On Japanese Floor Management Strategies:
A New Dimension of Backchannels

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0. ABSTRACT

Listener responses, so-called backchannels, have long been ignored in communication studies. Some researchers have tried to reveal their functions in discourse, but they have not reached any agreement so far.

The present study was conducted to find out what functions backchannels have as a device to manage the floor in discourse. Analysis was carried out on the basis of telephone talks between six Japanese and a native speaker of English. Results indicate that backchannels function as a device to destabilize the floor domination and to restabilize it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is something like a musical ensemble, in which players play their musical instruments according to a score and try to produce a fine harmony by cooperating with each other. Without the score and their collaborative participation, the ensemble will be broken down and may sound entirely discordant. Just as a musical ensemble requires a score and players' collaboration, conversation is a rule-governed joint activity.

The collaborative work in conversation is often referred to as 'conversation management' (Maynard, 1989). It may be generally acknowledged that participants in a conversation collaboratively manage the ongoing interaction by monitoring various messages and signs given by their interlocutors. However, most of the studies on face-to-face communication have been likely to put their attention on how speakers perform their language, not on how listeners jointly manage and compose a talk together with the speaker (See, Maynard, 1989: 159).

The collaborative work by listeners, such as 'yes' and 'uh huh', is generally called 'backchannels' (Yngve, 1970). Dunkan and Fiske (1977: 201-202) extended the range of backchannels and presented five categories, including: (1) *m-hm*, (2) Sentence Completions, (3) Requests for Clarification, (4) Brief Restatement, and (5) Head Nods and Shakes. It is also reported that other phenomena, such as 'eye gaze' (Kendon, 1990) and 'laughter' (Maynard, 1989: 159-177), function as backchannels.

Many researchers have also been attempting to illustrate what functions backchannels have in discourse on the basis of 'turn exchange'. Schegloff (1982: 82) argued that backchannels function as 'continuer', by which the listener tries to let the current speaker continue the talk by passing up the opportunities to initiate a repair for understanding. Maynard (1989) and Mizutani (1988) discussed that backchannels function to display and establish empathy toward the speaker. By referring to Tao and Thompson (1991: 221), Kobayashi (1995) mentioned that listeners sometimes use backchannels as a device to display their hesitation.

Floor, which will be used as the analytical unit in the present study, was first shown by Sacks (1972) and has been introduced in communication studies since then. The unit had been used almost interchangeably as 'turn' until Edelsky (1981) claimed that floor and turn were not equivalent, and she defined floor as psychological time and space between/among the participants (Edelsky, 1981: 397-405). Referring to the notion of floor that Edelsky presented, Hayashi (1987, 65) developed the definition and redefined the term as "communication attention orientation between/among speaker(s) and listener(s)" (Hayashi, 1987: 65).

The precise procedures of floor identification will be explained later, but roughly speaking the identification will be carried out according to who gets the central attention from whom (Hayashi, 1987: 67). Although there are various factors that affect on the interlocutors' attention, it is reasonable to expect that a person who takes the psychologically dominant status is likely to gain the attention of the other interlocutors and may be allowed to take the dominant status in the conversation as the floor holder (See, Hayashi, 1995; Goffman, 1977).

Floor is not stable but dynamic; since the interlocutors' attention is

likely to shift locally, it is obvious that the conversational domination is sometimes weakened or reinforced by the responses given by the floor supporters (See, Kobayashi, 1997: 3). Then we may safely assume that backchannels serve some important functions as a device to manage the conversational domination.

The present study was conducted to reveal how the floor supporter jointly manages and composes a talk together with the floor holder by using backchannels as a device to manage the conversational domination. In particular, the analysis was made based on the following two research questions: (1) How do Japanese participants temporarily take over the conversational domination and initiate a subfloor by using backchannels? and (2) How do they release the temporal domination and yield a subfloor by using backchannels? The results reveal that backchannels serve some important functions in floor management.

2. PROCEDURES

2-1. Datagathering

Six telephone conversations were recorded between six Japanese university students (JSs, for short), three males and three females, and a male native speaker of English (NS, for short) who was teaching English conversation at the same university. Telephone talks were used in the present study to let the caller, NS, take the dominant status in each session and to avoid the nonverbal effect on their language performance.

The general topics of the conversations were predetermined, which was to ask the JSs to join two Japanese language camps for foreign students: one was an overnight trip to a hot spring resort and the other was a bowling meet with the foreign students. However, considering the NS and the JSs had some shared personal information, it was possible that their common knowledge might affect the JSs' language performance. Therefore, the NS was asked to pretend to be an assistant manager of a Japanese language institute to avoid some possible sociolinguisitic influence on their language performance.

Each of the recording sessions was transcribed according to the nota-

tions given in Appendix. After finishing transcribing all the recordings, interviews were carried out to gather some supplementary data for the analysis.

2-2. Some Problems in Backchannel Identification

Our daily talk is filled with backchannel expressions. However, once we try to identify and elicit a backchannel from some fragments of a talk, we may face a great deal of difficulty. The reasons may be because backchannels "do not have an easily identifiable referential meaning or cannot be felicitously interpreted by a propositional/referential meaning within a given context" (Maynard, 1989: 159) and few researchers have reached an agreement on their definition.

To begin with, let me quote the definition of backchannel presented by Maynard (1990):

> ... back channel is identified strictly in the context of turns with the turn taking system and refers to occurences of listener behavior where an interlocutor, who assumes primarily a listener's role, sends brief messages and signs during the other interlocutor's speaking turn.
>
> (Maynard, 1990: 402)

If we try to elicit a backchannel according to the definition, we have to specify at first who is the speaker according to who is taking a 'speaking turn'. In examining a dyad conversation, listeners are subsequently specified as the person who is not taking a speaking turn.

It is reasonable to start the identification from specifying who is the speaker, but if we try to do it based on turn exchange, some problems appear. This is because turn itself sometimes does not reflect the real intention of the participants. Edelsky (1981) states as follows:

> The problem with defining turns simply on the basis of speaker exchange is that this does not account for either a participant's sense of what constitutes a turn or the intention of the turn taker. ... Such an inclination leads to defining a turn as finished even if a speaker did not feel the message was completed and so either added an afterthought or silently suffered an interpreted but not a technical cut-off.   (Edelsky, 1981; 399)

One of the actual problems is whether or not we should approve a question as a backchannel. Fragment 1 shows an example:

Fragment 1

D: Ahm/	(1)
and in particular we have two events this month/	(2)
for which we are still looking for/	(3)
[N: Hnn./]	(4)
ah helpers Japanese advisers./	(5)
[N: Ahh./]	(6)
And the first one/	(7)
is on May twenty-eighth./	(8)
N: May twenty?/	(9)
D: Twenty-eighth./	(10)
[N: Eighth ahh./]	(11)

The NS (D) initiates his speaking turn in Line 1 by employing a non-lexical filler, 'Ahm'. The JS (N) sends backchannels as the continuer in Lines 4 and 6 and allows the NS to continue the talk. The JS sends a confirmation question in Line 9, but whether to approve the question as a backchannel is the matter to be discussed here.

Brown (1995: 26-29) and Miyahara (1992: 120) mention that making a confirmation request is often conducted by *listeners* to elicit some missing information from the speaker. Also in the interview with the JSs, most of them reported that they used such requests as the listener, but from the theoretical standpoint, questions are regarded to constitute a 'speaking turn'. According to Edelsky (1981: 403), turn is "an onrecord 'speaking' behind which lies an intention to convey a message that is both referential and functional," then questioning, including the confirmation requests as in the fragment, is assumed as an intentional activity to draw the attention of the interlocutors and to elicit some needed information from the speaker. Therefore, they should be understood to constitute a turn from the theoretical viewpoint.

As shown in this section, specifying the speaker with turn exchange makes the backchannel identification problematic. Since turn itself sometimes does not reflect the real intention of the participants, it makes

difficult to describe how they actually try to work together at a given time. Therefore, another analytical unit, 'floor', will be used as the present study.

2-3. Analytical Units: *Floor* and *Subfloor*
2-3-1. What is *Floor*?

Floor, which will be used as the analytical unit of the present study, was first presented by Sacks (1972) and has been introduced in communication studies since then. Although he seemed to regard it almost as equivalent to 'turn', thanks to the studies by Phillips (1972) and Shults, Florio, and Erickson (1982), floor was found to serve as the global framework of interaction through the analysis of classroom discourse. Hayashi (1991: 5-6) further mentioned that floor functions in discourse as the cognitive frame of interactions and constrains local and global structure of conversation.

It was Edelsky (1981: 405) who first attended to the intention of the participants and defined floor as "the acknowledged what's-going-on within a psychological time/space." The notion of floor that she presented in the study may be well understood in her following statement:

> It is also possible to have the floor while one is not talking. The clearest example of this ... is a case where what was going on was that Carole was making a report about students who needed help with writing. In the midst of the report she began to recount papers sorted into various categories. That her silence and counting did not change the official what's-going-on can be seen [in the data]. Len and Sally took turns: that is, they made on-record comments addressed to the whole group, but they used low voices as a show of "respect" for the fact that Carole was still controlling the floor even though she was not taking a turn.
>
> (Edelsky, 1981: 406)

As she mentioned in the quotation, even though a participant makes an on-record utterance and succeeds in taking a turn, it does not mean that a floor is always given to the person; rather, as long as s/he does not take the dominant status in the cognitive time/space of the other interlocutors, a floor is not given to the person.

However, thinking that every conversation requires the other interlocutors' collaboration, it is unreasonable to assume that a person can take the

dominant status without being accepted by them. Some close studies on the floor establishment were made by Hayashi (1987; 1991; 1995), and she claimed that floor was established thanks to the mutual efforts of the participants. She explained it as follows:

> ... floor is a form of community competence. That is, it is a kind of competence that is developed in the cognitive space naturally or by mutual efforts when more than two persons interact with each other.
>
> (Hayashi, 1991: 2)

As discussed in this section, floor is the cognitive entity established by the mutual effort of the participants, functions as the local and global frame of interaction and reflects who is in the cognitively dominant status in the conversation.

2-3-2. Identification of *Floor* and *Subfloor*

Now that we have defined that a floor is established when the other interlocutors allow a person to take the cognitively dominant status in the ongoing interaction, we can go on to consider how to identify a floor.

Hayashi (1987: 65) defined floor as "communicative attention orientation between/among speaker(s) and listener(s)" and pointed out the importance of communicators' attention in floor identification. In the present study, floor identification was carried out by referring to the results of the interviews and the following guidelines Hayashi (1987) presented:

> Floor is ... thus defined with respect to who is orienting his/her attention in the on-going conversational content, who the central figure(s) of the on-going conversation is/are and is/are receiving the attention, and to whom and where the communicative territory belongs.
>
> (Hayashi, 1987: 67)

However, thinking that the interlocutor's attention is likely to shift locally, it is reasonable to assume that a floor is sometimes made of some sets of *subfloors* (Kobayashi, 1997: 3). Fragment 2 shows an example:

Fragment 2

D: One problem/	(1)
with that trip is the one for some people =	(2)
= might be there is a fee./	(3)
N: Thea?/ (LB)	(4)
D: A fee, a charge./	(5)
[N: Charge, ahhh./] (LB)	(6)
N: It will cost about twenty-five thousand yen./	(7)

In Fragment 2, the NS (D) initiates the interaction as the floor holder. As discussed in the previous Section 2-2., questioning is an intentional activity with which a questioner tries to draw the attention of the other interlocutors and to elicit some missing information. The NS holds the JS's attention and stays in the dominant status as the floor holder from Lines 1 to 3, but because of the challenge by the JS (N) in Line 4, he temporarily yields the floor domination and allows the JS to take the floor. Although the JS gets the NS's attention in Line 4, she quickly releases it back to the NS and lets him take the dominant status again as seen in the subsequent Lines 5 and 6.

The conversation domination is sometimes reinforced and weakened by the response given by the floor supporter. As seen in Fragment 2, subfloor appears when the main floor holder is directly or indirectly asked to halt developing the current floor by the floor supporter and when his/her floor domination is temporarily weakened (Kobayashi, 1997). In addition, there appeared some other subfloor initiation strategies in the fragments gathered for the present study. They will be also examined later in the Results and Discussion section.

In the present study, subfloors are also identified by referring to the interviews and the identification guidelines presented earlier.

2-4. Speaker/Listener Identification

One of the premises for a person to count as the speaker is how much attention the person gains from the other interlocutors, since even though a person utters some words, s/he cannot achieve speaker status as long as the interlocutors do not pay any attention to them (See, Wardhaugh, 1985).

Then, the question to be discussed here is whether or not we should regard the subfloor holder as the speaker.

As mentioned earlier, subfloor appears when the floor domination is temporarily weakened. As seen in Fragment 2, the subfloor holder (i.e, the current main floor supporter) succeeds in gaining the attention of the main floor holder by uttering a confirmation question, but the subfloor holder quickly yields it to the main floor holder and self-resigns from the temporarily dominant status. This may be because the subfloor holder assumes that the main floor holder still retains the main floor, even though the floor domination is temporarily weakened and taken over by the supporter's challenge. Therefore, even though the floor domination is temporarily weakened by the supporter's challenges, it does not mean the floor is completely taken over by the current floor supporter. Referring to the discussion in this section, the speaker is identified in the present study according to who is taking the main floor in the ongoing interaction.

2-5. Identification of Backchannels

Originally, backchannels are the responses given by the listeners, namely the floor supporters. Therefore, all the responses by the floor supporter are identified as listeners' backchannels in this study.

However, in the telephone talks gathered for the present study, there appeared some cases where the floor holder also employed some short utterables, much like listeners' backchannels, within his/her main floor. Dunkan and Fiske (1977) acknowledges the speaker sometimes employs backchannels, but the question is how to identify them. Fragment 3 shows an example of the speaker backchannel:

Fragment 3

D: And go until/	(1)
ah five o'clock p.m./	(2)
[T: Five o'clock./] (LB)	(3)
[Ah huh./] (SB)	(4)
Actually the game will end at at three/	(5)
o'clock./	(6)
[T: Ah huh./] (LB)	(7)

The NS (D) initiates the interaction as the floor holder. The floor supporter, the JS (T), sends backchannels in Lines 3 and 7 and seems to try to let the main floor holder to continue the talk. The point to be noted here is the response given by the floor holder in Line 4.

The speaker backchannels, such as in Line 4, are preliminary elicited according to their forms. In eliciting the speaker backchannels, the five form categories presented by Dunkan and Fiske (1977: 201-202) are fundamentally applied for the present study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 265 listener/speaker backchannels were produced by the JSs in the data gathered for this study: 170 cases appeared within the NS's main floors and 95 cases within the JSs' subfloors. In addition, 37 subfloors appeared during the NS's main floor domination in the collected data.

In this section, the collected fragments will be examined according to the research questions presented in Section 1: (1) How do JSs temporarily take over the conversational domination and initiate a subfloor by using backchannels? and (2) How do they release the temporal domination and yield a subfloor by using backchannels?

3-1. On the JS's Subfloor Initiation Strategies

Interactions will be carried out smoothly as long as the main floor holder retains the floor domination and the concurrent floor supporter assists his/her floor development. However, once a subfloor is initiated, both of the main floor and subfloor holders are in the dominant status at the same time and consequently their communicative status will become unstable, since the main floor holder allows the supporter to temporarily stay in the dominant status without releasing it completely. Therefore, examining how a subfloor is initiated may reveal how their communicative status is destabilized.

As for the subfloor initiation, the following two general strategies were found in the collected fragments: (1) subfloor initiation by question backchannels and (2) subfloor initiation by the main floor holder's self-yielding.

3-1-1. Subfloor Initiation by Question Backchannels

34 JS's listener backchannels were employed as the subfloor initiator, but the most typical strategy (20 out of 34) was to open a subfloor by using questions as a confirmation request. Fragment 4 will give us an example:

Fragment 4

D: And ahm/	(1)
it'll begin at one o'clock in the afternoon./	(2)
T: Ah sorry?/ (LB)	(3)
D: It will begin at at one o'clock =	(4)
= in the afternoon./	(5)
[T: Ah yes./] (LB)	(6)
D: And go until/	(7)
ah five o'clock p.m./	(8)
[T: Five o'clock./]	(9)

The NS (D) initiates the interaction in Lines 1 and 2 and takes the domination as the main floor holder. Even while in the NS's domination, the JS (T) utters a confirmation question in Line 3, "Ah, sorry?" as the floor supporter and succeeds in getting the NS's attention and taking over the domination temporarily. Even though the JS gains the temporal domination by the confirmation question in Line 3, it does not mean that the main floor holder, the NS, releases his domination completely; rather it may be reasonable to assume that both of them are in the dominant status.

Another typical strategy (12 out of 34) was to initiate a subfloor by using a question backchannel to collaboratively develop the main floor. An example is shown in Fragment 5:

Fragment 5

D: O.K., that's that's one of the things, just one afternoon./	(1)
And the other event is an overnight trip./	(2)
T: Overnight?/ (LB)	(3)
[D: Ah huh./] (SB)	(4)
T: Overnight trip?/ (LB)	(5)
D: Overnight trip to Beppu./	(6)
[T: Trip./] (LB)	(7)

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        [Uh huh/] (SB)                                        (8)
        to/                                                   (9)
----------------------------------------------------------------
  T: Trip, ahhn by car?/ (LB)                                (10)
  D: Ahhm/                                                   (11)
        I've just, let me look at the schedule here, ah huh./ (12)
        I believe it's it's by bus, ahm./                    (13)
                            [T: Bus./] (LB)                   (14)
        [Nh huh./] (SB)                                       (15)
                  [T: Nh huh./] (LB)                          (16)
        Or excuse me, no, not by bus, but by train./         (17)
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Fragment 5 was initiated by the NS (D) and he takes the domination as the main floor holder, while all through the fragment, the JS (T) joined as the floor supporter. The JS sends confirmation questions in Lines 3 and 5, and takes the temporal domination from Lines 3 to 9. While the NS tried to utter something in Line 9, the JS interrupted his talk and initiated a new subfloor in Line 10 by sending a question backchannel, "Trip, ahhn by car?."

The JS's question backchannel in Line 10 seemed to be produced to elicit some missing content information, and consequently it functions to develop a new topic in the fragment and to collaboratively develop the main floor with the NS. On the other hand, observing the JS's question in Line 10 from the point of their communicative status, both of the NS and JS will be found to stay in the dominant status owing to the question the JS made, as seen in Fragment 4.

Backchannels are originally the responses given by the listener, not by the speaker. Thinking that the listener (i.e, the floor supporter) does not only encourage the speaker (i.e, the floor holder) to continue the talk by passing up the opportunities to interrupt it but also they actively take the speaking turn by making a question and behave like the speaker by temporarily taking the dominant status, it may become reasonable to assume that their communicative status becomes unstable owing to the listener's active challenging.

3-1-2. Subfloor Initiation by the Main Floor Holder's Self-yielding

Another strategy found in the collected fragments (2 out of 34) was that

the main floor holder sometimes self-resigns from the dominant status and lets the floor supporter take it temporarily. Fragment 6 shows an example:

Fragment 6

D: Ah what what's your name please?/	(1)
N: My name is Naomi Fukutomo./ (SB)	(2)
D: [Ah O.K., Naomi Fu|kumoto./] (SB)	(3)
[N:|Fukumoto./] (LB)	(4)
[Uh huh./] (SB)	(5)
[N: Yes./] (LB)	(6)
Well, let me tell you who I am./	(7)
My name is Douglas Norton./	(8)

The NS (D) opens the interaction as the main floor holder in Line 1, and the JS (N) sends an answering backchannel in Line 2 as the concurrent floor supporter according to their self-report in the interviews. In Line 3, the NS utters a repetition backchannel toward the preceeding JS's answer, judging from the identification criterion of the speaker backchannels mentioned in Section 2-5.

The JS's question backchannels discussed in the previous section function to temporarily highlight the listener as the subfloor holder, but the NS's speaker backchannel in Line 3 seems to function to temporarily yield his domination to the JS. Considering a backchannel does not constitute a speaking turn as generally argued (Lier, 1988; Edelsky, 1981), it is possible to assume that the NS's speaker backchannel in the fragment reflects his intention to resign from the central position and to behave like the listener by yielding a speaking turn to the JS, though he still retains the main floor. In consequence, although the temporal floor domination is given to the JS because of the NS's self-yielding, the floor condition is still unstable since both of the NS and the JS are temporarily obliged to take the subordinate status as the listener.

In Section 3-1., how the JS initiates a subfloor was mainly examined. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, examining the subfloor initiation strategies may reveal how the participants' communicative status is destabilized. The results presented in this section indicate that the JS's question

backchannels and the NS's speaker backchannels may function to destabilize their communicative status.

In the next section, the other research question on how the JS yields a subfloor will be examined.

3-2. On the JS's Subfloor Yielding Strategies

As mentioned in the previous section, examining floor initiation strategies leads to the understanding of how the participants' communicative status will be destabilized. Interaction will go on smoothly as long as the floor holder retains his/her floor domination with the assist of the floor supporter, since their status remains stable in that condition. Then, we can see how their communicative status is restabilized by examining how the subfloor is yielded.

In the collected fragments, 41 backchannels were used by the JSs as the subfloor initiator. A typical example is shown in Fragment 7:

Fragment 7

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D:And then we'll have have the game until three  =            (1)
   =  o'clock/                                                 (2)
            [T: Yes./]                                         (3)
   and after that we'll have a reception./                     (4)
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 T: Reception?/ (LB)                                           (5)
 D: Ah huh./                                                   (6)
 T: Where?/ (LB)                                               (7)
 D: Ahn reception will be at the/                              (8)
    Kokura Sougou Department Store/                            (9)
                      [T: Ahh yes./] (LB)                      (10)
    that's the sky lounge./                                    (11)
              [T: That's great./] (LB)                         (12)
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 D: Ahhn so that will finish at five o'clock./                (13)
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The NS (D) initiates Fragment 7 as the main floor holder and retains the floor domination all throught the interaction in the fragment. The subfloor is opened by the question backchannel of the JS (D) in Line 5, "Reception?," and succeeds in taking the temporal domination from Lines 5 to 12. The JS sends backchannels in Lines 10 and 12, but what function those

backchannels have in the subfloor yielding is what will be discussed here.

As seen in the previous section, the participants' communicative status is destabilized when a subfloor is initiated. In Fragment 7, the JS's question backchannel in Line 5 functions to destabilize their communicative status, since the JS takes a speaking turn by the question backchannel and behaves like the speaker temporarily though the NS still retains the main floor domination. However, his backchannels in Lines 10 and 12 seem to display his intention to join the talk as the listener, not as the speaker, and function to restabilize their communicative status. In general, backchannels do not constitute a speaking turn and the JS tries to indicate that he is going to take the subordinate status by passing up the opportunities to take over the NS's domination again.

Not only the JS but also the NS takes an important role in the subfloor yielding. Even though the JS tries to yield the temporal floor domination, if the NS does not accept it, their communicative status will become destabilized again. In the given fragment, the NS seems to display his intention to take over the JS's temporal floor domination and to develop the main floor by employing a non-lexical filler in Line 13, "Ahhn." Likewise, the subfloor yielding is carried out by the collaborative work between the NS and the JS.

4. CONCLUSION

Floor is a dynamic cognitive entity which governs local and global system of interactions as Hayashi (1991) mentioned. When the floor is created, it may be a primitive configuration, but as the interaction proceeds it is gradually stabilized thanks to the assists of the concurrent floor supporters. However, if we turn our eyes to the local floor construction, we may see that the floor is sometimes weakened or reinforced by the responses given by the floor supporter.

The present study was conducted to reveal the functions of backchannels from the viewpoint of floor management. In particular, close attention was paid to how a subfloor was initiated and how it was yielded, and the results indicate that (1) the JS and NS make their communicative status unstable by using backchannels and (2) they collaboratively restabilize their

communicative status by using backchannels and other floor initiation devices, such as a filler.

However, there are many things to be considered in further studies, such as gender differences in backchannel performance. In the collected fragments for this study, three recordings were made in homogeneous condition, while the other three were in heterogeneous condition. Therefore, it may be quite reasonable to assume that gender differences in the recording sessions affected on the participants' language performance.

APPENDIX: Transcript Notations

/: Identifiable Pause   .: End of an Utterance

?: Utterance with Rising Intonation |: Simultaneous Utterance

(SB): Speaker Backchannels with Turn

(LB): Listener Backchannels with Turn

[　] (SB): Speaker Backchannels without Turn

[　] (LB): Listener Backchannels without Turn

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