DIVERSE
VOICES

Readings in Languages, Literatures and Cultures

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‘ahmm yes ya o.k. right ...':
Feminine Solidarity in Single-Sex Verbal Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the different ways men and women use language particularly with respect to their use of back channel support in single-sex verbal interaction. Several cases from previous studies that have been accounted for gender differences will be highlighted. The researcher will also provide samples of the differences extracted from a current study based on a local talk show programme. An attempt will be made to draw conclusions about the use of back channel support in a single-sex conversation and its relevance for understanding the importance of such use in a specific setting.

INTRODUCTION

Spoken interaction requires active participation by both parties which means that the current listener is not allowed to remain passive nor is s/he allowed to provide only silent, non-verbal feedback, such as head-nods, smiles, and eye-glances. Some kind of oral responding is expected in order to indicate that the participants within conversation are paying attention to one another.

Allwood (1992) stipulates that the linguistic feedback system is an essential instrument for successful communication. The success of the interaction between interlocutors depends on the reaction of other participants which according to Allwood (1991: 7) refers to four basic communicative functions which are:

i. contact - willingness and ability to continue interaction;
ii. perception - willingness and ability to perceive expression and message;
iii. understanding - willingness and ability to understand expression and message;
iv. attitudinal reactions - willingness and ability to give other attitudinal reactions to expression, message or interlocutor.

Schegloff (1972: 379) suggests that listeners signal their attention to the current speaker by using ‘assent terms’: for instance, ‘hmhm’, ‘yeah’, ‘yes’, ‘right’, and so on. Schegloff argues that these terms, which are also known as ‘accompaniment behaviour’ (Kendon, 1967); ‘back channel support’ (Young, 1970); ‘back channel behaviour’ (Duncan, 1972); and ‘minimal responses’ (Zimmerman and West, 1975) are not interruptions but rather “demonstrations of continued, co-ordinated hearsership” (Ibid.: 380), and that they are thus an essential part of any meaningful conversation.

In her study of gender differences in minimal responses, Reid (1995: 494-5) uses the following criteria to distinguish minimal responses:
They must be brief since they are only intended to be indicators of participation in the conversation. They must be made in response to another speaker. This ensures they really are a ‘response’.

They contain little semantic content since they serve only to indicate participation or, at most, agreement.

They do not generally interrupt the flow of speech from the first speaker.

The second speaker, that is, the one who produces the minimal response, is not attempting to take over the floor.

Each verbal minimal response constitutes either a completed or continuing intonation unit.

Feedback protocols in verbal interaction may be signalled in various forms. According to Stenstrom (1994: 81), "Back channels can reflect empathy, enthusiasm and indignation, but they can also reflect a lack of interest, indifference and impatience, although such feelings are generally expressed in a different form. Exactly what back channels do is partly a function of the lexical items chosen, partly of the intonation contour adopted."

BACK CHANNEL SUPPORT: THE CONVERSATIONAL DEVICE

The conversational device of back channel support most frequently takes the form of minimal responses, such as ‘mhm’, ‘uh-huh’, and ‘yeah’. The term ‘back channel’ implies that there are two channels in conversation that operate simultaneously. The ‘main’ channel is that through which the speaker (the person who is holding the floor) sends messages, and the ‘back’ channel is that over which the listener (the addressed recipient of the talk) gives useful information without claiming the floor. In other words, these back channel cues form one instance where simultaneous speech is tolerated and does not threaten a current speaker’s right to complete a turn. However, it is not always clear where a minimal response ceases to be minimal, and longer, but supportive, sequences can occur in conversations.

Coates looks at the supportive function of back channel support, and notes that minimal responses are used in two different ways in the women’s conversations that she recorded. According to Coates (1989: 106), "In the interaction-focused discussion sections, they are used to support the speaker and to indicate the listener’s active attention ... they are mostly timed to come at the end of an information unit (e.g. a tone group or a clause), yet so well anticipated is the point that the speaker’s flow is not interrupted."

The other use Coates (Ibid.: 107) identifies occurs in the “narrative or more information-focused sections of the conversation,” where “minimal responses seem to have another meaning. They are used far less frequently, and when they occur they signal agreement among participants that a particular stage of conversation has been reached.” In the example Coates gives, where a speaker introduces a new topic, other speakers only indicate at the very end “that they are attending”, with a string of perfectly-timed minimal responses. Coates (Ibid.) emphasises that, in all-female groups, “it seems the use of these linguistic forms is further evidence of women’s active participation in the joint production of text.”

Apart from minimal responses such as ‘mhm’, or ‘yeah’, back channel support can also take the form of questions, the response to which is incorporated into the turn of the speaker holding the floor. It can also take the form of information offered in support of the
speaker holding the ‘main’ channel, as in the following example from the data of Jenkins and Cheshire (1990: 271):

Ruth: I’m not talking about us, I’m talking about other people in our class, some people, like I’ve noticed other people.

Peter: Like Thy, he’s a prime example, nobody takes any notice of him.

Ruth: Yeah, I’ve noticed people like – Sabrina’s on her own.

In this interaction, Peter provides an illustration to support the point that Ruth is making. We know that Ruth finds Peter’s turn supportive of her turn, rather than a challenge for the floor, because she acknowledges and affirms it (according to Jenkins and Cheshire’s analysis and interpretation of the data) with her ‘yeah’. Jenkins and Cheshire’s data also makes it clear that boys are capable of using minimal responses supportively.

Most of the research on this linguistic feature has been on its co-operative, supportive use. Studies have noticed that the absence of back channel support can make the speaker feel that the listener is not interested in what the speaker is saying, or disagrees with it (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Fishman, 1983). Delayed back channel support also produces signs of anxiety in the speaker. These are not actively competitive uses of the feature, however, rather they should be seen as not co-operative. It is nevertheless possible that back channel support does have a competitive variant, which is the exploitation of the back channel to claim the main channel. Jenkins and Cheshire (1990: 209) observed that “… the function of the minimal responses used by boys and girls tended to be different. The boys used them to gain a foothold in the conversation rather than as a support for the current speaker. The girls, on the other hand, used minimal responses in an almost wholly supportive way.”

Jenkins and Cheshire link some of the minimal responses in their data to interruptions and attempted interruptions. They provide the following illustration (Ibid.: 208):

Sophie: What is an outsider?
Laura: An outsider is someone who has been rejected from other people
Johnny: Yeah, like...
Jane: And feels different and is treated different
Johnny: Yeah
Scott: And feels an outcast
Jane: And feels rejected
Johnny: Yeah, yeah somebody who feels like, and is treated badly
Scott: Someone who is in the wrong place
Johnny: Yeah, yeah. Perfect.

Jenkins and Cheshire identify Johnny’s use of the minimal response item ‘yeah’ as an attempt to enter and to control the discussion. Their point is reinforced by the fact that his turn concludes the discussion, since after uttering “Yeah, yeah. Perfect”, he switches the tape recorder off.

Despite Jenkins and Cheshire’s findings that minimal responses can be used competitively in order to gain the floor, and also that boys are capable of using minimal responses supportively, other research on this feature has concentrated on its supportive function, and has been unanimous that women use more minimal responses than men do (Fishman, 1977, 1980; Zimmerman and West, 1975; Hirschmann, 1974; Strodbeck and Mann, 1956). Fishman (1977) linked women’s relatively frequent use of back channel responses to what she diagnosed as doing the ‘interactional shitwork’ in mixed conversations. This view regards the use of minimal responses as typical of the interactant with least power. Coates
With the advent of the new millennium, many societies are moving towards a more global existence where a dynamic interface is constantly evolving between their languages, literatures and cultures. It is generally recognised that language reflects the culture and is the means by which cultural values are transmitted from generation to generation. Culture, on the other hand, conceives of itself as an understanding of the aesthetics and literature.

To face the challenges in the new millennium, aspects of languages, literatures and cultures are highlighted in this publication as a means of fostering and facilitating the process of globalisation.

The publication of this collection of selected papers is one of the tangible outcomes of the first Malaysia International Conference on Languages, Literatures and Cultures (MICOLLAC) organised by the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. They will be useful resources for referencing of new ideas as well as for paving directions for further research and resolutions in the study of languages, literatures and cultures.