

The Use of Back-channels by Advanced Learners of Japanese: Its Qualitative and Quantitative Aspects

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The brief vocalizations produced by the listener while the speaker is talking are called back-channels (BCs). BCs are necessary for a smooth flow of conversation and contribute greatly to the development of the speaker's talk. BCs are a universal behavior that can be observed in any language. Their usage, however, differs from culture to culture. In the cross-cultural settings, communication misunderstandings can occur due to the differing BC usage between different cultures. In Japanese language teaching, the necessity of teaching proper BC usage to learners is often emphasized. For the further understanding of learners' BC usage, more empirical studies on BCs used by learners are necessary.

The current study has attempted to investigate learners' BC behavior and to suggest implications for teaching Japanese BCs to learners. Face-to-face casual conversations between pairs of a native speaker and a learner of Japanese, and between native speakers are observed. BC usage by learners and native speakers are found to be different qualitatively rather than quantitatively. The analysis of the frequency, focusing on intervals between BCs rather than the number of BCs produced, demonstrate learners produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do. The analysis of the functional aspects of BC usage indicate that learners do not express what they feel about what the speaker said as much as do native speakers when producing BCs. This implies that learners participate in a conversation less actively when they are playing the role of the listener.

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I would like to note that a presentation discussing the quantitative and qualitative aspects of Japanese BC usage, which overlaps with this article, was given at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language in Hokkaido, October, 1998.

On the basis of our findings, two major suggestions are presented: (a) to raise learners' awareness to the difference in the qualitative aspects of Japanese BC usage from those of the learners' native language, and (b) to encourage learners to produce more BCs that show their attitude of willingness to cooperate and empathize with what the speaker said.

INTRODUCTION

A conversation is the product of the collaborative work of the speaker and the listener (Goodwin 1986). In a conversation, the listener does not simply listen to what the speaker says and comprehend the content. The speaker and the listener are expected to respond to each other and develop a conversation by constantly adjusting direction in accordance with responses. Indeed, whilst listening and comprehending, the listener also needs to respond and give feedback to the speaker's message. Such brief feedback is often referred to as a "back-channel" (BC), adopted from "backchannel communication" proposed by Yngve (1970).¹ If the speaker does not receive BCs, he or she will be uncertain whether or not communication is maintained. Duncan and Fiske (1977: 202-3) note that a BC ". . . appears to provide the auditor with a means for participating actively in the conversation, thus facilitating the general coordination of action by both participants." Even though the listener does not produce substantial utterances like the speaker, the listener's contribution to the development of the conversation is as important as that of the speaker.

The BC is a behavior observed universally in any language. The style and expectation of the usage of BCs, however, varies among social, cultural and linguistic groups (Hatch and Long 1980). Thus, a BC is characterized, on the one hand, as a universal behavior, and on the other hand, as a culturally specific device (Crozet 1996; Hatch 1983; Maynard 1997; McCarthy 1994; Slade and Gardner 1985; White 1989). Studies on the use of BCs report that BCs are more frequently used in Japanese conversation than in other languages, such as English or Mandarin (Clancy et al. 1996; LoCastro 1987; Maynard 1986, 1989). Maynard (1989: 177) says that a "continuous flow of back channel facilitates conversation management between Japanese speakers and listeners, and this continuous feedback in casual conversation is the norm within the Japanese speech community." Such frequent use of BCs in Japanese is often considered to reflect an aspect of Japanese culture that values maintaining smooth and harmonious social interaction (LoCastro 1987; Maynard 1986; White 1989).

A number of researchers point out the crucial role of culture in second or foreign language teaching / learning (Maynard 1997; McCarthy 1994; Slade and Gardner 1985; White 1989). In cross-cultural communication, a lack of

¹ Yngve (1970) introduced the term "back-channel communication" in his discussion on "short messages," such as "yes" and "uh huh," which a person who has the seeking turn receives without relinquishing his or her speaking turn.

cultural and contextual knowledge as well as grammatical knowledge of the target language often causes breakdowns or misunderstandings (Slade and Gardner 1985). Being competent in the linguistic aspects of the target language is not sufficient for learners to be successful users of the language in actual communication. In particular, competence at speaking a language further requires the ability to use the norms of interaction that are accepted socially and culturally in the target language (Crozet 1996).

It is important to raise the awareness of language learners to the role of BCs and to the appropriate use of BCs in varying contexts (Slade and Gardner 1985). This is particularly significant in Japanese language teaching as BCs are frequently used and play a very important role in Japanese conversation. The usage of BCs in the target language needs to be acknowledged and made clear to learners. Possible communicative misunderstandings due to the learners' ignorance of the differences in the use of BCs between their native and target languages should be prevented.

In the field of Japanese language teaching, how to teach appropriate BC usage is understood as a very important issue (Horiguchi 1988; Matsuda 1988; Mizutani 1983, 1984, 1988). The number of studies on the usage of BCs by learners is not prolific compared to that of studies on the BC behavior of native speakers. For an effective teaching of BCs, it is necessary to understand BC usage in Japanese conversation. Also, it is important to understand how learners actually use BCs in conversation. Understanding BC usage, by both native speakers and learners, will assist in obtaining implications for an effective teaching of BCs. Further empirical studies on the BC behavior of learners are necessary.

Aims

The main aim of this study is to investigate how BCs, one of the most important conversational devices, are used by learners of Japanese in actual conversations. The focus will be on advanced learners of Japanese in informal conversational settings. We will observe BC usage in two types of conversations: one between a learner and a native speaker and another between native speakers. The selection of these two types is made in order to compare BCs used by native speakers and learners of Japanese and investigate whether or not there are any differences in their BC usage. The usage of BCs by learners and by native speakers will be compared in terms of its quantitative and qualitative aspects, that is, frequency and function. Furthermore, some implications for teaching BC will be discussed based on the findings of the analysis.

Data

The data used for this study consist of audio- and video-taped face-to-face

Table 1a Participants in N-L Conversation

Conversation	Learners	Native Speaker
C 1	L1 (Male)	N1 (Female)
C 2	L2 (M)	N2 (M)
C 3	L3 (F)	N3 (F)
C 4	L4 (F)	N4 (F)
C 5	L5 (F)	N5 (M)

Table 1b Participants in NS-NS Conversation

Conversation	Native Speaker	Native Speaker
C 6	NS 6a (F)	NS 6b (F)
C 7	NS 7a (F)	NS 7b (M)
C 8	NS 8a (F)	NS 8b (M)
C 9	NS 9a (F)	NS 9b (F)
C10	NS10a (F)	NS10b (M)

casual conversations between pairs of a native Japanese speaker (N) and a learner of Japanese (L), and between native speakers (NSs). Five N-L and 5 NS-NS conversations by 20 participants (6 males and 14 females) were used for the analysis of this study. Each conversation and participant will be referred to by a reference number, such as C1 (conversation 1), L1 (learner 1).² The numbers assigned to the participants correspond to the number of conversations they participated in (Table 1a; 1b).

Ls are all native or near native speakers of English.³ All Ls attended either or both of the two language units specifically designed for advanced learners of Japanese. These units were offered by the Australian National University (ANU) in the first semester of 1997.⁴ All Ls have been to Japan for at least one year to study or for employment purposes. Although their purpose and length of stay in Japan are different, there is one common trait among them: they all used Japanese in their daily routine in Japan. Furthermore, all Ls had formal instruction of Japanese language at Japanese universities for at least one year during their stay in Japan. All the native speakers in N-L and NS-NS

² Two different abbreviations, "N" and "NS," are used to distinguish those native speakers who conversed with learners and those with native speakers respectively.

³ One of the Ls came to Australia from Hong Kong when he was about 14 years old. According to him, his English and Cantonese proficiency are about the same.

⁴ In one of these units, students are required to read contemporary Japanese texts on social, historical, ethnological, anthropological, and technological themes (cited from the course outline), and further to discuss the topics they have read. The other class focuses on developing competence in the modern spoken language, looking at the organization of various genres of the modern spoken language (also cited from the course outline).

conversations were studying at either the ANU or an English language school in Canberra, including exchange students from Japanese universities at the time of data collection. Some participants knew each other, whilst others had not known each other before. As far as can be ascertained from the data collected, conversations appear not to have many differences between those who were previously acquainted and those who were not. This is due to the fact that all participants are about the same age and were students, which allowed them the ease of conversing quite casually. All participants (5 Ls, 5 Ns, and 10 NSs) were in their twenties.

The data was collected in Canberra, Australia in May, 1997. Data collection was performed in a manner which sought to minimize the constraints from the investigator and avoid artificial elicitation. Without being assigned a topic, participants were instructed to have a conversation. The conversational topic was not specified so that the participants were able to have a conversation under a less controlled environment, and therefore the conversational data would approximate a naturally occurring conversation. Each conversation lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes. For analysis of the use of BCs, 15 minutes of each conversation were extracted, excluding the first 5 minutes and focusing on the following 15 minutes of the conversation. This time frame was selected because the beginning of the conversations was likely to be unnatural due to the participants' awareness of the recording. Furthermore, 15-minute conversations provided an ample amount of BCs for this study. The 15-minute segment of each tape-recorded conversation was transcribed for analysis based on the transcription symbols adopted from Gardner (1994) with some modifications. Video-taped data was used for the analysis of non-verbal behavior.

Methods

The data will be analyzed in terms of the aspects of frequency and function of the BCs used by participants of this study. This chapter will outline some issues which are relevant to the analysis of this study.

1 Identification of Back-Channels

Prior to the analysis, BCs are identified in collected conversations. BCs are the behavior of the listener, with which the listener informs the speaker that he or she is listening, has understood the talk, and/or how he or she feels about the speaker's talk. Utterances which consist of the speaking turns are not regarded as BCs. Among various behavior of the listener, the following four behaviors are regarded as BCs in this study: (a) back-channel expressions, (b) repetitions, (c) cooperative completions, and (d) head nods.

1.1 Back-Channel Expressions

BC expressions refer to a group of brief expressions that are called *aizuchishi* in

Horiguchi (1988) and Matsuda (1988).⁵ The following are some examples of BC expressions observed in the collected conversations:

honto, hontoni, sugoi, iine, sōka, sōnanda, sōdane, naruhodo, n, he, hūn, e::, hō.

1.2 Repetitions

The listener may repeat the utterance of the speaker fully or partially, as seen in the following example.⁶

- (1) L: *nanka ōburī no mori ni kō sono wainarī ga*
 something Albury Gen forests in well winery Sub
ip[paɪ atte:, sore mo: (.]
 many there-are-and it also
 “Well, there are many wineries in the forests of Albury, and they are also,”
- N: [*a honto ni*
 ah really
 “Oh, really.”
- L: *yūmei desu [yo.*
 famous Cop FP
 “famous.”
- N: [*yūmei,*
 famous
 “Famous.” (C3)

The listener may not repeat the portion or the whole of the speaker's talk in exactly the same way expressed by the speaker. In addition to simple repetition of this type as in the above example, this includes such repetitions that are repeated with additional particles or other elements, such as final-particle *ne*.

1.3 Cooperative Completions

If the listener completes a sentence the speaker had begun, it is referred to as cooperative completion. In the following example, L completes N's utterance.

- (2) L: *demo: (.) nanka ōsutorariajin to: shabet tara, =*
 but something Australian with talk if
 “But if you talk to Australians,”
- N: =*n::*
 uh huh
 “Uh huh.”
- L: *tto: (.) aite no eigo wa zenzen wakarimashita?*

⁵ Horiguchi (1988) and Matsuda (1988) consider it is advantageous in Japanese language teaching to treat these expressions, i.e., BC expressions, as one group.

⁶ We use the following abbreviations from the glosses in examples.

Cop (copula), FP (final particle), Gen (genitive case), Nom (nominative case), Obj (object marker), Q (question marker), QT (quotative marker), Sub (subject marker), Tag (tag-question-like expression), Top (topic marker).

well partner Gen English Top understood
 “well, did you understand their English?”
 (...)

N: *a::n (..) hutsuu no (.) nichijō (.) kaiwa nara?*
 well ordinary Gen every-day conversation if
 “Well, if it’s everyday conversation,”

→ L: *un wakarimashi[ta]*
 yeah understood
 “Yeah, (you) understood.”

[*tada rekuchā wa*
 but lecture Top

“But as for the lecture,”

(C2)

There is a case where the cooperative completion made by the listener based on his or her assumption may result in different endings from those intended by the speaker. This case will also be recognized as a type of cooperative completion. This can be considered as a type of feedback displaying the listener’s understanding of the speaker’s talk at the time of production. As is the case with repetitions, cooperative completion might be accomplished by adding some sentence-final particles.

1.4 Head Nods

In face-to-face conversation, not only verbal behavior but also non-verbal behavior is considered to be crucial in the course of conversation. In this study, head nods are included for analysis. Head nods are frequently observed in collected conversational data and appear to have the same function as other verbal BCs, namely it indicates “I am listening, so you may keep talking,” etc. Head nods are relatively clear to observe, compared to eye gaze or gesticulation in the collected data. Head nods refer to the vertical movement of the head and appear to give useful information to the speaker to understand the situation of conversation as well as the verbal BCs. They may be used singly or may be accompanied by a verbal BC. Head nods can be single or continuous repeated nods. Some may last longer, which might cover even more than two different verbal BCs in a continuous succession of head nods. If a movement is too subtle to identify, it is excluded from the analysis. Needless to say, a head movement which is produced to indicate a positive answer to a question is also excluded.

Other non-verbal behavior of the listener, such as eye gaze or gesticulation, has been reported to be observed during conversation (Kendon 1967; Duncan and Fiske 1977). Laughter is also claimed to be recognized as a type of BC by some researchers, such as Matsuda (1988) and Maynard (1986, 1997). Laughter is frequently observed also in the data of the current study. However, these non-verbal behaviors will not be included in the analysis. This is by no means because these behaviors are considered less important. Rather, the objects of analysis are restricted to those which are observed relatively clearly in

order to prevent possible confusion rather than including various behavioral aspects of the listener as types of BCs. Furthermore, the conversational data for this study occasionally fails to provide comprehensive information for the analysis of non-verbal behavior other than head nods.

2 Identification of Functions of Back-Channels

In the analysis of the functional aspects of BC usage, BCs identified in our conversational data will be assigned one of the following functions: (a) simple acknowledgment: simply acknowledge the listener's receipt and/or understanding of the speaker's talk, and (b) attitude: display the listener's attitude toward what the speaker said. A difference between these two functions is illustrated in the following segment of conversation.

- (3) NSb: *ne:. atashi datte burēku no.:*,
 FP I because break Gen
 “Yeah. Because in the middle of the break,”
- NSa: *n:*
 uh huh
 “Uh huh.”
- NSb: *mannaka ga essei no teishutsu dakara;*,
 middle Sub essay Gen due-date because
 “I have to hand in an essay, so”
- NSa: *ho: nto ni? =*
 really
 “Really?”
- NSb: *=zenhan wa:*,
 the-first-half Top
 “for the first half of the break,”
- NSa: *n*
 uh-huh
 “Uh huh.”
- NSb: *benkyō shinasai tte kanji de*
 study do QT Cop-and
 “I have to study, and,”
- (C9)

Let us first look at the first and the third BCs, i.e. *n:* and *n*. These BCs simply acknowledge that the listener has heard what the speaker said and that the speaker should continue talking. However, the second BC, i.e. *ho:ntoni?*, is somewhat different from these two BCs, i.e. *n:* and *n*. It displays the listener's surprise or emotional reaction rather than simply acknowledging that he or she is listening to the speaker. Accordingly, the first and the third BCs, i.e. *n:* and *n*, have the function of simple acknowledgment while the second BC, i.e. *ho:ntoni?*, has the function of displaying the listener's attitude.

As illustrated by the above examples, existence of the listener's attitude toward the speaker is crucial in distinguishing between these two functions, whether a BC simply acknowledges the receipt of the speaker's talk and no

more than that, i.e. simple acknowledgment, or in addition to this, a BC displays what the listener feels about what the speaker said, i.e., attitude.

The distinction between these two types of BCs is also found in some works (Goodwin 1986; Jefferson 1984; Maynard 1989; for example). For example, Goodwin (1986) proposes the difference between “continuers” and “assessments,” e.g. “uh huh” for the former, and “oh wow” for the latter. Maynard (1989: 171) proposes the following functions of BCs in Japanese: (a) continuer, (b) display of understanding of content, (c) support toward the speaker’s judgment, (d) agreement, (e) strong emotional response, and (f) minor addition, correction, or request for information. Maynard notes that these functions overlap, and it is understood that BCs perform more or less of these proposed functions. In our analysis of functional aspects of BCs, the distinction between the two functions, i.e., simple acknowledgment and attitude, is focused on in order to avoid confusion in investigation by minimizing the number of functions being focused on and overlaps between them. As will be illustrated, the two functions adopted by the current study cover several subcategories, such as continuer, display of understanding of content, assessment, agreement, etc.

The following sections discuss the functions of simple acknowledgment and attitude in more detail with some examples.

2.1 Simple Acknowledgment

Again, simple acknowledgment is assigned to those BCs with which the listener simply acknowledges the speaker that he or she has heard and/or understood what the speaker said and nothing further than this. This function includes continuers and displays of the understanding of the content of what the speaker said. Continuers appear in the midst of extended turn and signal the speaker to continue talking, as illustrated in (4).

(4) NSa: *n: hatsuon wa muzukashikunai kamoshirenai.* (.)

yeah pronunciation Top not-difficult may
“Yeah, pronunciation may not be difficult.”

nanka (.) *n: sugoi tanchō dashi.*,
something yeah terribly monotonous Cop-and
“Well, it’s very monotonous, and”

→ NSb: *n:*

uh-huh
“Uh huh.”

NSa: *.hh de tango mo ne:*, *.hh tokidoki eigo ni*

and vocabulary also FP sometimes English to
niterushi.,
similar-and

“and sometimes words (in Spanish) are similar to English words.”

→ NSb: *n:*

uh-huh
 “Uh huh.”

(.)

NSa: *n:*, *demo anmari benkyō shitenai kara*
 yeah but not-much study not-doing because
anmari ie[nai].
 not-much cannot-say
 “Yeah, but I cannot say much because I wasn’t studying
 much.” (C8)

Let us now look at BCs which show the listener’s understanding of the content of the speaker’s talk. In the following conversational segment, while NSa is talking, NSb is producing two BCs, which are *n:* and *ā::*. Compared with the first BC, i.e., *n:*, the second BC, i.e., *ā::*, displays the listener’s understanding of what the speaker said rather clearly.

(5) NSa: ↑*dō na n darō ne:*, *demo nanka(.) inaka ni*
 how Cop Nom Tag FP, but something country-side in
iru to:, [*nanka terebi toka no jōhō shika*
 be if like TV or Gen information only
 “I have no idea. But if I’m in the countryside, well, because
 I can only have information from the TV or something,”

NSb: [*n:*
 uh-huh
 “Uh huh.”

NSa: *shiranai kara?* (.) [*n:*, *nanka tōkyō tte*
 not-know because yeah something Tokyo QT
 “so, yeah, (I thought that) Tokyo must be,”

→ NSb: [*ā::*
 ah
 ‘Ah.’

NSa: *zettai abunai tokoro da to omotteta kedo:*
 definitely dangerous place Cop QT was-thinking but
 “a dangerous place, I thought (like that), but,” (C7)

Example (6) presents a BC that acknowledges that the listener has understood what the speaker said and that the listener will start speaking. Such BCs are produced at the transition points where a speaker change occurs.

(6) NSa: [*n:* *dakara tabun kaeri sanjuppun kurai*
 yeah so maybe way back 30-minutes about
kakaru n janai no ka na:.
 take Nom Tag Nom Q FP
 “Yeah, so it will probably take about thirty minutes to go back
 home, I guess.”

→ NSb: *n::: a watashi ne einzurī no hō mada itta*
 I-see ah I FP Ainslie Gen direction not-yet went
koto nakutte:,

fact not-and

“I see. Ah, I haven’t been to Ainslie yet, and,” (C6)

In this example, the BC, *n::*, indicates that the listener has heard and understood what the speaker said, had enough of the topic, and now he or she will start talking on a new topic. Those BCs, such as the *n::* in conversation (6), which immediately precede the new speaking turn of the listener who produces the BCs, may be seen as being produced by a speaker and thus are not BCs. These are, however, regarded as BCs as they are the behavior of the listener at the time of production, acknowledging the speaker’s turn, and these vocalizations themselves do not constitute speaking turns.

2.2 Attitude

The function of attitude is assigned to those BCs that show how the listener feels about the speaker’s talk. These can take the form of such expressions as those showing interest, agreement, and emotional responses. Conversation (7) is an example of BCs that shows interest to the speaker’s talk, i.e., “topicalizer.”

(7) L: >demo:< (.) *kyanbera yori motto samui yo.*
 but Canberra than much-more cold FP
 “But it is much more colder (in Tasmania) than in Canberra.”

→ N: *honto ni[:*,
 really
 “Really.”

L: [*n: ma: .hh yoru wa (.) sonnani*
 yeah well night Top not-much
samuku wa [nai kedo:, ano .hh (.) sō ne: (.) a: no: kyanbera
 not-cold Top not but well so FP well Canberra
 “Yeah, well, it is not much cold at night, but, well,”

N: [*n:*
 uh-huh
 “Uh huh.”

L: *no hō ga ano hi ga- hi ga deru kara*
 Gen Sub well sun Sub sun Sub appear because
 “there is more sunlight in Canberra, so,” (C4)

The BC, *hontoni:*, indicates the listener’s interest in what the speaker said and in being told more, and thus encourages the speaker to talk more on the topic. Indeed, *hontoni:* is followed by more talk by the speaker on the topic about the weather in Tasmania.

The BC in (8), *sō sō sō sō sō*, exhibits the listener’s attitude that she agrees to what the speaker is saying, which is more than simply showing that she has heard and understood.

(8) NSb: *sore da to datte kirare tara*
 that Cop if because be-cut if
owari daka [\$ ra: \$
 finish because

- NSa: “Because if (the key) is cut, that’s it, so.”
 [sō sō sō sō [sō
 so so so so so
 “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.”
- NSb: [jibun ga mendokusai yo ne
 oneself Sub troublesome FP FP
 “It’s just troublesome, isn’t it?” (C6)

The BC in example (9) is an example of those BCs that show a relatively strong attitude on the listener’s part toward what the speaker said, compared with the aforementioned cases, i.e., showing interest and agreement. By producing the BC, *a: sugoi*, i.e., “assessment,” the listener evaluates the speaker’s talk and indicates that what the speaker said is something remarkable (see Goodwin 1986 for a detailed discussion on the distinction between assessments and continuers).

- (9) L: *n:*, *ma:* *hoka no gurūpu toka* ↓ *n:* *sesshoku*
 yeah well other Gen group or yeah contact
shite: (.)° *n:*° *tatoeba shōrinjikenpō*
 do-and yeah for-example Shaolin-temple-patterns
toka o [*narat tari*,
 or Obj learned or
 “Yeah, well, I contact with other groups, and, well, for
 example, I learned Shaolin-temple-patterns, and,”
- N: [\$*a:* *sugoi*]
 ah great
 “Oh, great.” (C4)

3 Back-Channel Turns and Back-Channel Tokens

Each time when a BC is produced by the listener toward the speaker’s talk, it is considered that the listener produces a BC turn. Some BC turns consist of single expression, such as *n:* “uh huh” or *honto* “really.” Some are made up with more than two expressions. There are two subtypes in those that occur in combination of more than two expressions. The first subtype includes those produced in a repetition of identical forms such as *n: n: n:* “hmm hmm hmm” or *sokka sokka* “I see, I see.” This subtype also includes expressions produced with brief non-lexical vocalizations, such as *e hontoni* “oh, really” or *ā sokka* “oh, I see.” Expressions of this subtype are basically treated as one BC token. If there is a pause or remarkable change in speed between each item, they will be treated as separate tokens. The other subtype is produced in combination of more than two BC tokens, such as *a hontoni? iina* “oh, really? that’s good” or *ā sōnan’ya sugoi* “oh, is that so? great.”

The analysis of frequency is on turn basis. Therefore, both of the cases, singly occurring and those in combination, will be considered as a single BC turn produced by the listener. Head nods that are not accompanied by verbal BCs

are counted in the analysis of frequency.⁷ Both single and multiple head nods are counted as one BC turn. The analysis of function will be on a token basis, that is, BC tokens of the second subtype will be treated separately.

Findings

This chapter presents findings of the analysis of BCs produced by advanced learners and native speakers of Japanese in terms of the aspects of frequency and function.

1 Frequency

Identified BCs are first analyzed in terms of their frequency. It is widely viewed that learners produce fewer BCs than Japanese native speakers do (Horiguchi 1990; Watanabe 1994). The *current study*, however, demonstrates that learners in fact produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do.

1.1 The Number of BC Turns

In all the 10 conversations, 150 minutes in total, 2,492 BC turns are produced by 20 participants. Out of 2,492 BC turns, 2,188 are verbal BCs and 304 head nods. Table 2 shows the number of BC turns observed in the collected conversations. In total, there are 1,193 BC turns observed in five N-L conversations. Ls produce BCs 470 times in total and Ns 723 times. In five NS-NS conversations, 1,299 BC turns are observed in total. This number is greater than the case of N-L conversations by 106 BC turns. Such a greater number of BCs in N-L conversations is deemed to be due to the fluency of the flow of the conversation. The learners who participated in the conversations are advanced learners. However, they still had more difficulties when speaking in a conversation than native speakers. In fact, learner's talk appears to con-

Table 2 Number of BC Turns

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total	Mean
L	72	116	139	62	81	470	94
N	193	111	127	145	147	723	144.6
Total	265	227	266	207	228	1193	238.6
	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	Total	Mean
NSa	71	168	53	135	181	1299	129.9
NSb	251	88	128	176	48		
Total	322	256	181	311	229		259.8

⁷ The head nods accompanied by BCs are included in the number of verbal BCs.

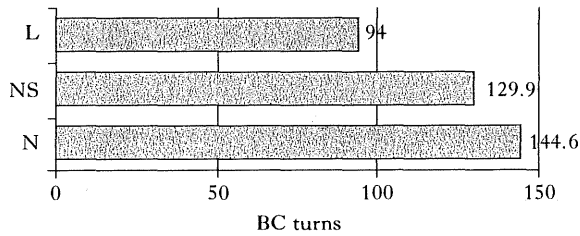


Fig. 1 Average number of BC turns

tain more frequent pauses and hesitations than native speaker's. Furthermore, even native speakers are less fluent in N-L conversations than in NS-NS. On the whole, conversations between a native speaker and a learner contain more pauses, hesitation, and/or slower speech than conversations between native speakers.

Figure 1 shows the average number of BC turns for each group. The order of the number of BC turns are shown as the order of: $N > NS > L$. The L group displays the fewest number of BC turns, 94 on average. Their conversational partners, Ns, produce the highest number of BC turns, 144.6 on average. Another interesting fact is that the difference between N and NS is relatively small, which is 14.7 turns. There is a remarkable difference in the number of BC turns between learners and native speakers, and that between group L and NS is 35.9 turns. The difference between group L and N is even greater, 50.6 BC turns. At first glance, because learners produce fewer BCs in number than native speakers, i.e., Ns and NSs, the reader may consider that learners do not produce BCs as frequently as do native speakers. Further examination, however, reveals that low occurrence in BC numbers does not necessarily indicate a less frequent use of BCs. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

1.2 The Number of Syllables per BC Turn

We have observed that learners produce a smaller number of BC turns than Ns and NSs do on average. This fact, however, does not immediately indicate that learners produce BCs less frequently than native speakers of Japanese. There is the possibility that the results obtained from counting the number of BC turns might have been influenced greatly by the difference of the length of time one played the listener's role. It is quite possible that the opportunity to produce BC turns is greater for those who tend to play the role of the listener.

The results will be examined further to determine whether or not they actually reflect the frequency of BCs. Observing the number of syllables occurring between BC turns would be helpful to determine more accurately how often BCs are displayed. Examining the number of syllables also allows us to

observe whether or not learners produce BC turns at longer intervals than do native speakers. Low frequency is often mentioned as one of the aspects which are considered to be problematic in learners' use of Japanese BCs.⁸ As frequent display of BCs is expected in Japanese conversation, it is often claimed that the low frequent use of BCs by learners make native speakers feel uncomfortable when they are talking.

This analysis will focus on the fragments of talk where each participant is playing the listener's role for the longest duration in a conversation in which he or she participated. First, fragments of a conversation are selected every participant. Then, the number of syllables included in the speaker's talk in each segment is counted. The number of syllables is divided by the number of BC turns displayed in the fragment. Both verbal and non-verbal BCs are included as BC turns. Further, those BCs that follow immediately after the speaker's talk are included in this analysis, as they are regarded as being given for the speaker's talk, even though they do not occur during the speaker's turn. As a result, the average number of syllables per BC turn is obtained. The number of syllables per BC turn indicates how often participants produce BC turns regardless of the difference in the length of time participants are assuming the role of the listener. The number of syllables per BC turn is interpreted as: the fewer these numbers are, the shorter the interval between BCs, and thus more frequently BCs are used. There is a point to note with regard to the procedures of this analysis. As the duration for which a participant continued to play the listener's role varies, some of the fragments are long and some are not. In the case that the total number of syllables in the selected segment is less than 100, the second longest segment is added, i.e., N1, NS7a, and NS8b. Therefore, there are some cases where more than one segment is included.

The results are shown in Table 3. The number of syllables per BC turn ranges from the lowest of 7.2, to the highest of 18.1. The average number of syllables is 14.0 for the L group, 11.6 for the N, and 13.8 for NS. The N group shows the lowest number and the L group the highest. The difference between the L group and the NS group is too slight (only 0.2 syllables) to be regarded as a meaningful difference. Therefore, the results are interpreted as: $N > NS, L$. On average Ns use BCs at shorter intervals compared with NSs and Ls. The frequency of BCs is about the same for NSs and Ls in terms of the interval, not the number of occurrences. Therefore, I shall claim that learners produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do.

⁸ This problematic aspect of the learners' use of BC in Japanese might not be true for learners of all proficiency levels. However, Watanabe (1994) notes that not much difference was observed in the frequency of BC between different levels including advanced learners.

Table 3 Number of Syllables per BC Turn

Participants (listener)	No. of syllables* (speaker's talk)	No. of BC turns	No. of syllables per BC turn
L1	154	14	11
L2	453	27	16.8
L3	334	29	11.5
L4	129	9	14.3
L5	164	10	16.4
			mean 14.0
N1	129	18	7.2
N2	139	10	13.9
N3	108	11	9.8
N4	163	12	13.6
N5	177	13	13.6
			mean 11.6
NS 6a	100	8	12.5
NS 6b	255	17	15
NS 7a	207	13	15.9
NS 7b	109	10	10.9
NS 8a	164	11	14.9
NS 8b	253	14	18.1
NS 9a	114	8	14.3
NS 9b	144	13	11.1
NS10a	201	18	11.2
NS10b	125	9	13.9
			mean 13.8

* Number of syllables produced by conversational partners.

1.3 Frequency of BC Turns of Learners

Above, we have discussed the aspect of BC frequency. Our observation has demonstrated that the number of occurrences of BC turns does not necessarily indicate the frequency of BCs, and therefore the fewer number of BCs by learners does not always mean that learners produce BCs less frequently than native speakers do. The investigation based on the number of syllables per BC turn has revealed that learners produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do. The general assumption that learners use BCs less frequently is not supported.

2 Function

This section presents an analysis of the functional aspects of BC usage focusing on two major functions of BCs: (a) simple acknowledgment and (b) display of the listener's attitude. Either one of these two functions is assigned to all BC

tokens identified in the collected conversations, except head nods. The majority of head nods appear to serve as simple acknowledgments, and thus the focus will be on verbal BCs in this analysis. The analysis reveals that a clear difference exists in the quality of BCs used by learners and native speakers. It will be shown that learners produce a higher percentage of simple acknowledgments and a lower percentage of attitudes compared to native speakers. The difference is statistically significant.

2.1 *Functions of Back-Channels Used by Learners and Native Speakers*

Table 4 shows the number of BC tokens and the percentages of each function. All twenty participants produce more simple acknowledgment than attitudes. The groups of native speakers, i.e., the N and Ns groups, present the similar distribution of these functions, i.e., 71.7% and 72.3% for simple acknowledgments and 28.3% and 27.7% for attitudes respectively. Compared to native speakers, learners produce a higher percentage of simple acknowledgments and a lower one for attitudes.

Table 4 Functions of BCs: frequency (%)

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	Total
Simple ack.	58 (84.0)	91 (88.3)	99 (84.6)	50 (83.3)	54 (80.6)	352 (84.6)
Attitude	11 (16.0)	12 (11.7)	18 (15.4)	10 (16.7)	13 (19.4)	64 (15.4)
Total	69	103	117	60	67	416

	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	Total
Simple ack.	135 (67.8)	78 (71.6)	84 (77.1)	81 (66.9)	116 (76.8)	494 (71.7)
Attitude	64 (32.2)	31 (28.4)	25 (22.9)	40 (33.1)	35 (23.2)	195 (28.3)
Total	199	109	109	121	151	689

	NS6a	NS7a	NS8a	NS9a	NS10a
Simple ack.	46 (61.3)	120 (77.4)	34 (77.3)	100 (82.0)	108 (65.1)
Attitude	29 (38.7)	35 (22.6)	10 (22.7)	22 (18.0)	58 (34.9)
Total	75	155	44	122	166

	NS6b	NS7b	NS8b	NS9b	NS10b	Total
Simple ack.	147 (69.3)	66 (76.7)	71 (74.7)	126 (70.0)	37 (77.1)	855 (72.3)
Attitude	65 (30.7)	20 (23.3)	24 (25.3)	54 (30.0)	11 (22.9)	328 (27.7)
Total	212	86	95	180	48	1183

Chi-square test (Table 5) reveals the difference in the functions of BCs used by learners and native speakers to be significant ($\chi^2=27.47$, $df=1$, $p<.001$). Again, learners' BCs contain a significantly higher percentage of simple acknowledgments and lower percentage of attitudes compared with those of native speakers.

Furthermore, the results for individuals show that all learners produce a higher percentage of simple acknowledgments and a lower percentage of attitudes than all native speakers, except NS9a who produces the lowest percentage of attitudes among native speakers, i.e., 18%. Figures 2a and 2b show the percentage of simple acknowledgments and attitudes respectively for each participant in ascending order. These figures indicate that a high portion of simple acknowledgments and a low portion of attitudes is clearly a common tendency observed in learners' BCs.

Above, we have investigated functions of BCs produced by learners and native speakers. The results have revealed a significant difference in the quality of BCs used by learners and native speakers in terms of their function. Learners tend to produce more BCs with the function of simple acknowledg-

Table 5 Frequency of the BCs of Each Function Produced by Learners and Native Speakers

	Observed Frequency			Expected Values		
	Learners	Native Speakers	Total	Learners	Native Speakers	Total
Ack.	352	1349	1701	Ack.	309.27	1391.73
Att.	64	523	587	Att.	106.73	480.27
Total	416	1872	2288	Total	416	1872

Chi-square=27.47, $df=1$, $p<.001$.

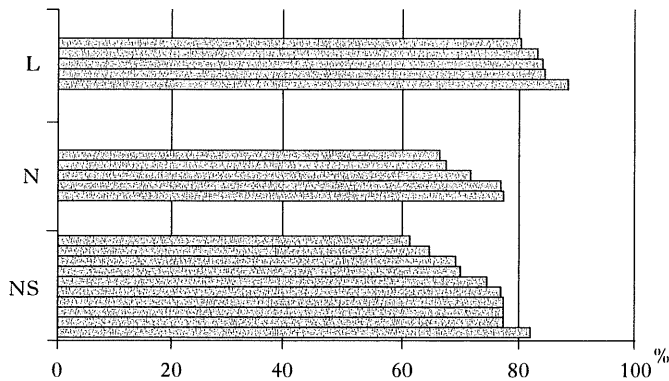


Fig. 2a Simple acknowledgments

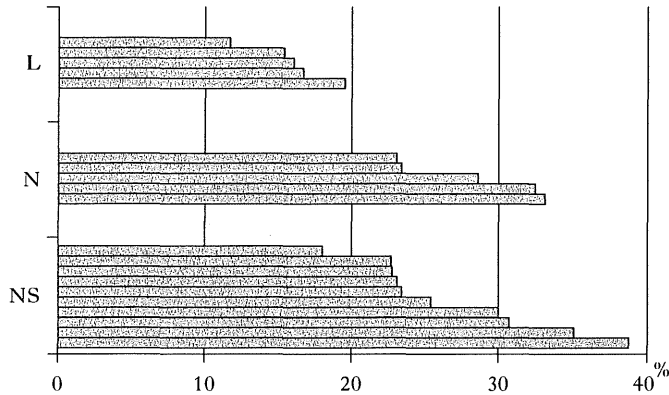


Fig. 2b Attitudes

ment and fewer BCs with that of attitude. In contrast, BCs produced by native speakers contain fewer simple acknowledgments and more attitudes.

Implications

In this study, we have observed BC usage by learners and native speakers of Japanese in terms of its qualitative and quantitative aspects. The analysis revealed significant differences in the qualitative aspects between learners and native speakers: learners do not express attitude toward what the speaker said as much as native speakers do when producing BCs. Regarding the frequency of BCs, learners were found to produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do.

Let us firstly consider what our findings imply. As noted previously, BCs provide the listener with a means to participate actively in conversation (Duncan and Fiske 1977). On the basis of this perspective, the two functions of simple acknowledgments and attitudes are assumed to indicate different degrees of the participant's involvement in conversation as the listener. That is, BCs with the function of attitude show a greater involvement of the listener than those of simple acknowledgment. This is because attitudes exhibit the listener's stronger response to what the speaker said than a simple response which merely shows a receipt of the speaker's talk. Recall that learners exhibit a lower percentage of attitudes compared with native speakers. This indicates that learners participate in a conversation less actively when playing the listener's role than do native speakers. Furthermore, the higher portion of attitudes in native speakers' BCs implies that BCs in Japanese conversation are used in such a way to show more attitude on the listener's part toward what the speakers said, e.g., showing interest, agreement, etc. It is often claimed that the low frequent use of BCs by learners makes native speakers feel uncomfortable when talking. In contrast, our findings suggests that the native speakers'

negative impressions about learners' BC usage may be due to the differences in the qualitative aspects of learners' BC usage rather than the quantitative aspects.

Let us now consider some pedagogical implications for teaching BCs.⁹ This study focuses on BCs used by advanced learners. All learners in this study have been to Japan for more than one year. These learners have interacted with Japanese native speakers in their daily life during their stay in Japan, although the degree may vary (see Data section above for details of participants). The results from the analysis of BC usage by these learners imply that not all aspects of BC usage have been acquired naturally through interaction with native speakers. This suggests a clear necessity for the instruction of BC behavior in the classroom.

Following are some suggestions for teaching BC usage based on our findings. First of all, we should raise learners' awareness to the differences in styles of Japanese BCs from those in the learners' native language. This should be a first step, otherwise such differences may not be noticed. In particular, we should emphasize the functional aspects of BC usage in Japanese: Japanese listeners tend to display their attitude of willingness to cooperate and empathize with the speaker's talk when producing BCs. This is particularly important, as differences in the qualitative aspect of BC usage are assumed to be more difficult to notice than the quantitative aspect. Furthermore, BC usage should be taught in conjunction with the culture that underlies it. This is important since BC usage is closely related to cultural context where the language is used. This issue will be discussed in more detail later. Finally, learners should be encouraged to develop the qualitative aspects of their BC usage. We observed a difference in BC usage between learners and native speakers in the functional aspects of BCs. In contrast, the results show that learners produce BCs as frequently as native speakers do. These observations suggest the quantitative aspects of BC usage have already been acquired but not the qualitative aspects.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly mention Japanese BC usage in relation to Japanese culture and communication style. As noted previously, BCs are a culturally specific device of which usage differs from culture to culture. BC usage in Japanese reflects Japanese cultural aspects. Maynard (1997: 54) notes, "Many sociological and anthropological studies on Japan have suggested that the Japanese behave in such a way as to express greater sensitivity to the surrounding context, including the participants and their views toward each other." As mentioned earlier, several researchers point out that frequent use of BCs in Japanese is a characteristic of Japanese conversational style and is related to Japanese cultural aspects that value maintaining smooth and harmonious social interaction (for example, LoCastro 1987; Maynard 1986; White 1989). What is important is that our findings suggest that such a cultural

⁹ Although the suggestions are mainly targeted for advanced learners, they are considered to be instructive to learners at other proficiency levels.

value is reflected also in the qualitative aspects of Japanese BC usage. In Japanese communication styles, the listener may be expected to display his or her sensitivity to the speaker by producing BCs frequently and, more importantly, by producing BCs of which quality shows the listener's attitude. This should be recognized as a crucial feature of Japanese BC usage and needs to receive special attention in the setting of cross-cultural communication and teaching Japanese.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

[]	Overlapping. The point of onset is marked with left-hand brackets, and the point at which overlap stops is marked with right-hand square brackets.
=	Latched. Contiguous stretches of talk between which there is no gap and no overlap.
(.)	Intervals within and between utterances. Single dot indicates very short pause. Double dots indicate a short pause, three a longer, and four a very long pause.
.	A falling terminal contour.
,	A continuing contour.
?	A rising contour.
<i>words</i>	Stress is indicated by underlining.
:	Drawl or the lengthening of a sound.
↑↓	A particularly marked shift in pitch.
°words°	A softer talk than the surrounding talk.
-	An abrupt cutoff. This also represents a glottal stop.
hh	Audible aspirations.
.hh	Audible inhalations.
>words<	A faster talk than its surrounding talk.
<words>	A slow talk.
\$ words\$	Laughing while talking.
()	An uncertain hearing of the talk.
(())	Vocalizations that cannot be satisfactorily transcribed, or references to other contextual features are indicated within double parentheses.
→	A feature of interest referred to in a text can be highlighted by a right-pointing arrow.
