Conversational Style of Malay Speakers
— in Respect of Backchannels —

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〈要　旨〉

　人は誰でもある会話のスタイルを持っており、会話のスタイルは個人によって、性別によって、また文化の違いによって異なる（Tannen:1984）とされる。それゆえ、会話のスタイルの違いは異なる文化を持つ者の間での障害になりうる。本論文では、これまであまり研究されていないマレー人の会話のスタイルの一端を明らかにすることを最終目標に据え、マレー人女子大学生二者間の会話を、「あいづち」の出現場所に注目し考察した。本研究から示唆されたことは以下のとおりである。このデータにおけるマレー人女性のあいづちは、1）「話者のポーズがないところで打たれるもの」が59%、「話者のポーズ時に打たれるもの」が41%であり、話者の発話に重なるようにしてあいづちが打たれるほうが多い。これは話し手がポーズをあまり与えないことも関与していると考えられる。この結果より、マレー人と日本人の話し手のあいづちへの期待度は異なる可能性がある。2）「話者のポーズがないところで打たれるあいづち」は、「話し手への『話を聞いている』というサインまたは理解」を表す「話し手のために述べられたもの」というよりは、むしろ聞き手の話し手の話の内容への「自己主張」を表し、時にはターンをとるための弛緩剤的役割を果たすという「聞き手自身のためのもの」という面も大きい可能性があると考えられる。

1. Introduction

According to Tannen (1984), everybody has a certain conversational style and the style varies according to individuals, sex and cultures. Therefore the differences of conversational styles can be an obstacle in communication between those with different cultures. Many researches about the differences of conversational styles between Japanese speakers and English speakers have been conducted and more recently conversational analyses between Japanese speakers and those of other languages such as Korean and Chinese have increased in number. Some differences and similarities of conversational styles between Japanese speakers and those of other languages have been revealed, yet we have hardly seen equivalent between Japanese speakers and Malay speakers.

This study aims to investigate the conversational style of Malay speakers from the viewpoint of backchannels. This research could be positioned as an essential study to later apply the result into comparative analysis between Japanese and Malay speakers' conversational styles.

2. Definition of backchannels

As for the definitions of backchannels from the view point of 'functions', many researchers have had their own definitions of backchannels. Miyachi (1959), Duncan (1977), Kurosaki (1987), Horiguchi (1988), Matsuda (1988) and Maynard (1993) are among those. Miyachi (1959) and Kurosaki (1987) define backchannels as statements by a listener showing 'listening' and 'understanding' what a speaker says. Horiguchi (1988), in addition to them, adds 'agreement', 'negative' and 'expression of feeling'. Matsuda (1988) adds 'filling silence' in addition to Horiguchi (1988)'s definition. Maynard (1993) divides functions of backchannels into 6 categories and adds 'addition, repair and requirement of information' to Horiguchi (1988)'s. As seen above, the definitions of backchannels vary. In this paper, I define a backchannel as follows: A backchannel is a short statement that shows a listener's response such as listening, understanding and agreement etc. towards a speaker's statement.

3. Method of research

The study uses one pair of Malay female friends' conversation whose topic is 'Which is better, staying inside campus or outside campus'. They are university students in Malaysia in their early twenties. The recording time is about 11 minutes. The conversation was recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

The data in this exploratory study is limited only to one pair. Therefore the findings cannot be generalized to Malay conversations. In addition, the data covers only one conversation by Malay female friends in their 20's whose topic is preliminarily decided by the researcher. Thus, the data provides a limited range of backchannel features. More such data should be further collected and investigated.

4. Analysis

In the data, in terms of places where backchannels are stated, backchannels such as Example 1 are often observed.

Example 1

A: [*yalah bayangkan dari pada kelas daripada pagi sampai ke petang*

    Yes, imagine that the class held in the morning until evening

B: [*a: xx*

    ah xx

A: *bayangkan balik-balik tu sepatutnya masa yang ada untuk study tapi kita*

    supposedly we study during that time but we

B:

A: *dah ambik untuk untuk apa nama? untuk perjalana:n kan*

    spend it on what? on the road going back home right?

B: *a:*

                                          ah

A: *pastu pena:t.*   [*pastu tak study:* ··· *Ya lepas tu?*

    then we will be exhausted. Then we won't study. Yes, then?

B: *ha: itu* [*lah.*

                  yes that's it

The underlined B's backchannel is overlapped partly with A's statement 'pastu tak study' (then we won't study). A doesn't seem to expect any backchannel here and continues to talk without any sign of request for backchannels. On the other hand, after listening A's statement 'pastu pena:t' (then we will be exhausted), B shows agreement by saying 'ha: itu lah' (ha, that's it). The same feature as this is seen quite often in the data. Table 1 shows how often backchannels which overlap with speakers' statements are shown.

Table 1 Where backchannels are stated

	Frequency (%)
Where there is a speaker's pause	41
Where there are no speaker's pauses	59

The result shows preference for backchannels which overlap with speakers' statements. The backchannels overlapping with speakers' statements occupy 59%, whereas those without overlapping 41%.

This makes a significant comparison with Japanese backchannels. In Nagata (2004), about 20% of backchannels are stated in non pause positions, whereas about 80% of backchannels are mentioned in where a speaker makes a pause. Since Nagata (2004) examines conversations between those who met for the first time and my study is among friends, also only analyzes one Malay conversation data, the results of the data cannot be compared simply equally. However it can be inferred that there is a possibility of the different tendencies of the positions which backchannels are stated between Malay and Japanese speakers.

Why do Malay females in this data state backchannels in non pause positions more than pause positions? One possibility would be because a speaker does not provide pauses often for a listener, as if a listener's response is not expected. Consequently, a listener's backchannels often overlap with a speaker's statement.

On the other hand, as Mizutani (2001) points out, Japanese backchannels are stated where there is a speaker's pause. This is because a speaker requires a listener's backchannels and leaves pauses for a listener to state backchannels in Japanese conversations and without listener's backchannels, speakers feel unpleasant to continue to talk. In response to a speaker's pause, a listener states backchannels.

Malay speakers in this study seem not to expect listeners' backchannels very often. Since there are fewer pauses by Malay speakers, Malay listeners should squeeze in backchannels when a speaker is talking.

However, why do Malay females in this data state backchannels even when not required by a speaker? They could take an option which they do not state any backchannel except for during speakers' pauses.

Now to investigate the reason, the study takes a further look into the environment which backchannels in no pause positions are stated.

Example 2

A: *Macam m:: malaslah nak layan karenah budak-budak* [*ni yang*

    Looks like er they are lazy to entertain those demanding international students

B: *a:* [*betul juga tu.*

                                  ah that's right

A: international de [mand *sangat nilah asyik-asyik tak puas hati asyik-asyik nak*

    they always feel unsatisfied and keep complaining

B: [*silap lah.*

                 (that's wrong)

A: *komen saja tak apa, kita local kan.*

    It's ok we are just commenting. We are local right?

B:

In Example 2, A says '*Macam, m:: malaslah nak layan karenah budak-budak*' (Looks like er they are too lazy to entertain students). After listening this statement, B states backchannel '*a: betul juga tu*' (ah that's right). This backchannel overlaps with A's statement '*ni yang* • •' (those international student • •). Also just after this A's statement, B again inserts a backchannel '*silap lah*' (that's wrong), overlapping with A's statement again. Since, at this point after the B's first backchannel, no new information is given from A, this second backchannel is considered as a B's opinion towards the A's first statement again. From this example, it could be pointed out that a listener gives her backchannels quite freely without any limit of positions that backchannels appear. It seems that a listener B here wants to express her responses on the spot without delay, even though not required by a speaker A. That is, a listener is also eager to express her opinion even when there is neither a pause to insert her statement nor her holding a turn.

Example 3

A: *a: demand dia lebih sikit kan. Tapi tak tahulah nak kata apa kan. Tapi*

　ah they are more demanding, but I don't know what to say. But

B:

A: *rasa ada double standard lah. Macam international dengan a kita* [*pelajar*

　feels like there is a double standard. Like the international students compared to us,

B: 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[*ya lah*

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Yes

A: *-pelajar local ni kan..*

　local students, right?

B:

In Example 3, A talks about International students and management treats them better compared to local students, so A feels management practices double standard. When A says 'macam international dengan a kita' (like the international students compared to us), B shows agreement, stating a backchannel 'ya lah' (yes) and the backchannel overlaps with A's talk 'pelajar-pelajar local ni kan?' (local students right?). That is, before A completely finishes talking, B understands what A intends to say and B, without waiting A finishing a sentence, states a backchannel. This overlapped B's backchannel is not the one required by A, but I think it is reasonable to assume that it is a means to show B's opinion, in this case, 'agreement', without delay, not only for a speaker A, but also for B her self's sake.

Example 4

A: chatting internet, [surf internet kan.

　chatting internet, surfing the internet

B: 　　　　　　　　　　　[*a:: nak pergi setiap mahallah pergi cc tu agaklah kurang*

　　　　　　　　　　　ah to go to hostel go to cyber café I'm not

A: [*a::: yalah* [*nak wireless pula ni kena ada laptop pula kan.*

                     ah yeah we need a laptop to use the wireless service right?

B: *berkemampuanlah* [*kan.*   [*nak*

    able to afford right?   want

A's 'chatting internet, surf internet kan.' (chatting internet, surfing the internet) is a backchannel towards the B's statement before this. Before A's backchannel finishes, B continues her turn, saying '*a:: nak pergi setiap mahallah pergi cc tu agaklah kurang berkemampuanlah kan*' (ah to go to hostel go to cyber café I'm not able to afford right?). Then before B finishes her sentence, A shows agreement with a backchannel '*a::: yalah*' (ah yeah) and takes a turn, saying '*nak* wireless *pula ni kena ada* laptop *pula kan?* (we need laptop to use the wireless service right?). Thus, A's backchannel '*a::: yalah*' plays a role of introduction to take a turn. A's backchannel '*a::: yalah*' stated in a quite loud tone, together with lengthened syllable '*a:::*', which shows a strong agreement. Therefore, it can be presumed that A uses a backchannel as means to take a turn as well as showing agreement towards the speaker B's statement.

In the data, 4 examples of backchannels where listeners switch role are observed. Out of the 4, 3 include backchannels indicating agreement i.e. 'a:: yalah' (ahhh yes.) and 'hmmmm betul tu.' (hmmmm. that's right).

Now 'the ratio of each kind of backchannels indicating listeners' opinion where there are no speaker's pauses' and 'the ratio of each kind of backchannels indicating listeners' opinion where there are speakers' pauses' are shown in Table 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2 Kinds of backchannels indicating listeners' opinion where there are no speaker's pauses

Kinds of backchannels	frequency (%)
Agreement	38
Expression of feeling	5
Completion	8

Table 3　Kinds of backchannels indicating listeners' opinion where there
are speakers' pauses

Kind of backchannels	frequency（%）
Agreement	32
Expression of feeling	5
Completion	0

Table 2 and 3 show that 51% of all the backchannels in no speaker's pause positions are backchannels which indicate listeners' opinion, i.e. agreement, completion and expression of feeling, whereas 37% in speakers' pause positions.　Listeners show more opinion during speakers' non pause positions compared to speakers' pause positions.

5. Conclusion

The findings in this study revealed that it does not seem that Malay females in this data regard insertion of backchannels which overlap with a speaker's talk unnatural.　According to Mizutani (1988), American English speakers have a tendency to listen to a speaker's talk until it completely finishes and then a listener states his/her opinion, while Japanese states backchannels often even before a speaker finishes his/her talk.　In terms of features of backchannels, it could be said that Malay females in this data are more similar to Japanese speakers.

Nevertheless, it is also indicated that Malay female speakers in the data leave fewer pauses for a listener to insert their statement.　Consequently, listeners' backchannels inevitably overlap with speakers' statements.　This speakers' feature of leaving much fewer pauses for listeners makes a significant comparison with Japanese speakers, who expect listeners' responses while they are talking.

In addition to it, backchannels by Malay female listeners in the data are used as showing a listener listening to / understanding a speaker's statement not mainly for a speaker's sake, but rather as positively showing a listener's opinion for a listener him/herself and at times also as a means to take a turn.

Thus, it is inferred that the consciousness towards backchannels by Malay speakers are significantly different from Japanese equivalent.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions

.   falling intonation followed by pause

?   rising intonation followed by pause

:   lengthened syllable, multiple colons indicate a more lengthened syllable

⋯   noticeable pause or break in rhythm

[The starting point of overlapping speech

x   a part which is not clearly heard

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