | 1.69                  |

|                    |      |           |           |           |       |       |           |       |      |       |
|--------------------|------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|------|-------|
| SP4L               | 70   | 14.2<br>9 | 17.1<br>4 | 15.7<br>1 | 81.43 | 7.14  | 11.4<br>3 | 2.86  | 1.43 | 2.86  |
| <b>Males 25-50</b> |      |           |           |           |       |       |           |       |      |       |
| SHJJ               | 82   | 21.9<br>5 | 31.7<br>1 | 35.3<br>7 | 53.66 | 32.93 | 13.4<br>1 | 24.39 | 3.66 | 3.66  |
| SAHB               | 37   | 35.1<br>4 | 32.4<br>3 | 43.2<br>4 | 40.54 | 48.65 | 10.8<br>1 | 13.51 | 8.11 | 0     |
| SVFH               | 42   | 11.9      | 23.8<br>1 | 16.6<br>7 | 66.67 | 23.81 | 9.52      | 9.52  | 2.38 | 2.38  |
| <b>Females 50+</b> |      |           |           |           |       |       |           |       |      |       |
| S6J8               | 111  | 27.9<br>3 | 27.9<br>3 | 24.3<br>2 | 69.37 | 14.41 | 16.2<br>2 | 14.41 | 8.11 | 14.41 |
| S8SH               | 90   | 5.56      | 3.33      | 15.5<br>6 | 86.67 | 13.33 | 0         | 6.67  | 2.22 | 6.67  |
| SYX3               | 91   | 9.89      | 12.0<br>9 | 8.79      | 87.91 | 6.59  | 5.49      | 1.1   | 2.2  | 6.59  |
| <b>Males 50+</b>   |      |           |           |           |       |       |           |       |      |       |
| SPTQ               | 54   | 22.2<br>2 | 16.6<br>7 | 22.2<br>2 | 77.78 | 7.41  | 14.8<br>1 | 7.41  | 5.56 | 0     |
| SCQC               | 42   | 2.38      | 4.76      | 7.14      | 83.33 | 16.67 | 0         | 16.67 | 0    | 2.38  |
| SX6V               | 47   | 31.9<br>1 | 34.0<br>4 | 44.6<br>8 | 61.7  | 21.28 | 17.0<br>2 | 8.51  | 2.13 | 0     |
| Average            | 59.5 | 21.2<br>4 | 23.8<br>6 | 27.3<br>3 | 67.76 | 19.64 | 12.5<br>9 | 11.2  | 5.59 | 4.37  |

Table 3: Summary of backchannel features across conversations (Note: Green cells indicate the highest value per column, red the lowest.)

## **4.2 The role of gender in backchannel communication**

Backchannels serve as essential interactional tools in conversation, facilitating conversational flow, signalling attentiveness, and regulating turn-taking. The analysis of male and female speakers' conversations reveals notable differences in how these backchannels are used, both in terms of frequency and function. While both genders employ backchannels to encourage speaker continuation and indicate engagement, key distinctions emerge in their usage patterns, complexity, clustering, and conversational impact. This section of the thesis offers a detailed, complex comparison of backchannel use between men and women, providing insight into the ways different interactional styles shape conversation.

### **4.2.1 General characteristics of backchannel use**

One of the most striking differences between the two groups is the overall frequency of backchannels. Women use 614 backchannels, whereas men use 457. This suggests that female speakers tend to provide more frequent listener feedback. The higher frequency among female speakers may also indicate a stronger emphasis on interactive engagement, reinforcing their role in fostering connection and mutual understanding in conversation.

Women exhibit a greater variety of backchannel expressions, including “mm”, “yes”, “oh”, “really”, “exactly”, and “I know”, while men rely heavily on “yeah”, “mm”, “oh”, and “right”. The greater lexical diversity in female backchannels indicates a tendency for women to provide more nuanced and engaged responses, possibly to encourage the speaker or indicate active listening. This lexical variation also suggests that female backchannels serve a wider range of conversational functions, such as showing agreement, surprise, emotional alignment, or prompting further elaboration.

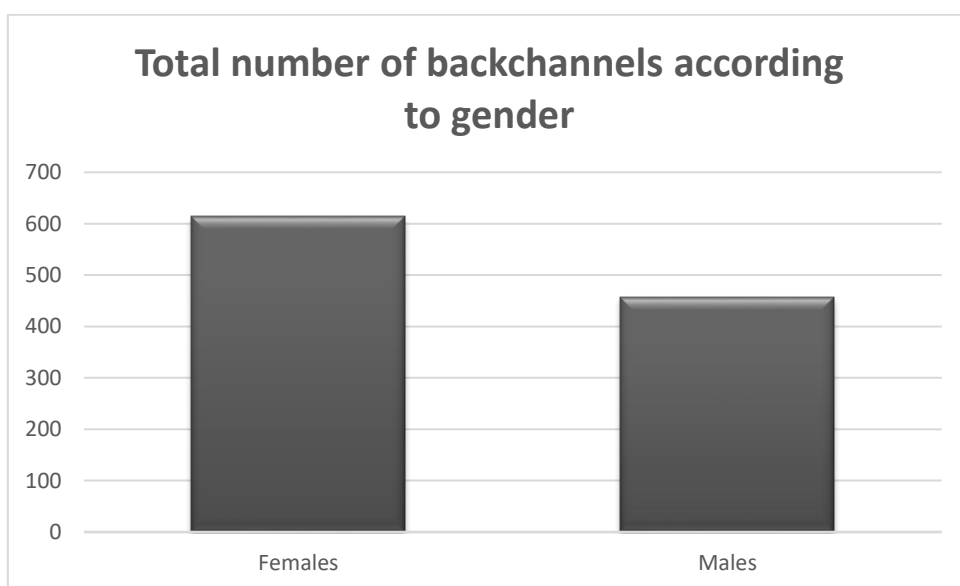


Figure 1: Distribution of backchannels by gender

#### 4.2.2 Minimal vs. non-minimal backchannels

Minimal backchannels (e.g., “yeah”, “mm”, “no”) dominate both male and female speech, and their distribution is identical:

|                          | females | males |
|--------------------------|---------|-------|
| minimal backchannels     | 79 %    | 79 %  |
| non-minimal backchannels | 21 %    | 21 %  |

Table 4: Distribution of minimal and non-minimal backchannels by gender

This indicates that both genders rely on minimal responses at the same rate. However, the content and function of non-minimal backchannels differ between men and women. Women tend to use non-minimal backchannels such as “oh really”, “oh my god” or “that’s interesting” to express engagement and emotion, while men’s non-minimal backchannels often serve as affirmations or confirmations, such as “right exactly” or “yeah I know”. The use of non-minimal backchannels by women suggests a tendency to actively shape the conversation, while men’s non-minimal responses are more likely to function as straightforward acknowledgments.

### 4.2.3 Functional distribution of backchannels

Backchannels serve different functions in conversation, including continuers (to signal the speaker should continue), convergence (to show agreement or alignment), and engaged responses (to express emotional or intellectual involvement).

|                         | females | males |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|
| continuer               | 71 %    | 66 %  |
| convergence backchannel | 15 %    | 23 %  |
| engaged backchannel     | 14 %    | 11 %  |

Table 5: Distribution of functions of backchannels by gender

Women use significantly more continuers, reinforcing their role as active listeners who facilitate the flow of conversation. The difference in engaged responses is relatively small, with women using only 3 % more engaged backchannels than men. This suggests that while women show slightly more involvement through backchannels, the overall function of engagement remains somewhat comparable across genders. However, the higher proportion of convergence backchannels among men suggests that male speakers may favour explicit alignment with the speaker rather than consistently using engagement markers.

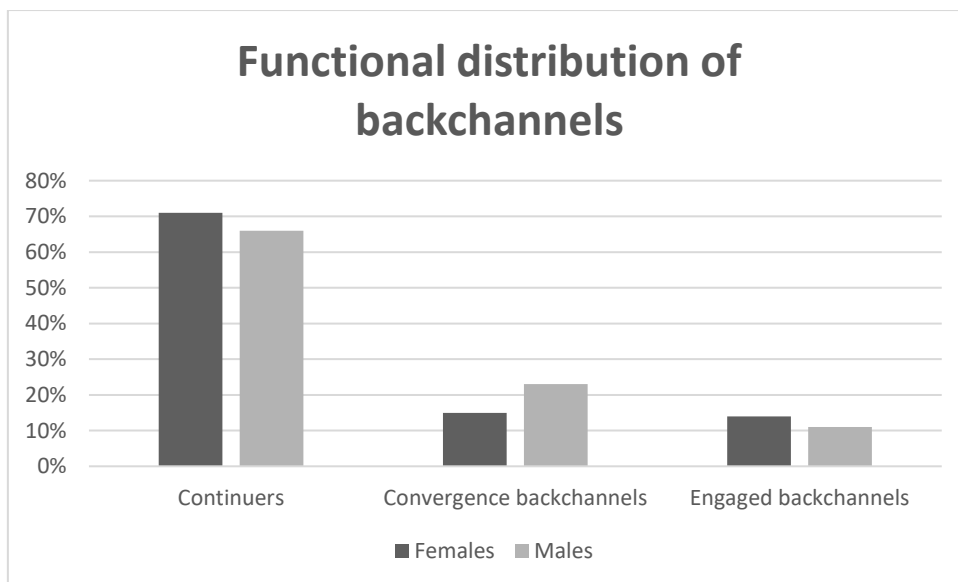


Figure 2: Distribution of functions of backchannels by gender

#### 4.2.4 Complex and repetitive backchannels

Some backchannels extend beyond simple acknowledgment and involve more complexity. These may include repetitions of a previously said phrase, combinations of two or more simple backchannels, iterations of a simple backchannel or backchannels that employ a higher degree of creativity.

|                                    | females | males |
|------------------------------------|---------|-------|
| complex or repetitive backchannels | 25 %    | 28 %  |

Table 6: Distribution of complex or repetitive backchannels by gender

Men use slightly more complex and repetitive backchannels than women. However, the types of complexity differ. Women's complex backchannels often involve emotional or evaluative expressions (e.g., "oh really", "oh no", "that's interesting"), whereas men's tend to confirm understanding (e.g., "yeah exactly", "right okay"). The slight advantage in complexity among male speakers suggests that while they generally produce fewer backchannels, they may compensate with occasional complex or layered responses that reinforce alignment with the speaker.

#### 4.2.5 Clustering of backchannels

Some backchannels appear in rapid succession, forming clusters where multiple acknowledgments occur within a short span.

|            | females | males |
|------------|---------|-------|
| clustering | 8 %     | 2 %   |

Table 7: Distribution of clustering by gender

Women cluster backchannels far more frequently than men. This suggests a stronger tendency for reinforcing engagement and creating a sense of active listening, whereas men favour a more segmented and restrained use of backchannels. Clustering in female conversations often occurs in moments of narrative intensity or emotional expression, reinforcing alignment with the speaker's message (ex. 50). In contrast, the lower clustering rate among men suggests a more structured and measured approach to backchannel use.

- (50) S0646: yeah and also I mean the the other surprising thing anyway is that you know it was meant to be like cancer was the sort of big unmentionable subject in
- S0282: >>**yeah**
- S0646: those days
- S0282: **yeah**
- S0646: and actually it 's mentioned all the time now
- S0282: **yeah** (SYX3)

#### 4.2.6 Prompted speaker change and reaction to backchannels

One of the key conversational functions of backchannels is their role in speaker transitions (ex. 51). Women's backchannels prompted 10 % of speaker changes, while men's prompted 11 %. This suggests that men's backchannels may be slightly more effective at prompting speaker shifts. However, since the difference is minimal, both genders appear to use backchannels in a relatively similar way to negotiate turn-taking.

- (51) S0355: she 's won awards for that er through her service to the community and erm er and I was very pleased for her she was very very (.) proud it was an achievement for her to win that award (.) er it was not only great for her to win it but it was great of er people in our society to to er help people attain those sort of achievements and feel good about themselves and I and I think that 's a wonderful thing erm yeah I think she was the Argus awards she was er (.) erm nominated for those and er won one of those (.) so that was good erm
- S0281: **yeah** (.) you have n't said anything about my new glasses (SPTQ)

Additionally, women's backchannels more frequently elicited elaboration from the speaker (5 % of cases) compared to men (4 % of cases) (ex. 52). This reinforces the idea that while female backchanneling may encourage the speaker to expand on their thoughts, the difference is not particularly large.

- (52) S0405: erm (.) du n no had a (.) erm I came to school on time I this is the first time I 've been to an assembly in (.) it feels like months probably just weeks though

S0555: **are you serious ? wow**

S0405: yeah I mean I give a lot of assemblies but I do n't go to them (S8U5)

### **4.3 The role of age in backchannel communication**

While previous research has focused on gender-based differences in backchannel behaviour, this chapter examines variations across different age groups: young speakers (0-25 years), middle-aged speakers (25-50 years), and older speakers (50+ years). By analysing the frequency, function, complexity, and interactional effects of backchannels, this study identifies age-related patterns that shape conversational styles.

#### **4.3.1 General characteristics of backchannel use**

The total number of backchannels varied across the age groups, with older speakers producing the most (435), followed by middle-aged speakers (351), and younger speakers using the fewest (285). This suggests that backchannel use increases with age, potentially reflecting greater conversational experience and an enhanced awareness of listener engagement strategies. However, a closer look at individual conversations within each group reveals that conversational context and participant familiarity significantly influence backchannel frequency. For instance, younger participants in familiar settings exhibited higher backchannel rates than those in more formal discussions.

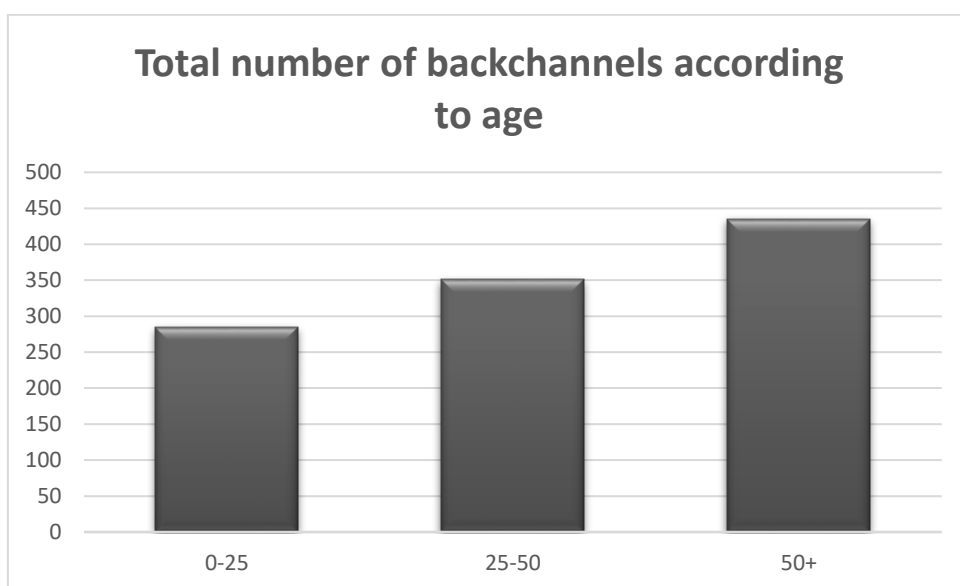


Figure 3: Distribution of backchannels by age

#### 4.3.2 Simple vs. complex backchannels

Across all age groups, simple backchannels were more common than complex ones. However, older speakers showed the highest proportion of simple backchannels (80 %), compared to middle-aged speakers (69 %) and younger speakers (71 %). Conversely, younger and middle-aged speakers used complex backchannels at similar rates (around 30 %), while older speakers used them the least (20 %). This suggests that younger and middle-aged individuals may be more likely to incorporate varied and elaborate listener responses, while older speakers tend to prefer brief and straightforward acknowledgments.

|                      | 0-25 | 25-50 | 50+  |
|----------------------|------|-------|------|
| simple backchannels  | 71 % | 69 %  | 80 % |
| complex backchannels | 29 % | 31 %  | 20 % |

Table 8: Distribution of simple and complex backchannels by age

#### 4.3.3 Minimal vs. non-minimal backchannels

Minimal backchannels (e.g., “yeah”, “mm”) dominated across all age groups, but their proportion increased with age. Young speakers used minimal backchannels in 74 % of cases, middle-aged speakers in 78 %, and older speakers in 83 %. In contrast, non-minimal backchannels, which provide more explicit feedback (e.g., “oh really”, “that’s interesting”), were most common among younger speakers (26 %) and least common among older

speakers (17 %). This indicates that younger speakers are more inclined to use expressive and evaluative backchannels, while older individuals favour brief affirmations.

Interestingly, specific conversations highlight exceptions to this pattern. In one case, a conversation between two middle-aged sisters contained an unusually high number of non-minimal backchannels, suggesting that shared experience and familiarity can override typical age-related trends.

|                          | 0-25 | 25-50 | 50+  |
|--------------------------|------|-------|------|
| minimal backchannels     | 74 % | 78 %  | 83 % |
| non-minimal backchannels | 26 % | 22 %  | 17 % |

Table 9: Distribution of minimal and non-minimal backchannels by age

#### 4.3.4 Functional distribution of backchannels

##### Continuers

Continuers, which encourage the speaker to keep talking (e.g., “mm-hmm”, “yeah”), were the most frequent function of backchannels in all groups. Their usage was highest among older speakers (78 %), followed by younger speakers (66 %) and middle-aged speakers (59 %). This suggests that older individuals prioritize maintaining speaker continuity over other interactional roles of backchanneling.

##### Convergence backchannels

Convergence backchannels, which signal agreement or alignment with the speaker (e.g., “right”, “exactly”), were most common among middle-aged speakers (26 %), followed by younger speakers (18 %) and least common among older speakers (13 %). This suggests that middle-aged individuals are more likely to explicitly confirm shared understanding and agreement, a pattern that may reflect their communication styles in professional or social contexts.

##### Engaged Backchannels

Engaged backchannels, which demonstrate emotional or intellectual involvement (e.g., “oh wow”, “that’s amazing”), were more frequent among younger speakers (15 %) and middle-aged speakers (15 %) than among older speakers (9 %). This pattern indicates that

younger and middle-aged speakers are more expressive in their conversational feedback, while older individuals tend to provide more neutral or understated responses.

A closer examination of conversational transcripts reveals how these functions manifest in real interactions. In one middle-aged conversation, highly engaged backchannels occurred in moments of emotional storytelling, reinforcing shared involvement. In contrast, a conversation between older speakers showed minimal engagement markers, favouring a more measured and reserved listening style.

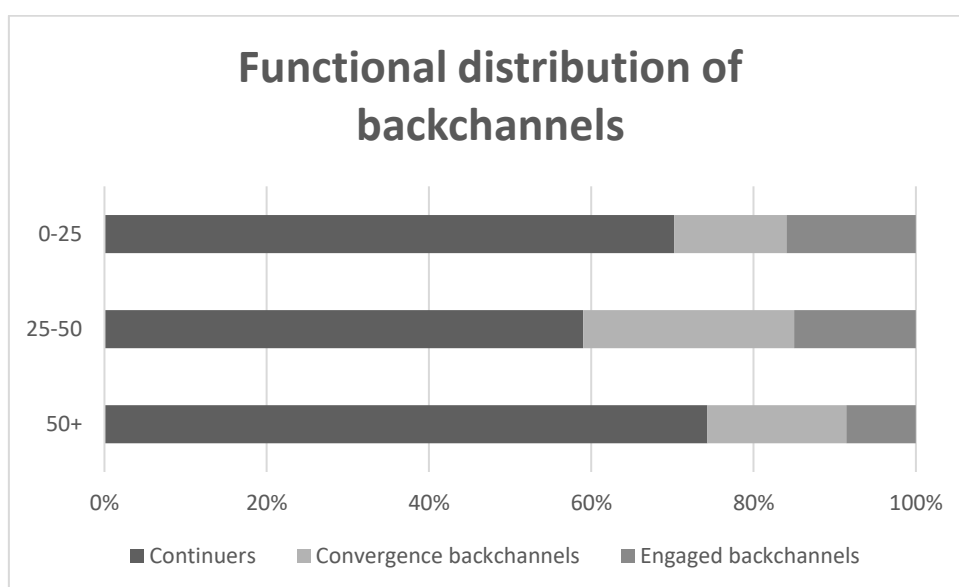


Figure 4: Distribution of functions of backchannels by age

#### 4.3.5 Overlap and interruption patterns

Overlap (simultaneous speech while providing a backchannel) was highest in the middle-aged group (28 %), followed by older speakers (24 %) and youngest speakers (18 %). This suggests that middle-aged individuals may engage in more dynamic and rapid-paced conversations, incorporating backchannels without strict adherence to turn-taking. Younger speakers showed the least overlap, possibly indicating a stronger tendency to wait for clear speaker transitions before responding.

|                 | 0-25 | 25-50 | 50+  |
|-----------------|------|-------|------|
| with overlap    | 18 % | 28 %  | 24 % |
| without overlap | 82 % | 72 %  | 76 % |

Table 10: Distribution of overlapping backchannels by age

#### 4.3.6 Clustering of backchannels

Clustering, or the tendency to use multiple backchannels in rapid succession, was relatively uncommon but increased with age. Older speakers clustered backchannels most frequently (7 %), followed by middle-aged speakers (6 %) and younger speakers (3 %). This pattern suggests that older speakers may employ multiple backchannels as a way to reinforce engagement and attentiveness in conversations.

|            | 0-25 | 25-50 | 50+ |
|------------|------|-------|-----|
| clustering | 3 %  | 6 %   | 7 % |

Table 11: Distribution of clustering by age

#### 4.3.7 Prompted speaker change and reaction to backchannels

Backchannels that led to a speaker transition occurred most frequently in middle-aged conversations (16 %), followed by younger speakers (10 %) and least frequently in older speakers (9 %). This suggests that middle-aged speakers may use backchannels more strategically to influence turn-taking.

Similarly, backchannels that prompted further elaboration from the speaker were most common in younger speakers (9 %), decreasing with age (5 % in middle-aged speakers and 4 % in older speakers). This finding aligns with the observation that younger speakers tend to use more expressive and evaluative backchannels, which naturally invite expansion from the speaker.

## 5 Conclusion

This diploma thesis investigated the use of backchannels in present-day spoken British English, with a particular focus on how their forms and functions vary across speaker gender and age. Drawing on a demographically balanced and turn-normalized subset of the Spoken BNC2014 corpus, the study analysed 18 dyadic conversations representing 6 distinct gender–age groups. This design enabled systematic, proportionally valid comparisons, which marks a methodological contribution to corpus-based discourse analysis.

Backchannels were examined across a multidimensional framework that incorporated their forms (minimal/non-minimal, simple/complex, generic/specific), functions (continuer, convergence, engagement), and several contextual features, including overlap, clustering, speaker change, and prompted reactions. The resulting classification scheme allowed for both distributional and interactional interpretation and was applied consistently across more than 1,500 backchannel tokens.

The analysis revealed several notable trends. First, with regard to gender, female speakers in the dataset produced a higher overall number of backchannels (614) and demonstrated greater lexical and functional diversity. Their backchannels often included affective and evaluative elements (e.g., “oh really”, “that’s interesting”) and exhibited more frequent clustering (8 %). These findings are consistent with prior claims that women tend to adopt a more facilitative and affiliative conversational style.

Male speakers, while contributing fewer backchannels in total (457), produced a relatively high proportion of complex and iterative forms (28 %) — particularly among older participants — suggesting a more selective and emphatic style of listener engagement. In addition, convergence markers such as “right” or “exactly” were more commonly used by male speakers, indicating a preference for alignment or summarization.

Age-related variation also emerged. Older speakers produced the highest number of backchannels overall (435), primarily of the minimal type (83 %), reflecting a tendency toward efficiency and supportiveness. In contrast, younger speakers employed a greater proportion of non-minimal and evaluative responses (26 %), suggestive of a more involved or expressive engagement strategy. Middle-aged speakers were the most likely to overlap with their interlocutors (28 %), indicating a more co-constructive or competitive turn-taking style.

Functionally, continuers were the most frequent category across all groups, but notable variation was observed. Women and older speakers produced continuers more frequently (71 % and 78 %), while convergence was more prevalent among men and middle-aged participants (23 % and 26 %). Younger speakers showed the highest proportion of engagement markers (15 %), reinforcing their affective involvement. These findings refine existing claims about gender and age-related interactional styles, offering more granular insight into backchannel behaviour across same-gender, same-age dyads — an underexplored configuration in previous research.

One of the study's empirical contributions lies in its analysis of “yeah” in relation to speaker change. While Jefferson (1983) and Drummond (1993) suggested that “yeah” commonly signals a transition of speaker roles, only 10 % of its occurrences in this dataset were followed by a change of speaker — significantly lower than previously reported rates. This finding supports the view that “yeah” is a multifunctional and context-dependent token. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the study did not account for prosodic or non-verbal cues such as intonation, gaze, or gesture, which may also play a role in signalling speaker transitions.

Another noteworthy contribution is the inclusion of overlap and clustering in the comparative analysis. Middle-aged speakers were found to use overlapping speech most frequently (28 %), while clustering was most characteristic of women and older speakers

(8 % and 7 %). These dimensions of backchannel use are often under-represented in corpus studies and offer new perspectives on real-time listener involvement.

This thesis thus offers a novel contribution to the study of listener behaviour in spoken interaction by integrating a functionally grounded, corpus-based approach with demographic variation across speaker gender and age. Through the use of turn-normalized conversational samples, it enables direct, proportional comparison of backchannel use across 18 dyadic interactions — a methodological improvement over earlier studies with uneven sample sizes or uncontrolled speaker variables. Unlike most existing research, which typically examines mixed-age or mixed-gender interactions, this study isolates same-gender and same-age groups, thereby uncovering subtle intra-group variation often obscured in broader datasets. The inclusion of rarely examined features such as speaker change, clustering, and overlap, combined with detailed functional classification, further enriches the descriptive scope. As such, the study not only confirms existing sociolinguistic findings but also adds empirical nuance to them and proposes a replicable framework for future corpus-driven research on spoken discourse.

While the study offers valuable findings, it also presents certain limitations. The dataset consists of a relatively small number of conversations, and only same-gender, same-age interactions were included. Additionally, the corpus data span the years 2012–2016; therefore, potential diachronic shifts in backchannel use — particularly among younger speakers — may not be captured. Moreover, the influence of conversational topic and speaker engagement levels, which could significantly impact backchannel use, were not controlled. These variables warrant further investigation.

Future research should consider expanding the scope to include mixed-gender and mixed-age dyads, as well as cross-varietal comparisons (e.g., American, Australian, or Indian English). The inclusion of multimodal features — such as prosody, facial expressions, and gesture — would further enhance the analysis of how backchannels function within

turn-taking and alignment. Additionally, investigating variation across different levels of speaker involvement and topic familiarity may yield further insights.

In sum, this thesis provides a comprehensive, empirically grounded account of how age and gender influence backchannel use in contemporary British English. It demonstrates that backchannels are not merely incidental acknowledgments but are strategically deployed resources in interaction, reflecting and constructing speaker identity, stance, and involvement. Through its methodological design and detailed comparative framework, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of listener behaviour and the broader mechanics of spoken discourse.

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### **Sources and tools**

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## **Vyjádření k využití nástrojů umělé inteligence**

Tímto prohlašuji, že ke zhotovení mé diplomové práce s názvem *A corpus-based research of backchannels in British English taking account of gender and age factors* (vedoucí práce doc. PhDr. Renata Pípalová, CSc.) nebyly využity žádné nástroje umělé inteligence.

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Appendix I: Complete alphabetical list of backchannels

Appendix II: Alphabetical list of non-minimal backchannels

Appendix III: Alphabetical list of backchannels that prompted speaker change

Appendix IV: Alphabetical list of backchannels that prompted a reaction

## 7 Appendix

### 7.1 Appendix I: Complete alphabetical list of backchannels

|    | backchannel          | frequency | function           | gender         | age group        |
|----|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1  | ah                   | 13        | continuer, engaged | females, males | 0-25, 25-50, 50+ |
| 2  | ah (.) oh good       | 1         | engaged            | males          | 0-25             |
| 3  | ah ah ah             | 1         | continuer          | males          | 25-50            |
| 4  | ah ha ha okay        | 1         | engaged            | males          | 50+              |
| 5  | ah no                | 1         | continuer          | males          | 25-50            |
| 6  | ah uhu uhu           | 1         | continuer          | males          | 50+              |
| 7  | ah yeah              | 1         | continuer          | females        | 50+              |
| 8  | ah yes               | 1         | continuer          | males          | 50+              |
| 9  | aha                  | 2         | continuer          | males          | 25-50            |
| 10 | annoying             | 1         | convergence        | females        | 0-25             |
| 11 | are they?            | 1         | engaged            | males          | 50+              |
| 12 | are you serious? wow | 1         | engaged            | males          | 0-25             |
| 13 | boring               | 1         | convergence        | females        | 0-25             |
| 14 | brilliant            | 1         | engaged            | females        | 25-50            |

|        |                   |   |             |                   |                      |
|--------|-------------------|---|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>5 | damn it           | 1 | engaged     | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>6 | definitely        | 1 | convergence | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7 | do we? oh no yeah | 1 | engaged     | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>8 | do you? yeah      | 1 | engaged     | females           | 50+                  |
| 1<br>9 | does he?          | 1 | engaged     | males             | 0-25                 |
| 2<br>0 | does it?          | 1 | engaged     | males             | 50+                  |
| 2<br>1 | er mm yeah        | 1 | continuer   | females           | 25-50                |
| 2<br>2 | exactly           | 6 | convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 2<br>3 | god               | 3 | engaged     | females           | 0-25                 |
| 2<br>4 | good              | 2 | convergence | females           | 0-25                 |
| 2<br>5 | good god          | 1 | engaged     | females           | 0-25                 |
| 2<br>6 | goodness          | 1 | engaged     | females           | 50+                  |
| 2<br>7 | gosh              | 3 | engaged     | females           | 25-50,<br>50+        |

|        |                                    |   |             |                   |               |
|--------|------------------------------------|---|-------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 2<br>8 | gosh (.) oh okay (.) oh do<br>you? | 1 | engaged     | females           | 25-50         |
| 2<br>9 | his birthday right                 | 1 | convergence | females           | 25-50         |
| 3<br>0 | hopefully                          | 1 | convergence | females           | 0-25          |
| 3<br>1 | I know                             | 4 | convergence | females           | 0-25          |
| 3<br>2 | I know (.) yes                     | 1 | convergence | females           | 50+           |
| 3<br>3 | I know no                          | 1 | convergence | males             | 0-25          |
| 3<br>4 | I see                              | 1 | convergence | males             | 0-25          |
| 3<br>5 | I think so                         | 1 | continuer   | females           | 50+           |
| 3<br>6 | is it?                             | 3 | engaged     | females,<br>males | 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 3<br>7 | is it? good                        | 1 | engaged     | females           | 25-50         |
| 3<br>8 | is she?                            | 1 | engaged     | males             | 0-25          |
| 3<br>9 | it was hard                        | 1 | convergence | females           | 50+           |
| 4<br>0 | it's not                           | 1 | convergence | females           | 0-25          |

|        |                          |     |                           |                   |                      |
|--------|--------------------------|-----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 4<br>1 | it's really awkward yeah | 1   | convergence               | males             | 0-25                 |
| 4<br>2 | maybe                    | 1   | continuer                 | females           | 25-50                |
| 4<br>3 | maybe yeah               | 1   | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 4<br>4 | mm                       | 192 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 4<br>5 | mm (.) yeah              | 2   | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 25-50                |
| 4<br>6 | mm mm                    | 12  | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 4<br>7 | mm mm mm                 | 1   | continuer                 | females           | 50+                  |
| 4<br>8 | mm yeah                  | 2   | continuer                 | females           | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 4<br>9 | mm yeah yeah yeah        | 1   | convergence               | males             | 50+                  |
| 5<br>0 | no                       | 22  | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 5<br>1 | no I know I know I know  | 1   | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 5<br>2 | no I'm alright           | 1   | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 5<br>3 | no no                    | 5   | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 25-50,<br>50+        |

|        |                                            |    |                                       |                   |                      |
|--------|--------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 5<br>4 | no no (.) yeah yeah yeah yeah<br>yeah yeah | 1  | convergence                           | males             | 25-50                |
| 5<br>5 | no no no                                   | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 50+                  |
| 5<br>6 | no way (.) no                              | 1  | engaged                               | females           | 25-50                |
| 5<br>7 | no well                                    | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 0-25                 |
| 5<br>8 | obviously                                  | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 25-50                |
| 5<br>9 | of course yes                              | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 25-50                |
| 6<br>0 | oh                                         | 77 | continuer,<br>convergence,<br>engaged | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 6<br>1 | oh (.) no                                  | 1  | engaged                               | females           | 50+                  |
| 6<br>2 | oh (.) oh right                            | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 25-50                |
| 6<br>3 | oh a square neck yes                       | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 50+                  |
| 6<br>4 | oh a V-neck                                | 1  | convergence                           | females           | 50+                  |
| 6<br>5 | oh ah                                      | 1  | continuer                             | males             | 25-50                |
| 6<br>6 | oh Christ                                  | 1  | engaged                               | males             | 50+                  |

|        |               |   |                    |                   |                      |
|--------|---------------|---|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 6<br>7 | oh christ god | 1 | engaged            | males             | 50+                  |
| 6<br>8 | oh dear       | 5 | engaged            | females           | 25-50,<br>50+        |
| 6<br>9 | oh definitely | 1 | convergence        | females           | 0-25                 |
| 7<br>0 | oh did she?   | 1 | engaged            | females           | 50+                  |
| 7<br>1 | oh er yeah    | 1 | continuer          | males             | 0-25                 |
| 7<br>2 | oh god        | 4 | engaged            | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 7<br>3 | oh good       | 2 | engaged            | females,<br>males | 25-50                |
| 7<br>4 | oh how lovely | 1 | engaged            | females           | 0-25                 |
| 7<br>5 | oh is it?     | 1 | engaged            | females           | 0-25                 |
| 7<br>6 | oh isn't it?  | 1 | engaged            | females           | 50+                  |
| 7<br>7 | oh mate       | 1 | engaged            | males             | 25-50                |
| 7<br>8 | oh mm         | 1 | continuer          | females           | 0-25                 |
| 7<br>9 | oh my god     | 7 | continuer, engaged | females,<br>males | 0-25, 50+            |

|    |                            |    |                           |                   |                      |
|----|----------------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 80 | oh my god wow              | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25                 |
| 81 | oh my word                 | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 50+                  |
| 82 | oh nice                    | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 25-50                |
| 83 | oh no                      | 8  | convergence,<br>engaged   | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 84 | oh of course               | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 85 | oh okay                    | 7  | continuer, engaged        | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 86 | oh really (.) gosh         | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 25-50                |
| 87 | oh really?                 | 6  | engaged                   | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 88 | oh right                   | 15 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 89 | oh right okay              | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 0-25                 |
| 90 | oh right yeah              | 1  | convergence               | males             | 0-25                 |
| 91 | oh thank goodness for that | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 50+                  |
| 92 | oh that's a shame          | 2  | engaged                   | females           | 25-50                |

|             |                     |    |                           |                   |                 |
|-------------|---------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 9<br>3      | oh that's good      | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25            |
| 9<br>4      | oh that's good then | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25            |
| 9<br>5      | oh they do          | 1  | convergence               | females           | 50+             |
| 9<br>6      | oh wow              | 5  | engaged                   | females,<br>males | 25-50           |
| 9<br>7      | oh yeah             | 11 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50 |
| 9<br>8      | oh yeah alight then | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50           |
| 9<br>9      | oh yeah hmm         | 1  | convergence               | females           | 0-25            |
| 1<br>0<br>0 | oh yeah oh my god   | 1  | convergence               | males             | 0-25            |
| 1<br>0<br>1 | oh yeah that's true | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50           |
| 1<br>0<br>2 | oh yeah yeah        | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50           |
| 1<br>0<br>3 | oh yeah yeah okay   | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50           |

|             |                             |    |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|-----------------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>0<br>4 | oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah | 2  | continuer,<br>convergence | males             | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 1<br>0<br>5 | oh yeah?                    | 2  | engaged                   | males             | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 1<br>0<br>6 | oh yes                      | 3  | convergence               | females,<br>males | 50+                  |
| 1<br>0<br>7 | oh yes (.) mm mm            | 1  | convergence               | females           | 50+                  |
| 1<br>0<br>8 | oh yes okay cool            | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>0<br>9 | oh yes yes                  | 2  | convergence               | females,<br>males | 25-50,<br>50+        |
| 1<br>1<br>0 | okay                        | 23 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 1<br>1<br>1 | okay (.) gosh               | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>1<br>2 | okay (.) okay               | 1  | continuer                 | females           | 25-50                |

|             |                   |    |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|-------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>1<br>3 | okay (.) right    | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>1<br>4 | okay (.) yeah     | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>1<br>5 | okay okay right   | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>1<br>6 | Raasay yes yes    | 1  | convergence               | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>1<br>7 | RE                | 1  | convergence               | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>1<br>8 | really?           | 11 | engaged                   | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 1<br>1<br>9 | really? (.) yeah? | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>2<br>0 | really? oh yeah   | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>2<br>1 | right             | 29 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |

|             |                       |   |                           |                   |               |
|-------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1<br>2<br>2 | right (.) yeah        | 1 | continuer                 | males             | 50+           |
| 1<br>2<br>3 | right (.) yes (.) yes | 1 | convergence               | females           | 50+           |
| 1<br>2<br>4 | right okay            | 3 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 50+           |
| 1<br>2<br>5 | right right           | 1 | continuer                 | males             | 50+           |
| 1<br>2<br>6 | scouts oh (.) uh-oh   | 1 | engaged                   | males             | 25-50         |
| 1<br>2<br>7 | shit                  | 2 | engaged                   | males             | 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 1<br>2<br>8 | so sad isn't it       | 1 | engaged                   | females           | 0-25          |
| 1<br>2<br>9 | Spanish               | 1 | convergence               | females           | 0-25          |
| 1<br>3<br>0 | sure                  | 1 | convergence               | males             | 50+           |

|             |                    |   |             |         |             |
|-------------|--------------------|---|-------------|---------|-------------|
| 1<br>3<br>1 | T H Baker          | 1 | convergence | females | 25-50       |
| 1<br>3<br>2 | teach yeah         | 1 | convergence | males   | 0-25        |
| 1<br>3<br>3 | that's cool        | 1 | engaged     | males   | 25-50       |
| 1<br>3<br>4 | that's cool though | 1 | engaged     | males   | 25-50       |
| 1<br>3<br>5 | that's interesting | 1 | engaged     | males   | 25-50       |
| 1<br>3<br>6 | that's really good | 2 | engaged     | females | 0-25, 25-50 |
| 1<br>3<br>7 | that's so sad      | 1 | engaged     | females | 0-25        |
| 1<br>3<br>8 | they're not yeah   | 1 | convergence | males   | 0-25        |
| 1<br>3<br>9 | trunk              | 1 | convergence | males   | 50+         |

|             |                |    |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|----------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>4<br>0 | uh huh         | 2  | continuer                 | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>4<br>1 | uhu            | 4  | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 1<br>4<br>2 | uhu okay       | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>4<br>3 | unwillingly    | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>4<br>4 | well           | 1  | continuer                 | females           | 50+                  |
| 1<br>4<br>5 | what?          | 2  | engaged                   | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>4<br>6 | Wino yeah yeah | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>4<br>7 | wow            | 11 | engaged                   | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 1<br>4<br>8 | wow wow        | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 50+                  |

|             |                                                     |     |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>4<br>9 | yay                                                 | 1   | continuer                 | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>5<br>0 | yeah                                                | 300 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |
| 1<br>5<br>1 | yeah (.) blimey yeah yeah (.)<br>mm (.) interesting | 1   | engaged                   | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>5<br>2 | yeah (.) I see I see I see                          | 1   | convergence               | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>5<br>3 | yeah (.) oh yes yes (.) mm (.)<br>oh well (.) yes   | 1   | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>5<br>4 | yeah (.) okay                                       | 1   | continuer                 | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>5<br>5 | yeah (.) yeah                                       | 5   | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 1<br>5<br>6 | yeah (.) yeah yeah yeah yeah                        | 1   | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>5<br>7 | yeah (.) yes                                        | 1   | continuer                 | females           | 25-50                |

|             |                           |   |             |                   |                 |
|-------------|---------------------------|---|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1<br>5<br>8 | yeah cool man             | 1 | convergence | males             | 25-50           |
| 1<br>5<br>9 | yeah definitely           | 1 | convergence | males             | 25-50           |
| 1<br>6<br>0 | yeah exactly              | 2 | convergence | females,<br>males | 25-50,<br>50+   |
| 1<br>6<br>1 | yeah horrendous pain yeah | 1 | convergence | females           | 50+             |
| 1<br>6<br>2 | yeah I know               | 5 | convergence | males             | 0-25, 25-<br>50 |
| 1<br>6<br>3 | yeah I know (.) yeah      | 1 | convergence | females           | 25-50           |
| 1<br>6<br>4 | yeah I know I know I know | 1 | convergence | males             | 0-25            |
| 1<br>6<br>5 | yeah it's still one way   | 1 | convergence | males             | 0-25            |
| 1<br>6<br>6 | yeah maybe                | 1 | convergence | females           | 25-50           |

|             |                         |    |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|-------------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>6<br>7 | yeah no                 | 1  | convergence               | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>6<br>8 | yeah okay               | 3  | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50      |
| 1<br>6<br>9 | yeah really?            | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 50+                  |
| 1<br>7<br>0 | yeah she's really funny | 1  | convergence               | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>7<br>1 | yeah Superman           | 1  | convergence               | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>7<br>2 | yeah that's true        | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7<br>3 | yeah trash sauce        | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7<br>4 | yeah true               | 1  | convergence               | females           | 50+                  |
| 1<br>7<br>5 | yeah yeah               | 15 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |

|             |                                       |    |                           |                   |                      |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1<br>7<br>6 | yeah yeah (.) who are you?<br>yeah    | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7<br>7 | yeah yeah yeah                        | 3  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7<br>8 | yeah yeah yeah yeah                   | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>7<br>9 | yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah              | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>8<br>0 | yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah<br>yeah yeah | 1  | convergence               | males             | 25-50                |
| 1<br>8<br>1 | yeah you do you do                    | 1  | convergence               | females           | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>8<br>2 | yeah?                                 | 2  | continuer, engaged        | males             | 0-25, 50+            |
| 1<br>8<br>3 | yep                                   | 2  | continuer,<br>convergence | males             | 0-25                 |
| 1<br>8<br>4 | yes                                   | 72 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-<br>50, 50+ |

|             |                  |   |                           |                   |     |
|-------------|------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------|-----|
| 1<br>8<br>5 | yes (.) yeah     | 1 | continuer                 | males             | 50+ |
| 1<br>8<br>6 | yes now          | 1 | convergence               | females           | 50+ |
| 1<br>8<br>7 | yes oh I know    | 1 | convergence               | females           | 50+ |
| 1<br>8<br>8 | yes that's right | 1 | continuer                 | males             | 50+ |
| 1<br>8<br>9 | yes yes          | 5 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 50+ |
| 1<br>9<br>0 | yes yes exactly  | 1 | convergence               | females           | 50+ |

## 7.2 Appendix II: Alphabetical list of non-minimal backchannels

|   | backchannel          | frequency | function    | gender  | age group |
|---|----------------------|-----------|-------------|---------|-----------|
| 1 | ah (.) oh good       | 1         | engaged     | males   | 0-25      |
| 2 | annoying             | 1         | convergence | females | 0-25      |
| 3 | are they?            | 1         | engaged     | males   | 50+       |
| 4 | are you serious? wow | 1         | engaged     | males   | 0-25      |

|    |                                 |   |             |                |                  |
|----|---------------------------------|---|-------------|----------------|------------------|
| 5  | boring                          | 1 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |
| 6  | brilliant                       | 1 | engaged     | females        | 25-50            |
| 7  | damn it                         | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25             |
| 8  | definitely                      | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50            |
| 9  | do we? oh no yeah               | 1 | engaged     | males          | 0-25             |
| 10 | do you? yeah                    | 1 | engaged     | females        | 50+              |
| 11 | does he?                        | 1 | engaged     | males          | 0-25             |
| 12 | does it?                        | 1 | engaged     | males          | 50+              |
| 13 | exactly                         | 6 | convergence | females, males | 0-25, 25-50, 50+ |
| 14 | god                             | 3 | engaged     | females        | 0-25             |
| 15 | good                            | 2 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |
| 16 | good god                        | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25             |
| 17 | goodness                        | 1 | engaged     | females        | 50+              |
| 18 | gosh                            | 3 | engaged     | females        | 25-50, 50+       |
| 19 | gosh (.) oh okay (.) oh do you? | 1 | engaged     | females        | 25-50            |
| 20 | his birthday right              | 1 | convergence | females        | 25-50            |
| 21 | hopefully                       | 1 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |
| 22 | I know                          | 4 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |

|    |                          |   |             |                |            |
|----|--------------------------|---|-------------|----------------|------------|
| 23 | I know (.) yes           | 1 | convergence | females        | 50+        |
| 24 | I know no                | 1 | convergence | males          | 0-25       |
| 25 | I see                    | 1 | convergence | males          | 0-25       |
| 26 | I think so               | 1 | continuer   | females        | 50+        |
| 27 | is it?                   | 3 | engaged     | females, males | 25-50, 50+ |
| 28 | is it? good              | 1 | engaged     | females        | 25-50      |
| 29 | is she?                  | 1 | engaged     | males          | 0-25       |
| 30 | it was hard              | 1 | convergence | females        | 50+        |
| 31 | it's not                 | 1 | convergence | females        | 0-25       |
| 32 | it's really awkward yeah | 1 | convergence | males          | 0-25       |
| 33 | maybe yeah               | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50      |
| 34 | no I know I know I know  | 1 | convergence | females        | 25-50      |
| 35 | no I'm alright           | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50      |
| 36 | no way (.) no            | 1 | engaged     | females        | 25-50      |

|    |                      |   |             |                |                  |
|----|----------------------|---|-------------|----------------|------------------|
| 37 | no well              | 1 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |
| 38 | obviously            | 1 | convergence | females        | 25-50            |
| 39 | of course yes        | 1 | convergence | females        | 25-50            |
| 40 | oh (.) oh right      | 1 | convergence | females        | 25-50            |
| 41 | oh a square neck yes | 1 | convergence | females        | 50+              |
| 42 | oh a V-neck          | 1 | convergence | females        | 50+              |
| 43 | oh Christ            | 1 | engaged     | males          | 50+              |
| 44 | oh christ god        | 1 | engaged     | males          | 50+              |
| 45 | oh dear              | 5 | engaged     | females        | 25-50, 50+       |
| 46 | oh definitely        | 1 | convergence | females        | 0-25             |
| 47 | oh did she?          | 1 | engaged     | females        | 50+              |
| 48 | oh god               | 4 | engaged     | females, males | 0-25, 25-50, 50+ |
| 49 | oh good              | 2 | engaged     | females, males | 25-50            |
| 50 | oh how lovely        | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25             |
| 51 | oh is it?            | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25             |
| 52 | oh isn't it?         | 1 | engaged     | females        | 50+              |

|    |                            |    |                           |                   |                     |
|----|----------------------------|----|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 53 | oh mate                    | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 25-50               |
| 54 | oh my god                  | 7  | continuer,<br>engaged     | females,<br>males | 0-25, 50+           |
| 55 | oh my god wow              | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25                |
| 56 | oh my word                 | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 50+                 |
| 57 | oh nice                    | 1  | engaged                   | males             | 25-50               |
| 58 | oh of course               | 1  | convergence               | females           | 25-50               |
| 59 | oh okay                    | 1  | continuer                 | females           | 0-25                |
| 60 | oh really (.) gosh         | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 25-50               |
| 61 | oh really?                 | 6  | engaged                   | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 62 | oh right                   | 15 | continuer,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 63 | oh right okay              | 1  | continuer                 | males             | 0-25                |
| 64 | oh right yeah              | 1  | convergence               | males             | 0-25                |
| 65 | oh thank goodness for that | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 50+                 |
| 66 | oh that's a shame          | 2  | engaged                   | females           | 25-50               |
| 67 | oh that's good             | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25                |
| 68 | oh that's good then        | 1  | engaged                   | females           | 0-25                |

|    |                     |    |                 |                   |                     |
|----|---------------------|----|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 69 | oh they do          | 1  | converge<br>nce | females           | 50+                 |
| 70 | oh wow              | 2  | engaged         | females           | 25-50               |
| 71 | oh yeah alight then | 1  | converge<br>nce | males             | 25-50               |
| 72 | oh yeah oh my god   | 1  | converge<br>nce | males             | 0-25                |
| 73 | oh yeah that's true | 1  | converge<br>nce | females           | 25-50               |
| 74 | oh yes okay cool    | 1  | converge<br>nce | females           | 25-50               |
| 75 | okay (.) gosh       | 1  | engaged         | females           | 25-50               |
| 76 | okay okay right     | 1  | continue<br>r   | males             | 50+                 |
| 77 | Raasay yes yes      | 1  | converge<br>nce | males             | 50+                 |
| 78 | RE                  | 1  | converge<br>nce | females           | 0-25                |
| 79 | really?             | 11 | engaged         | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 80 | really? (.) yeah?   | 1  | engaged         | males             | 50+                 |
| 81 | really? oh yeah     | 1  | converge<br>nce | males             | 25-50               |

|    |                       |    |                               |                   |                     |
|----|-----------------------|----|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 82 | right                 | 28 | continue<br>r,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 83 | right (.) yeah        | 1  | continue<br>r                 | males             | 50+                 |
| 84 | right (.) yes (.) yes | 1  | convergence                   | females           | 50+                 |
| 85 | right okay            | 3  | continue<br>r,<br>convergence | females,<br>males | 50+                 |
| 86 | right right           | 1  | continue<br>r                 | males             | 50+                 |
| 87 | scouts oh (.) uh-oh   | 1  | engaged                       | males             | 25-50               |
| 88 | shit                  | 2  | engaged                       | males             | 25-50, 50+          |
| 89 | so sad isn't it       | 1  | engaged                       | females           | 0-25                |
| 90 | Spanish               | 1  | convergence                   | females           | 0-25                |
| 91 | T H Baker             | 1  | convergence                   | females           | 25-50               |
| 92 | teach yeah            | 1  | convergence                   | males             | 0-25                |
| 93 | that's cool           | 1  | engaged                       | males             | 25-50               |
| 94 | that's cool though    | 1  | engaged                       | males             | 25-50               |
| 95 | that's interesting    | 1  | engaged                       | males             | 25-50               |

|     |                                                  |   |             |                |             |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------|---|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| 96  | that's really good                               | 2 | engaged     | females        | 0-25, 25-50 |
| 97  | that's so sad                                    | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25        |
| 98  | they're not yeah                                 | 1 | convergence | males          | 0-25        |
| 99  | trunk                                            | 1 | convergence | males          | 50+         |
| 100 | unwillingly                                      | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50       |
| 101 | what?                                            | 1 | engaged     | males          | 0-25        |
| 102 | Wino yeah yeah                                   | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50       |
| 103 | wow                                              | 1 | engaged     | females        | 0-25        |
| 104 | yeah (.) blimey yeah yeah (.) mm (.) interesting | 1 | engaged     | females        | 25-50       |
| 105 | yeah (.) I see I see I see                       | 1 | convergence | males          | 0-25        |
| 106 | yeah cool man                                    | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50       |
| 107 | yeah definitely                                  | 1 | convergence | males          | 25-50       |
| 108 | yeah exactly                                     | 2 | convergence | females, males | 25-50, 50+  |
| 109 | yeah horrendous pain yeah                        | 1 | convergence | females        | 50+         |

|     |                                 |   |             |         |             |
|-----|---------------------------------|---|-------------|---------|-------------|
| 110 | yeah I know                     | 5 | convergence | males   | 0-25, 25-50 |
| 111 | yeah I know (.) yeah            | 1 | convergence | females | 25-50       |
| 112 | yeah I know I know I know       | 1 | convergence | males   | 0-25        |
| 113 | yeah it's still one way         | 1 | convergence | males   | 0-25        |
| 114 | yeah maybe                      | 1 | convergence | females | 25-50       |
| 115 | yeah really?                    | 1 | engaged     | males   | 50+         |
| 116 | yeah she's really funny         | 1 | convergence | females | 0-25        |
| 117 | yeah Superman                   | 1 | convergence | males   | 0-25        |
| 118 | yeah that's true                | 1 | convergence | females | 25-50       |
| 119 | yeah trash sauce                | 1 | convergence | females | 25-50       |
| 120 | yeah true                       | 1 | convergence | females | 50+         |
| 121 | yeah yeah (.) who are you? yeah | 1 | convergence | males   | 25-50       |
| 122 | yeah you do you do              | 1 | convergence | females | 0-25        |

|         |                  |   |                 |         |     |
|---------|------------------|---|-----------------|---------|-----|
| 12<br>3 | yes now          | 1 | converge<br>nce | females | 50+ |
| 12<br>4 | yes oh I know    | 1 | converge<br>nce | females | 50+ |
| 12<br>5 | yes that's right | 1 | continue<br>r   | males   | 50+ |
| 12<br>6 | yes yes exactly  | 1 | converge<br>nce | females | 50+ |

### 7.3 Appendix III: Alphabetical list of backchannels that prompted speaker change

|   | <b>backchannel</b>                      | <b>frequenc<br/>y</b> | <b>gender</b>     | <b>age group</b>    |
|---|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | I know                                  | 3                     | females           | 0-25                |
| 2 | I know (.) yes                          | 1                     | females           | 50+                 |
| 3 | exactly                                 | 2                     | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50         |
| 4 | mm                                      | 19                    | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 5 | mm (.) yeah                             | 1                     | females           | 25-50               |
| 6 | mm mm                                   | 2                     | females,<br>males | 25-50, 50+          |
| 7 | no no                                   | 1                     | females           | 50+                 |
| 8 | no no (.) yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah | 1                     | males             | 25-50               |
| 9 | no way (.) no                           | 1                     | females           | 25-50               |

|        |                             |    |                   |                     |
|--------|-----------------------------|----|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1<br>0 | oh                          | 11 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 1<br>1 | oh god                      | 1  | males             | 50+                 |
| 1<br>2 | oh my god                   | 1  | females           | 0-25                |
| 1<br>3 | oh no                       | 1  | females           | 0-25                |
| 1<br>4 | oh right                    | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 1<br>5 | oh thank goodness for that  | 1  | females           | 50+                 |
| 1<br>6 | oh that's good              | 1  | females           | 0-25                |
| 1<br>7 | oh that's good then         | 1  | females           | 0-25                |
| 1<br>8 | oh wow                      | 2  | females,<br>males | 25-50               |
| 1<br>9 | oh yeah                     | 2  | males             | 25-50               |
| 2<br>0 | oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah | 1  | males             | 25-50               |
| 2<br>1 | oh yes                      | 1  | females           | 50+                 |
| 2<br>2 | okay                        | 4  | females,<br>males | 25-50               |

|        |                                                   |    |                   |                     |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------|----|-------------------|---------------------|
| 2<br>3 | okay (.) gosh                                     | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 2<br>4 | okay (.) right                                    | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 2<br>5 | right                                             | 2  | females           | 25-50, 50+          |
| 2<br>6 | shit                                              | 1  | males             | 50+                 |
| 2<br>7 | wow                                               | 2  | females,<br>males | 0-25                |
| 2<br>8 | yay                                               | 1  | females           | 0-25                |
| 2<br>9 | yeah                                              | 31 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 3<br>0 | yeah (.) oh yes yes (.) mm (.) oh well (.)<br>yes | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>1 | yeah (.) yeah                                     | 2  | females           | 0-25, 25-50         |
| 3<br>2 | yeah (.) yeah yeah yeah yeah                      | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>3 | yeah I know                                       | 2  | males             | 0-25                |
| 3<br>4 | yeah I know (.) yeah                              | 1  | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>5 | yeah yeah                                         | 2  | males             | 25-50, 50+          |

|        |         |    |                   |           |
|--------|---------|----|-------------------|-----------|
| 3<br>6 | yes     | 13 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 50+ |
| 3<br>7 | yes yes | 3  | females,<br>males | 50+       |

#### 7.4 Appendix IV: Alphabetical list of backchannels that prompted a reaction

|    | backchannel                     | type of prompted reaction | frequency | gender            | age group |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1  | are you serious? wow            | elaboration               | 1         | males             | 0-25      |
| 2  | boring                          | elaboration               | 1         | females           | 0-25      |
| 3  | damn it                         | elaboration               | 1         | females           | 0-25      |
| 4  | do we? oh no yeah               | elaboration               | 1         | males             | 0-25      |
| 5  | do you? yeah                    | elaboration               | 1         | females           | 50+       |
| 6  | does he?                        | elaboration               | 1         | males             | 0-25      |
| 7  | goodness                        | elaboration               | 1         | females           | 50+       |
| 8  | gosh (.) oh okay (.) oh do you? | confirmation              | 1         | females           | 25-50     |
| 9  | hopefully                       | elaboration               | 1         | females           | 0-25      |
| 10 | is it?                          | confirmation              | 1         | males             | 50+       |
| 11 | is it?                          | elaboration               | 2         | females,<br>males | 25-50     |
| 12 | is she?                         | elaboration               | 1         | males             | 0-25      |

|        |                      |              |   |                   |                     |
|--------|----------------------|--------------|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1<br>3 | it was hard          | confirmation | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 1<br>4 | no I'm alright       | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 25-50               |
| 1<br>5 | oh                   | confirmation | 1 | males             | 0-25                |
| 1<br>6 | oh                   | elaboration  | 3 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 1<br>7 | oh (.) no            | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 1<br>8 | oh a V-neck          | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 1<br>9 | oh a square neck yes | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 2<br>0 | oh christ god        | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 50+                 |
| 2<br>1 | oh dear              | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 25-50               |
| 2<br>2 | oh did she?          | confirmation | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 2<br>3 | oh good              | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 25-50               |
| 2<br>4 | oh is it?            | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 0-25                |
| 2<br>5 | oh isn't it?         | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 50+                 |

|        |                               |              |   |                   |                     |
|--------|-------------------------------|--------------|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| 2<br>6 | oh my god                     | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 0-25                |
| 2<br>7 | oh my god wow                 | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 0-25                |
| 2<br>8 | oh okay                       | elaboration  | 3 | females           | 0-25, 25-50         |
| 2<br>9 | oh really?                    | confirmation | 1 | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>0 | oh really?                    | elaboration  | 4 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 3<br>1 | oh thank goodness for<br>that | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 50+                 |
| 3<br>2 | oh that's a shame             | elaboration  | 1 | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>3 | oh wow                        | elaboration  | 2 | females           | 25-50               |
| 3<br>4 | oh yeah?                      | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 0-25                |
| 3<br>5 | really?                       | confirmation | 2 | females,<br>males | 0-25                |
| 3<br>6 | really?                       | elaboration  | 6 | females,<br>males | 0-25, 25-50,<br>50+ |
| 3<br>7 | really? (.) yeah?             | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 50+                 |
| 3<br>8 | really? oh yeah               | elaboration  | 1 | males             | 25-50               |

|        |                         |             |   |         |       |
|--------|-------------------------|-------------|---|---------|-------|
| 3<br>9 | so sad isn't it         | elaboration | 1 | females | 0-25  |
| 4<br>0 | teach yeah              | elaboration | 1 | males   | 0-25  |
| 4<br>1 | that's cool             | elaboration | 1 | males   | 25-50 |
| 4<br>2 | that's so sad           | elaboration | 1 | females | 0-25  |
| 4<br>3 | what?                   | elaboration | 1 | males   | 0-25  |
| 4<br>4 | yeah really?            | elaboration | 1 | males   | 50+   |
| 4<br>5 | yeah she's really funny | elaboration | 1 | females | 0-25  |