The effect of conversational setting on backchannel feedback

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The importance of backchannels (BCs)—short utterances produced by the listener—is widely recognised [1]. BCs play a major role in constructing and maintaining shared knowledge in conversation. They have been investigated in a number of studies in task-oriented speech, usually without visual contact between speakers. Owing to the design of these tasks, establishing *common ground* (shared knowledge between interlocutors) [2] is crucial. In spontaneous conversations, on the other hand, there is no specified task, making the establishment of common ground less important from a strictly functional perspective, allowing BCs to serve a wider range of functions [3].

Previous studies on German task-based dialogues report a predominance of the BCs *ja, okay, mmhm* (mostly with rising intonation) and *genau* (mostly with falling intonation) [4,5]. The current study investigates lexical choice and prosodic realisation of BCs in spontaneous face-to-face conversations and audio-only Maptasks. We recorded 14 speakers in dyads. In both types of conversation, speakers used mostly standard BC types such as *ja* and *mmhm*. However, in spontaneous conversation, the proportion of *other* (non-standard) BCs was much higher, with speakers using words such as *mega* or *voll* ('totally'). Speakers used mostly rising intonation contours in task-based conversation and mostly level or falling contours in spontaneous conversation. The rate of backchannels per minute was higher in the Maptask (5.5) compared to the spontaneous setting (3.8).

In sum, our findings suggest considerable differences in BC production between task-oriented and spontaneous conversations. The more creative use of feedback at the lexical level in spontaneous conversations might reflect its use as a social signal in this setting. Similarly, the predominance of rising BCs, found only for Maptask conversations, might reflect a specific function of indicating that the interlocutor may proceed with the task at hand. Our findings emphasise the importance of taking into account conversational settings, especially when investigating quintessentially interactional aspects of speech communication.

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