



# The Linguistic coding of back- channels

A proposed methodological approach.

# 4 Discourse functions of back-channels:



The University of  
Nottingham

## 1- Back-channels as CONTINUERS

- ◆ The most basic form of back-channel.
- ◆ Primary function = *maintain the flow* of the discourse.
- ◆ *Floor-yielding* tokens signalling the that addressee is listening, desiring the speakers *floor-holding* narrative to continue.
- ◆ Provide valuable feedback on how the message is being received.

<\$M> and likewise someone else said to me at one of the conferences er un= <M> someone else presented a paper actually +  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> looking at the use of i= i= it was on um they'd built <M> they'd not really built a corpus +  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> they'd taken online content fro= from two New York newspapers +  
<\$F> yeah.  
<\$M> or two American newspapers and looked at the er pre= premodifying adjectives +  
<\$F> uh-huh.  
<\$M> of any differen= of any word related to a a nationality or a or +  
<\$F> okay.  
<\$M> a country.  
<\$F> oh that's interesting +  
<\$M> and that what they were doing was basically saying well let's look at all these countries +  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> or the word nation or the word state things +  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> like that an= and when they say premodify they did it in very loose terms just looked at any adjective.  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> immediately to the left on th=  
<\$F> right okay.  
<\$M> on the corpus lines +  
<\$F> so any form of premodification +  
<\$M> and and looking at at how um at how these different countries were +  
<\$F> mmm.  
<\$M> describing it and it the results were basically that African countries were always negatively evaluated compared with western countries.  
<\$F> yeah.  
<\$M> but that gave me the thought which is is something that I'd already said in my upgrade +  
<\$F> yeah yeah.  
<\$M> that I was gonna do.



## 2- Back-channels as **CONVERGENCE** **TOKENS**

- ◆ Perceived as having a '*higher relational value*' than continuers.
- ◆ Primary function = *mark agreement / convergence*- negotiating topic boundary points (where topics can be shifted or changed).
- ◆ Help maintain good relations, by reinforcing *commonality* throughout the discourse.
- ◆ Can adopt the form of single words, echo questions or short statements.

<\$M> and likewise someone else said to me at one of the conferences er un= <M> someone else presented a paper actually +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> looking at the use of i= i= it was on um they'd built <M> they'd not really built a corpus +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> they'd taken online content fro= from two New York newspapers +  
<\$F> **yeah**.  
<\$M> or two American newspapers and looked at the er pre= premodifying adjectives +  
<\$F> **uh-huh**.  
<\$M> of any differen= of any word related to a a nationality or a or +  
<\$F> **okay**.  
<\$M> a country.  
<\$F> oh that's interesting +  
<\$M> and that what they were doing was basically saying well let's look at all these countries +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> or the word nation or the word state things +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> like that an= and when they say premodify they did it in very loose terms just looked at any adjective.  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> immediately to the left on th=  
<\$F> right okay.  
<\$M> on the corpus lines +  
<\$F> so any form of premodification +  
<\$M> and and looking at at how um at how these different countries were +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> describing it and it the results were basically that African countries were always negatively evaluated compared with western countries.  
<\$F> **yeah**.  
<\$M> but that gave me the thought which is is something that I'd already said in my upgrade +  
<\$F> **yeah yeah**.  
<\$M> that I was gonna do.



## 3- Back-channels as **ENGAGED RESPONSE TOKENS**

- ◆ ***Affective*** forms of response tokens.
- ◆ They communicate ***emotive*** signals and opinions to the speaker ***without taking over the turn*** in the discourse (again, signalling a desire for the speaker to continue).
- ◆ They can highlight, for example, the addressees anger, shock, surprise, disgust, sympathy, empathy etc.

<\$M> and likewise someone else said to me at one of the conferences er un= <M> someone else presented a paper actually +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> looking at the use of i= i= it was on um they'd built <M> they'd not really built a corpus +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> they'd taken online content fro= from two New York newspapers +  
<\$F> **yeah**.  
<\$M> or two American newspapers and looked at the er pre= premodifying adjectives +  
<\$F> **uh-huh**.  
<\$M> of any differen= of any word related to a a nationality or a or +  
<\$F> **okay**.  
<\$M> a country.  
<\$F> **oh that's interesting** +  
<\$M> and that what they were doing was basically saying well let's look at all these countries +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> or the word nation or the word state things +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> like that an= and when they say premodify they did it in very loose terms just looked at any adjective.  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> immediately to the left on th=  
<\$F> right okay.  
<\$M> on the corpus lines +  
<\$F> so any form of premodification +  
<\$M> and and looking at at how um at how these different countries were +  
<\$F> **mmm**.  
<\$M> describing it and it the results were basically that African countries were always negatively evaluated compared with western countries.  
<\$F> **yeah**.  
<\$M> but that gave me the thought which is is something that I'd already said in my upgrade +  
<\$F> **yeah yeah**.  
<\$M> that I was gonna do.



## 4- Back-channels as **INFORMATION RECEIPT TOKENS**

- ◆ Associated with *asymmetrical discourse* where one speaker has managerial power over the flow of the discourse.
- ◆ *Highly organisational* form of response token
- ◆ Rare in casual conversations in familiar settings.
- ◆ Can assume the role of a *discourse marker*, signalling the close or shift of a topic.
- ◆ Usually marked by falling pitch.

<\$M> and likewise someone else said to me at one of the conferences er un= <M> someone else presented a paper actually +  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> looking at the use of i= i= it was on um they'd built <M> they'd not really built a corpus +  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> they'd taken online content fro= from two New York newspapers +  
<\$F> **yeah.**

<\$M> or two American newspapers and looked at the er pre= premodifying adjectives +  
<\$F> **uh-huh.**

<\$M> of any differen= of any word related to a a nationality or a or +  
<\$F> **okay.**

<\$M> a country.  
<\$F> **oh that's interesting** +

<\$M> and that what they were doing was basically saying well let's look at all these countries +  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> or the word nation or the word state things +  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> like that an= and when they say premodify they did it in very loose terms just looked at any adjective.  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> immediately to the left on th=  
<\$F> **right okay.**

<\$M> on the corpus lines +  
<\$F> so any form of premodification +

<\$M> and and looking at at how um at how these different countries were +  
<\$F> **mmm.**

<\$M> describing it and it the results were basically that African countries were always negatively evaluated compared with western countries.  
<\$F> **yeah.**

<\$M> but that gave me the thought which is is something that I'd already said in my upgrade +  
<\$F> **yeah yeah.**

<\$M> that I was gonna do.

# Initial Frequencies: <\$F>



The University of  
Nottingham

<i>String</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>String</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>Type</i>
Mmm	104	Con	Oh that's interesting	1	ER
Yeah	33	Con	Yeah yeah	1	ER
Uh-huh	11	Con	Yeah that's really true	1	ER
Mmm mmm	5	Con	Yeah I remember	1	ER
Yeah yeah	4	Con	Time yeah	1	ER
Yeah mmm	1	Con	No no no but you can	1	ER
Mmm err	1	Con	No	1	ER
Uh-huh mmm	1	Con	Yeah defiantly yeah	1	ER
			Yeah not	1	ER
Yeah	43	CT	Yeah small sample	1	ER
Yeah yeah	8	CT	About yeah	1	ER
Okay	2	CT			
No	1	CT	Okay	3	IR
Yeah you do	1	CT	Right okay	2	IR
Yeah that's true yeah	1	CT	Yeah okay	2	IR
Yeah mmm	1	CT	No	1	IR
Right yeah	1	CT	Oh no not at all no	1	IR
Uh-huh	1	CT	Oh right	1	IR

## Key:

Con = Continuers

CT = Convergence Tokens

ER = Engaged Response  
Tokens

IR = Information Receipt  
Tokens

# Initial Frequencies: <\$M>



The University of  
Nottingham

<i>String</i>	<i>Freq.</i>	<i>Type</i>
Mmm	10	Con
Yeah	3	Con
Uh	1	Con
Um	1	Con
Yeah	11	CT
Yeah er	1	CT
I agree uh	1	CT
I know	1	CT
Yeah for Zoltan	1	CT
No	3	ER
End of July	1	ER
Well yeah	1	ER
Defiantly	1	ER
Language	1	ER
Okay	1	IR
Alright	1	IR

## Key:

Con = Continuers

CT = Convergence Tokens

ER = Engaged Response  
Tokens

IR = Information Receipt  
Tokens

# COMBINED Initial Frequencies:



The University of  
Nottingham

	$\langle \$F \rangle$	$\langle \$M \rangle$
Con	161	15
CT	59	15
ER	11	7
IR	10	2