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**Backchannels across cultures:
A study of Americans and Japanese¹**

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ABSTRACT

The frequency of listener responses, called *backchannels*, was studied in English conversations within and across two cultural groups: Americans from the midwestern United States and Japanese who were born and raised in Japan. The findings reveal that backchannels of several types are displayed far more frequently by Japanese listeners. This appears to be related to the greater use by Japanese of certain discourse constructions that favor backchannels, and to the Japanese culture. The Japanese listening style remains unchanged in cross-cultural conversations, but Americans alter listening style in the direction of their non-native interlocutors. The study found no evidence for the hypothesis that backchanneling conventions that are not shared contribute to negative personality attributions or stereotyping. (Conversational analysis, intercultural communication, Japanese and American English discourse)

INTRODUCTION

Members of particular cultural groups have a repertoire of conversational devices that they use with a certain frequency in most circumstances (Tannen 1980). One such device is the way they give listener responses such as *mmhm*, *uh-huh*, and *yeah*.

Listener responses are aptly termed *backchannels* by Yngve (1970). The term implies that there are two channels in conversation that operate simultaneously. The "main" channel is that through which the speaker (the person holding the floor) sends messages, whereas the "back" channel is that over which the listener (the addressed recipient of talk) gives useful information without claiming the floor.

The term backchannel includes nonverbal as well as verbal forms, but this study will examine only vocal responses. In an earlier study (White 1983), I investigated the relationship between head nods and two types of audible responses (*mmhm* and *uh-huh*) in two, 12-minute videotaped conversations. I found that head nods co-occurred with vocalized responses approximately 85 percent of the time. This result is consistent with Dittmann and Lle-

welby's (1968) finding, which also demonstrated that visual and auditory backchannels tend to occur at roughly the same points. In light of these findings and the practical difficulties and obtrusiveness of videotaping as opposed to audiotaping, nonverbal responses were excluded from this study.

Identification of culture-specific conversational devices is important. When conventions for use and interpretations of conversational devices are not shared, stereotyping and personality attributions may well occur (Chick 1985; Erickson 1979; Gumperz 1982; Scarcella 1983; Tannen 1980). Here lies a well-established linguistic assumption that certain features of a person's style are carried over into a cross-cultural situation.

Concerning backchannels, Lebra (1976:39) states, "Since a Japanese listener in an English conversation is likely to make more interjections, the American speaker would take such interjections as a sign of the listener's impatience and demand for a quick completion of the statement." Mizutani (1982) notes that *aizuchi* (backchannels) are very frequent in Japanese conversations as well.² When Japanese listen in a Japanese conversation, he says, the non-Japanese speakers become disturbed by the frequent responses of the Japanese listeners and fail to understand their meaning: attentiveness, comprehension, and interest. At the same time, Mizutani says, the non-Japanese themselves disturb the Japanese speakers by failing to give frequent responses.

The statements made by Lebra and Mizutani are not based on empirical evidence, linguistic or otherwise, perhaps because the issue was not central to their work. To date, there have been no studies specifically designed to investigate the role of verbal backchannels in cross-cultural interactions in English. Do Japanese listeners display different frequencies or types of backchannels than Americans do when they converse in English with members of their own cultural group? If they do, what explains their higher use of backchannels? Do these differing systems of backchanneling hold in cross-cultural conversations? If so, do they play a role in the development of negative cultural stereotyping and personality attributions? These questions will be taken up in the discussion that follows.

METHOD

Participants

The data are taken from tape recordings of 30-minute conversations in English within and across two cultural groups: participants were 10 L1 American English speakers from the midwestern United States and 10 were L2 Japanese-English speakers born and raised in Japan. The 10 American speakers were selected randomly from among 30 volunteers on the basis of their ethnicity and the place they had lived most of their life (as was determined by a brief questionnaire). The aim was to select Anglo-Americans

from the midwestern United States. The selection was intended to guarantee that, aside from individual and possibly urban/rural differences, there would be little ethnic difference among them.

The screening of the Japanese volunteers was based primarily on their ability to converse in English, as judged by my own telephone conversations with each of them. To supplement my subjective judgment of their proficiency, 2 native American English-speaking persons listened to the first 10 minutes of each of the 10 Japanese audiotaped conversations once they were collected. The judges were asked to rate English communicative ability using the Foreign Service Institute's language proficiency interview test (Patkowski 1980). The results showed that the overall proficiency level (mean) of the Japanese informants was 4.0 on a scale of 1-6. There was little variation among Japanese individuals in their English language communicative skill.

Participants were all women attending the University of Hawaii at Manoa and had lived in Hawaii less than 6 months. A short period of residence in Hawaii was judged to be important because the longer the contact with the members of other cultures, the greater the possibility of changes in back-channel use and interpretations. The students were not told about the nature of the study or even its linguistic basis. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 37 years and did not know one another prior to the study. Nonfamiliarity of the dyads ensured that perceptions would not be influenced by the interactants' prior knowledge of each other's personality traits.

Procedure

Audiotaping sessions were conducted in two separate but adjacent lounges at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The lounges were small, quiet, carpeted, and comfortably furnished. Recording equipment consisted of a small Sony cassette tape recorder, which was placed unobtrusively. Each of the 20 informants engaged in two 30-minute dyadic, face-to-face conversations. The first conversation was with a member of the cross-cultural group. Once the first conversations were over, the dyads switched partners forming two intracultural dyads. This yielded a total of 20 conversations: 5 by Americans (A-A), 5 by Japanese (J-J), and 10 cross-cultural (A-J).

Prior to the audiotaping sessions, participants were simply asked to "get to know one another for 30 minutes in English." Once conversations were terminated, interactants were asked privately to relate their satisfaction with the conversation and their perception of their partner's personality. More specifically, they were asked, "How do you feel about the conversation?" and "What do you think of your partner?" Responses were written down as communicated to the author. After the participants presented an open-ended evaluation of the conversation and of their partner's personality, they were given a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire - a modified version of Hecht's (1978) inventory - was a 16-item inventory intended to assess both conver-

sational satisfaction and personality perception in further detail than an open-ended oral response would allow, as shown in the Appendix.

Conversational data

The middle 10 minutes of each of the 20 encounters were selected for transcription. The middle 10 minutes were selected for two reasons. First, the beginnings and ends of conversations, especially among strangers, are likely to be relatively problematic. Second, nearly 3½ hours of taped conversations provided ample (1,305) instances of backchannels of interest to this study.

The five most frequent expressions were selected for this study. They constituted 74 percent of all audible listening responses in the conversations. These were *mmhm* (43%), *yeah* (19%), *uh-huh* (18%), *oh* (14%), and *hmm* (6%). The remaining tokens (26%) included over 30 varieties of brief statements such as "Me too," "That's nice," and "I can imagine why"; over 20 varieties of brief expressions such as "Really!" "Right," and "Yes"; repetitions, word supplies, sentence completions, and brief restatements, all of which are termed backchannels by Duncan (1974).

I chose frequency as a criterion because statistical analyses of cross-cultural differences requires a relatively large number of tokens. Furthermore, identifying a whole range of verbal behavior as backchannels can be problematic. For example, it is difficult to determine whether "I can imagine why" constitutes a backchannel or a separate speaking turn. Another related difficulty is the semantic weight of the expression. The five instances I selected for this study, apart from being prototypical, do not convey definite semantic information. For example, there is no direct semantic convention by which *mmhm* equals "yes" or "I understand" or "I agree," and it does not contribute to the substance of the speaker's talk (unless it is produced in response to a question, in which case it no longer counts as a backchannel).

FREQUENCY OF BACKCHANNELS AND CULTURAL NORMS

The findings presented in Table 1 show that the frequency of use of listener responses is culturally specific: Japanese give significantly more backchannels to one another than Americans do in intracultural interactions, with the exception of *yeah*. One possible explanation for the reluctance of the Japanese to use *yeah* may be a cross-cultural homophonism. According to my Japanese informants, in Japanese the word for *no* is *iya*, which sounds very similar to *yeah*. There were no instances of carry over of interjections from Japanese.

Another way of reporting these findings is to say that in intracultural communications in English, Japanese provide one of five forms of backchannels for every 14 words, whereas Americans provide a similar response for every

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TABLE 1. *Relationship between frequency of backchanneling and culture in intracultural encounters*

	Mean <i>mmhm</i>	Mean <i>uh-huh</i>	Mean <i>yeah</i>	Mean <i>oh!</i>	Mean <i>hmm</i>	Mean total
American listeners	10.0	2.9	11.8	2.5	1.1	28.4
Japanese listeners	30.2	11.6	9.5	9.4	7.6	68.3

37 words. This 3:1 ratio holds when Japanese converse in their *native* language with conationals and Americans converse in English with other Americans, according to Maynard (1986).

What explains this large overall difference in frequency of backchanneling between Japanese and American informants when they interact among themselves in English? Two explanations may be given. The first considers the actions of the speaker and the second centers around the listener.

Speaker-based explanation for the Japanese higher use of backchannels

Backchannels are more frequent for the Japanese interacting with other Japanese partly because the favoring discourse environments that are relatively prevalent in conversation are more frequent for this group. Table 2 shows that discourse environments that (a) are significantly more frequent for the Japanese, (b) favor backchannels, and (c) are relatively dominant in discourse, include clause and reduced clause boundaries (marked with **).

Clausal boundaries are defined here as pauses preceded by a syntactic unit consisting of a noun phrase and a verb phrase. If two or more clauses are not separated by a pause, they are treated as a single unit – a multiclausal sentence, such as “But it was hard because he would leave and I would be in the house and I would have nothing to do.” (For a full description of the linguistic environments, see White 1986.)

Why does Japanese discourse contain more clause boundaries? In order to understand the reason for the Japanese higher frequency of clause boundary, I randomly chose four transcripts, two of A-A and two of J-J interactions, and carefully examined the nature of their clauses. The explanation appeared to be this: Japanese talk consisted primarily of single-clause sentences, whereas Americans’ talk contained a relatively high number of multiple-clause sentences, as shown in Table 3. Because each single-clause sentence was, by definition, followed closely by a pause, this led to more clause boundaries.

Two factors may have contributed to the Japanese use of single-clause sen-

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TABLE 2. *Frequency of discourse locations for American and Japanese speakers*

Location	A speakers in A-A			J speakers in J-J		
	Opportunities	Words	Ratio	Opportunities	Words	Ratio
1. Hesitation	69	9099	8	92	4462	21*
2. False starts	167	9099	18	110	4462	25*
3. Filled pauses	78	9099	8	115	4462	26*
4. Turn-final <i>so</i>	6	9099	1	7	4462	2
5. Subject/topic	18	9099	2	9	4462	2
6. Topic	23	9099	2***	3	4462	1
7. Rising intonation	16	9099	2	5	4462	1
8. Contrastive stress	16	9099	2***	2	4462	0
9. Clause boundary	662	9099	73	394	4462	88**
10. Reduced clause boundary	95	9099	10	76	4462	17**
yes/no replies	24	9099	3	30	4462	7*
11. Cond./adverb. clauses	26	9099	3	20	4462	4
12. Clause-final <i>y'know</i>	51	9099	6***	2	4462	0

*Discourse environments that are significantly more frequent for the Japanese.

**Discourse environments that are not only significantly more frequent for the Japanese, but also favor backchannels.

***Favoring discourse environments that are significantly more frequent for Americans, but not plentiful in conversation.

TABLE 3. *Relationship between number of clauses per sentence and culture of speakers*

	American speakers			Japanese speakers		
	No. of clauses	Total words	Ratio	No. of clauses	Total words	Ratio
1-clause	115	3420	34	130	1651	79*
2-clause	62	3420	18*	13	1651	8
3-clause	24	3420	7*	3	1651	2
4-clause	5	3420	1	0	1651	0
5-clause	7	3420	1	0	1651	0

*The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at $p < .02$.

tences. First, the Japanese participants in this study did not have the same fluency in English as their American counterparts. Second, there is some evidence that points to a possible overgeneralization from the Japanese linguistic system. Arthur (1978), based on samples taken from written stories in English and Japanese, found that mean words per sentence is 11.8 in Japanese but 14.3 in English.

Why does Japanese discourse contain more ellipted clause boundaries? Recall from Table 2 that ellipted clause boundary was the second suggested contributor to Japanese speakers' greater frequency of backchannels. Japanese speakers' tendency to use reduced clauses (i.e., to leave out sentential elements, particularly the subject) when they speak in English may be an overgeneralization from Japanese discourse. According to Martin (1975), the frequency of sentences in which the subject is not explicitly stated may be as high as 74 percent in Japanese discourse. What factors contribute to the omission of subjects in Japanese?

The existence of terse constructions in Japanese appears to relate, in part, to the Japanese honorific system, and, in part, to the Japanese linguistic system. Kusanagi (1976) describes the honorific phenomenon as follows: The speaker determines the relative social status, intimacy of the relationship, and conversational situation, and chooses the appropriate honorific expression. Because there are many rules in Japanese for selection of honorific expressions, depending on the degree of humbleness and politeness that the relationship and situation require, it appears that speakers omit referents, at least until a relative position is established.

That people must convey information at some level, or else communication cannot take place, points to a linguistic explanation as well. The Japanese language, according to Kuno (1978), tolerates less redundancy than the English system does. For example, in Japanese, once a person is introduced as topic, so long as there is no change in the discourse topic, there is no need to reintroduce the topic.

Thus far we have observed that Japanese use significantly more backchannels than Americans do when they engage in intracultural conversations, and that this higher frequency of backchanneling is constrained by several factors: the greater frequency of certain linguistic environments that favor them; the Japanese honorific system; the Japanese linguistic system; the lack of fluency of the Japanese participants in English.

Listener-based explanation for the Japanese higher use of backchannels

Earlier, I discussed how Japanese *speakers'* use of language may contribute to the Japanese listeners' greater use of backchannels. In this section, I will explain how the actions of the *listeners* themselves account for the higher overall frequency of backchanneling among the Japanese when they converse in English. As shown in Table 4, Japanese listeners surpass their American counterparts in giving backchannels in all discourse environments that favor backchannels, except two: *so* in turn-final and *y'know* in clause-final positions.³

This finding suggests that it is not only that Japanese, as speakers, pro-

TABLE 4. *Relative effectiveness of discourse locations in producing backchannels for Americans and Japanese in intracultural encounters*

Location	A listener and A-A			J listener in J-J		
	No. of backchannels	Opportunities	% Occurrence	No. of backchannels	Opportunities	% Occurrence
1. Hesitation	4	69	6	15	92	16
2. False starts	3	167	2	1	110	1
3. Filled pauses	1	78	1	0	115	0
4. Turn-final <i>so</i>	3	6	50	1	7	14
5. Subject/topic	3	18	17	6	9	67
6. Topic	7	23	30	3	3	100
7. Rising intonation	6	16	37	2	5	40
8. Contrastive stress	6	16	37	1	2	50
9. Clause boundary	160	662	24	165	394	42
10. Reduced clause boundary	19	95	20	35	76	46
yes/no replies	0	24	0	2	30	7
11. Cond./adverb. clauses	2	26	8	10	20	50
12. Clause-final <i>y'know</i>	8	51	16	0	2	0

*In these discourse environments, Japanese use significantly more backchannels ($p < .05$).

vide greater discourse openings for backchannels than their American counterparts, but that it is also that Japanese, as *listeners*, use higher numbers of backchannels in those openings. In other words, actions in both speaker and listener roles are responsible for the higher Japanese use of backchanneling.

In the same way that we considered reasons (e.g., overgeneralization from the usage of ellipsis in Japanese) for the greater Japanese use of clause boundaries (an environment that promotes backchannels), we need to ask: Why do Japanese, as listeners, give more backchannels than Anglo-Americans?

As a linguist, my first inclination was to find a linguistic explanation for the Japanese listeners' greater display of backchannels. This attempt, however, was fruitless, since Japanese listeners give more backchannels across almost all environments in which listener responses are likely to occur (shown in Table 4). That is, the Japanese appear to have a higher overall baseline for backchanneling in daily conversations. That Japanese have a higher overall level of backchanneling can also be shown by this observation: The minimum number of backchannels by a Japanese listener was 41, as opposed to 10 for an American listener.

Since linguistic conventions did not appear to explain the greater Japanese use of backchannels, I then began examining Japanese cultural values in search for an explanation, since as Maynard (1986) has found, *aizuchi* are very frequent in *Japanese* conversations as well.

The cultural value most relevant to the use of backchannels concerns the Japanese concept *omoiyari*, which, according to Lebra (1976), is a key concept for understanding Japanese people. Because the concept does not exist as such in American culture, it is difficult to find an equivalent term for it in English. My impression from the literature, from discussions with Japanese specialists, and from observations of the Japanese in Honolulu, is that the concept generally refers to the creation and maintenance of smooth and pleasant human interactions. This is believed to ultimately bring emotional payoffs in human relations.

To maintain harmony, unanimity, or mutual understanding, people must be most sensitive to the recipient's point of view and feelings. Being empathetic with others' ideas and wishes may require going beyond indirectness and politeness (e.g., "yes, but . . .") and involve compliance with the other's ideas, even if they are opposed to one's own (Lebra 1976). Although tact is also highly valued in American culture, I believe getting one's own point of view or true feelings across (i.e., being open and assertive), even if it may challenge the other's viewpoint, is also expected and also ranks high among the virtues deserving of respect for Americans.

In conversation, the fear of deviating from the speaker's viewpoint and the eagerness to anticipate, understand, and accommodate the other's idea may, in part, be demonstrated by the frequency with which the Japanese listener interjects with a backchannel. Linking the analysis of the Japanese back-

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TABLE 5. *Alteration pattern of American listeners' backchanneling in cross-cultural settings*

	Mean <i>mmhm</i>	Mean <i>uh-huh</i>	Mean <i>yeah</i>	Mean <i>oh!</i>	Mean <i>hmm</i>	Mean total
A listening to other A	10.0	2.9	11.8	2.5	1.1	28.4
A listening to J	18.9	6.5	12.0	4.2	4.5	46.1

channel use to the concept *omoiyari* is consistent with the functional analysis of backchannels discussed in my (1986) dissertation, namely that backchannels are instrumental in conveying to the speaker that the listener is constructing meaning, as intended by the speaker, and that the listener is open to continued interaction.

ACCOMMODATION HYPOTHESIS

Now that I have shown what may count as the normative use of backchanneling for each cultural group, I will demonstrate how these conventions change in cross-cultural conversations for American listeners, whereas they remain unchanged for Japanese listeners.

Based on the assumptions that certain linguistic features of a person's conversational style are carried over into cross-cultural situations, one may expect that Japanese and American listeners bring their distinct listening styles into cross-cultural conversations. The present data support the theory with respect to the nonnative group only: Japanese frequency of backchanneling in cross-cultural settings remained somewhat high, as expected. However, the data reveal a most interesting finding regarding the Americans' rate of backchanneling in encounters with the Japanese.

American listeners change their overall frequency of backchanneling and display significantly more backchannels in conversations with the Japanese than in conversations with other Americans, with the exception of *yeah*. This is noteworthy because, as was shown in Table 1, *yeah* is a listening device used relatively infrequently by the Japanese. The alteration pattern of American listeners is shown in Table 5.

Despite Americans' rather drastic increase in frequency of backchanneling from intra- to cross-cultural conversations (i.e., from 28.4 to 46.1), Americans still produce considerably fewer backchannels in cross-cultural encounters than Japanese (46.1 versus 60.1), but the difference is no longer statistically significant, as shown in Figure 1.

Why do these native speakers shift listening style in conversations with

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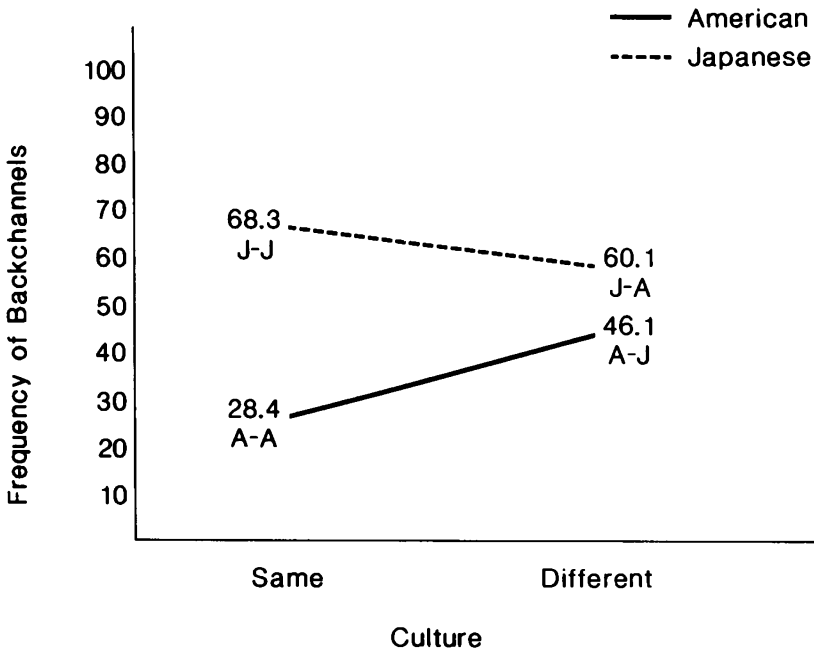


FIGURE 1. Frequency of backchannels displayed by American and Japanese listeners in intra- and cross-cultural encounters.

their nonnative interlocutors? A possible explanation, I believe, is that Americans *accommodate* to the style of their foreign interlocutors. Several scholars have studied linguistic accommodations made by native speakers in cross-cultural settings. Ferguson (1975) and Snow, Eeden, and Muysken (1981) identify several forms of phonological, syntactic, and semantic adaptations made by native speakers when talking to a nonnative speaker in order to facilitate comprehension. These adjustments, commonly known as foreigner talk, include lower syntactic complexity, shorter utterances, lexical simplifications, clear articulation, avoidance of idiomatic expressions, and slow rate of delivery. Giles (1975) suggests that speakers in dyadic interactions often accommodate (reduce dissimilarities in accent) in order to gain the approval of the listener.

Americans in this study may have increased their rate of backchanneling to overcome the Japanese speakers' reticence and encourage them to talk, since, as you recall, an average Japanese speaker produced less than a third of the number of words produced by an average American speaker (332 versus 1,065).

Japanese disinclination to talk appears to have been a function of their

fluency in English as well as of their cultural practices. Consider linguistic fluency first. Japanese participants, as you recall, were born and raised in Japan, yet they had the necessary command of English to enroll in regular university courses and to maintain a ½ hour conversation in English.

However, the Japanese, as was judged by their audiotaped conversations as well as by the evaluations of their American partners both in the Inventory and in the interviews with me, were less proficient in conversational English than their native-speaking counterparts. Such differing language proficiency is almost inevitable in cross-cultural encounters unless the non-native speaker of the language has spent a long period of time in the host country. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, the longer the contact with the people of the host culture, the greater is the possibility of change in backchannel use and interpretations. This unavoidable paradox could have led to the possibility that Japanese participants, because they were not as fluent in English as their partners, felt inhibited and hence assumed the role of the listener. Consistent with this interpretation, Taylor (1979) suggests that reluctance to make mistakes and fear of not being able to understand or reply create anxiety for Japanese students and hence freeze their mind to speak in English.

Japanese speakers' disinclination to talk may have been a function of their culture as well as of their relationship to the American speakers. The Japanese are generally not inclined to state an opinion on issues or discuss topics at length with a stranger (Cambra, Ishii, & Klopff 1980; Klopff & Cambra 1979; McDermott, Tseng, & Marezki 1980; Okuda 1975). I found this myself when 4 out of 10 Japanese did not share their reaction about their conversations with their partners in a follow-up interview with me (even when solicited).

A second, but not contradictory interpretation for the American speakers' greater use of backchannels in cross-cultural encounters may be the following: As a native group, Americans increased feedback to the foreign speakers to indicate their understanding. I say this because American speakers were receiving indications from the second-language speakers that they were not fluent speakers of English.

BACKCHANNELS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Communication difficulties, such as misinterpretation, can occur between speakers who do not share conventions of language use. Misinterpretations of meaning in cross-cultural situations have been convincingly demonstrated by the works of Chick (1986), Erickson (1979), Gumperz (1982), and Tanen (1980).

With respect to the conventions of listening, Lebra (1976) and Mizutani (1982) state that a Japanese listener of English is likely to display a greater

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TABLE 6. *Relationship between listener's frequency of backchannels and speaker's conversational satisfaction*

Item no.	Item description	A speakers/J listeners	
		rho ^a	p ^b
3	She showed me she understood what I said	.75	.01
7	She encouraged me to continue talking	.63	.05
12	She seemed to care	.63	.05
15	She appeared interested and concerned	.84	.001

^aThe rank order correlation coefficient, Spearman's rho, can range from -1 to +1. If there is no relationship between the frequency of backchannels and perceptions of the conversational partner, rho equals zero, whereas -1 or +1 indicates a perfect negative or perfect positive relationship.

^bA *p* value of .05 or less indicates that the null hypothesis of no relation between the two rank orders can be rejected.

number of listener responses, and this may be interpreted by the Anglo-American speaker as a sign of impatience and demand for a quick completion of a statement.

Given the findings of Tannen, Gumperz, and Erickson, and, further, given the hypothesis of Lebra and Mizutani, one would expect a positive relationship between Japanese listeners' backchannels and American speakers' perception of lack of patience, attentiveness, comprehension, and interest.

I correlated, for each group, listeners' frequency of backchannels and speakers' ratings on individual items in the Conversational Satisfaction Inventory. Table 6 shows the significant relationships obtained for frequency of backchanneling and relevant items in the inventory. The results appear to directly contradict the hypothesis that American speakers take Japanese frequent interjections as a sign of noncomprehension, disinterest, and impatience.

First, American speakers perceived Japanese listeners who gave more backchannels than other Japanese as showing more signs of comprehension. The correlation between Americans' perception of Japanese comprehension (item 3) and Japanese use of backchannels was significant ($\rho = .75, p < .01$). Second, American speakers perceived Japanese listeners who gave more backchannels than other Japanese as showing more encouragement, concern, and interest ($\rho = .63, p < .05$; $\rho = .84, p < .001$).

The hypothesis that Americans take Japanese increased use of backchannels to mean that they are impatient is also not supported by the present findings. American speakers, as shown in Table 7, perceived Japanese listeners to be more patient ($t = 2.1, p < .05$), more polite ($t = 2.2, p < .04$), and more attentive ($t = 2.1, p < .05$) than American listeners.

TABLE 7. *Mean satisfaction of American and Japanese speakers in intra- and cross-cultural conversations*

Item no.	Mean A speaker satisfaction		Mean J speaker satisfaction	
	A-A	J-A	J-J	A-J
1	6.2	6.1	5.3	5.0
2	6.3	6.5	4.8	4.2
3	6.8	6.1	6.2	6.5
4	6.4	6.7	6.3	6.7
5	6.0	6.3	6.0	5.4
6	6.6	5.8	4.9	5.4
7	5.8	5.6	5.0	5.5
8	6.2	7.0* (patient)	6.2	5.9
9	6.8	6.9	6.4	6.9
10	6.5	7.0* (polite)	5.2	6.0
11	6.4	6.3	6.0	6.3
12	6.6	6.5	5.4	5.7
13	7.0	7.0	5.5	6.0
14	6.2	6.8* (attentive)	5.3	5.5
15	6.0	6.3	5.6	5.6
16	5.2	5.4	5.3	4.9

*Statistically significant:

Item 8 American speakers perceived Japanese listeners to be more patient.

Item 10 American speakers perceived Japanese listeners to be more polite.

Item 14 American speakers perceived Japanese listeners to be more attentive.

However, it was not possible to establish a correlation between these perceptions and the Japanese use of backchannels, since all Japanese listeners had received a maximum value of 7 (on a scale of 1-7) on patience and politeness. In computing a correlation, if the range of one of the variables is zero, as was the case in this study, the correlation is zero. Such a situation may reflect a measurement problem rather than the absence of a relationship between the variables.

These findings create two contradictions. The first one is that they do not support the general expectation that differing conversational styles lead to misinterpretation of meanings. In fact, the findings point to a positive stereotyping as a result of greater use of backchannels. Two explanations may be given. First, the participants in Chick, Erickson, Gumperz, Scarcella, and Tannen's studies were all fluent speakers of English. When misunderstandings occur between fluent speakers of the language, negative feelings are far more likely to be attributed to the personality of one or both of the participants. But when one of the interlocutors is less competent in the language (as was the case with the Japanese in this study), there may be a tendency to attribute misinterpretations to linguistic skills.

Second, the participants in this study - American and Japanese under-

graduate students – had come from a long distance to attend a university which is culturally very diverse. In addition, they volunteered to participate in a study that involved conversing with a member of another culture. This suggests that these American and Japanese students were a select group of people who had a generally favorable attitude to people of other cultures in the first place. Perhaps they were also prepared for stylistic differences.

The second contradictory finding stands in direct opposition to Lebra and Mizutani's hypotheses. That is, American speakers not only did not perceive their Japanese listeners as lacking patience, interest, and attentiveness, but they rated them as being more patient and more polite. Several explanations come to mind.

First, it is important to recognize that the statements made by Lebra and Mizutani were not based on empirical evidence, linguistic or otherwise. In the case of Lebra, the issue was not central to her work. In the case of Mizutani, while she did have Japanese and American participants in her study, she did not elicit their own opinions of the conversations or demonstrate a correlation between aspects of discomfort in cross-cultural conversations and uses of backchannels. In the absence of a demonstrated relationship between conversational difficulties and uses of backchannels, it should not be surprising that Lebra's and Mizutani's statements turned out to be false in these data. As Wolfson (1986) reminds us, native speakers, while very able to judge correctness and appropriateness of speech behavior, may not be able to describe objectively their own rules of speaking. Sometimes what comes out of the process of analyzing data can be counterintuitive to the hypotheses of native speakers.

Second, the present study shows that Japanese gave fewer backchannels in cross-cultural situations. Third, the short exposure the American students had to the Japanese students may not have been sufficient to alter their perceptions. As Gumperz, Jupp, and Roberts (1979:2) say, "lack of shared criteria may not be important in any one single instance, but in prolonged conversations it can have a cumulative effect."

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this article, I have suggested that members of the Japanese and American cultural groups have a repertoire of backchannel cues that they use with certain frequency: Japanese give significantly more backchannels of several types than Americans do. The exception is *yeah*, which correlates negatively with conversational satisfaction. The greater frequency of listener responses may have its roots in the culture of the Japanese participants and in their language. These linguistic/cultural conventions may be carried over or over-generalized to cross-cultural situations.

I have also shown that native speakers alter their conversational style in interactions with nonnative interlocutors: Americans display significantly

higher frequencies of backchanneling in cross-cultural settings with the Japanese than in intracultural situations. The alteration of specific forms of responses is also noteworthy. Unlike any other form of backchannel, Americans gave fewer *yeah* – a device used very infrequently by the Japanese.

I attributed this change to an accommodation phenomenon, that is, to Americans' desire to encourage reticent Japanese interlocutors to continue talking and to indicate their comprehension, especially since Japanese participants were not fluent speakers of English. Japanese apprehension to talk was judged to be related to their cultural practices (i.e., their nonaffiliatory relations with the American partners) and to their low confidence in their English skills.

In conversations among native and nonnative speakers, asymmetrical accommodation is generally expected. Asymmetrical linguistic accommodation is explained by Ferguson (1975) and Snow et al. (1981) in the following way: Native speakers accommodate because they clearly have the linguistic ability to do so. The explanation for asymmetrical backchanneling accommodation may be that native speakers are more attuned to the requirements of a harmonious English conversation, and, further, are in a superior position to make contributions to the development of a coordinated conversation. An interesting question for further research may be the following: Is the direction of change of native speakers' rate of backchanneling always toward an increase of backchannels even with cultures in which rate of backchanneling is lower?

The study found no evidence for the hypothesis that backchanneling conventions that are not shared by American and Japanese culture groups contribute to misunderstanding or stereotyping. In fact, the study points to a potentially positive stereotyping as a result of Japanese speakers' greater use of backchannels: In Japanese-American dyads, there was a positive correlation between Japanese use of backchannels and American speakers' perception of their comprehension, interest, and encouragement. Also, Americans perceived Japanese to be significantly more patient, polite, and attentive. No correlation was found between these personality attributions and Japanese use of backchannels due to lack of variability, reflecting a measurement problem rather than the absence of a relationship between the variables. An interesting problem for future research may be to study verbal listening cues and their effect when Americans converse with speakers of other ethnic or linguistic backgrounds in varied sociolinguistic situations.⁴

NOTES

1. I am deeply grateful to Deborah Schiffrin for her incisive comments. This article is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted to Georgetown University. Correspondence should be sent to: Sheida White, Center for Development of Early Education, Kapalama Heights, Honolulu, HI 96817.

BACKCHANNELS ACROSS CULTURES

2. The term *aizuchi* is the closest translation to backchannels that there is in the Japanese and English literature. It is a nontechnical term which literally means 'mutual hammering' (Mizutani 1982). It suggests a mutual effort to create something valuable.
3. As discussed in my (1986) dissertation, turn-final *so* may trigger a different set of expectations for the Japanese. For Americans, it marks an implied or understood result based on what was said earlier in the conversation. Second, *so* may signal a speaker's readiness to give up the floor and the expectation that the hearer take responsibility for the next move or topic in the conversation. As for the clause-final *y'know*, it is proposed that Americans use the expression to draw a listener's attention to the import of the information just presented. Japanese probably use the expression less because so much of their learning of English in Japan is through textbooks, as opposed to hearing it spoken. They are probably less likely to be attuned to and indicate recognition of the import of the information to which the speaker has pointed.
4. Wolfson's notion of *bulge* (1986) may be relevant to this study. She reports that the great majority (the bulge) of behaviors such as compliments, invitations, greetings, partings, gratitudes, and refusals occur in interactions between speakers who are neither intimates nor total strangers, but acquaintances of similar status who may see one another as potential friends. (She suggests that this pattern may reflect the great social mobility in American society.) The backchannels in this study occurred between status-equal nonintimates who were potentially friends, but they were also total strangers. Wolfson's study does not have a category for status-equal strangers (as opposed to status-equal acquaintances) who are potentially friends. Her general notion may still bear on the data in the following way: Because participants were perhaps unsure of their standing to each other, they may have provided backchannels in a different way than they would have with intimates or status-equal acquaintances. In this work, nonfamiliarity of the dyads was necessary in order to ensure that perceptions would not be influenced by prior knowledge of each other's personality. But we do need to concern ourselves with the generality of uses of backchannels across situations, statuses, and relationships.

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APPENDIX: INVENTORY OF CONVERSATIONAL SATISFACTION

	1 = yes 7 = no ^a
1. She let me know that I was communicating effectively.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. I felt that I was able to present myself favorably during the conversation.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. She showed me that she understood what I said.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. She showed me that she listened attentively to what I said.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. She expressed a lot of interest in what I had to say.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. This conversation went smoothly.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. She encouraged me to continue talking.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. She seemed impatient.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. She seemed cold and unfriendly.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. She was polite	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. She appeared warm and friendly.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. She didn't seem to care.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13. She was <i>impolite</i> .	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14. She was an attentive listener.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
15. She appeared interested and concerned.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
16. She did not interrupt me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Scoring key:

For 8, 9, 12, 13 1 = 1 (a rating of 1 was scored as 1)

For all others 1 = 7 (a rating of 7 was scored as 1)

^aThe scoring system corrected for the negatively stated items.