
DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS OF BACKCHANNEL IN CONVERSATIONS

Neneng Yuniarty

Informatics Management, Piksi Ganesha Politechnic, Bandung, Indonesia.

Abstract

A conversation is an interactive exchange of thoughts, ideas, information, or emotions between two or more individuals. It involves a back-and-forth communication process where participants share spoken or written messages with the intention of conveying meaning, understanding each other, and potentially reaching a mutual agreement or conclusion. Effective conversations often require active listening, thoughtful responses, and the ability to adapt to the flow of the discussion. One of the responses in a conversation is by making backchannel. This research was aimed to know the different functions of backchannel that are commonly appeared in a daily conversation. Context of the situation plays big role in determining the functions of backchannel in the conversations. This research was done by describing and analysing the different functions in the conversations. The result shows that the participants mostly use uh-huh, yeah, yes, yeah all right, and no. The used backchannel shown in the data are function as continuer, understanding, support and empathy, agreement, emotive, and minor addition or request for information.

Keywords: Conversation, Backchannel, Context.

Introduction

Conversation is a dynamic exchange where participants engage in a back-and-forth manner, building upon each other's thoughts, ideas, and statements. This interactivity and spontaneity are what make conversations so unique and essential for human interaction.

Conversations can take various forms, such as casual chitchat, deep discussions, debates, interviews, and more. They serve as a means of sharing information, expressing emotions, exchanging viewpoints, and building connections between people. The unpredictability you mentioned arises from the fact that conversations often lead to unexpected directions, as participants respond to each other in real-time, often shaping the course of the discussion in unforeseen ways.

The emergence of digital communication has expanded the concept of conversation to include online interactions, where people can engage in conversations across various platforms, such as social media, forums, and instant messaging. These digital conversations have their own unique dynamics and challenges, including asynchronous communication and the potential for misinterpretation due to the absence of nonverbal cues.

Overall, conversations are a fundamental aspect of human communication, enabling us to connect, learn, and share in ways that written text alone cannot replicate.

In conversations, responses play a crucial role in maintaining the flow of dialogue. Backchannels or Continuity Adjuncts (CAs) are essential elements that show engagement and understanding, encouraging the conversation to progress. They can be as simple as "I see," "Oh, really?" or "That makes sense." These responses validate the speaker's message and can indicate whether the listener wants to delve deeper into the topic, transition to a new subject, or perhaps conclude the discussion. The context and participants indeed shape the direction the conversation takes.

In linguistics, a backchannel is a term used to describe verbal and non-verbal cues that listeners give to show their engagement, interest, or understanding during a conversation. Backchanneling is an important aspect of communication as it helps the speaker gauge the listener's involvement and adjust their speech accordingly. Backchannels can be both verbal and non-verbal and serve various functions in a conversation:

1. Verbal backchannels: These are short verbal responses or interjections that a listener provides to acknowledge the speaker's message. They often indicate agreement, understanding, or encouragement. Examples include "mm-hmm," "yeah," "I see," "right," and "oh."
2. Non-verbal backchannels: These are gestures, facial expressions, or actions that listeners use to signal their engagement. Nodding, maintaining eye contact, and using facial expressions like smiling are common non-verbal backchannels. These cues help demonstrate that the listener is actively participating in the conversation.
3. Minimal responses: These are brief remarks or words that show the listener is following the conversation without interrupting the speaker. They are typically short and serve as indicators of attentiveness. For instance, saying "okay," "got it," or "sure."
4. Paralinguistic cues: These include variations in pitch, tone, and pace of speech that can indicate the listener's reactions or emotions. For example, a rise in pitch might convey surprise or interest, while a lowering of pitch could signify understanding or agreement.
5. Turn-taking signals: Backchannels can also be used to signal that the listener wants to take a turn in the conversation. Phrases like "can I say something?" or "I have a question" can serve as backchannels to request a turn to speak.

Cultural norms and individual communication styles can influence the frequency and type of backchannels used in different interactions. Some cultures may place a stronger emphasis on active backchanneling, while others might prioritize more attentive non-verbal cues.

Overall, backchannels play a crucial role in maintaining smooth and effective communication by showing the speaker that the listener is engaged and interested, which contributes to the overall flow of the conversation. Surely, it needs an appropriate placement in the proper use of these responses (backchannel). It is necessary to avoid the overuse or less usage in applying them because the participants will be bothered or feel neglected.

Literature Review

The conversation could imply that individuals engage in communication primarily for the sake of interaction, as a way of 'socialization', or it might signify any instance of interactive discussion with specific goals. This explanation underscores that conversation, whether through spoken words or non-verbal cues, constitutes a method of human socialization within social connections.

The distinct characteristics of direct verbal communication differ from those of indirect non-verbal communication in written form. Normally, spoken communication occurs within a specific time frame, is unplanned, takes place in person, involves social interaction, has a flexible structure, can be edited on the spot, and contains varying patterns of vocal intonation (Crystal, 2004).

Certain individuals view conversation as a graceful dance, where participants harmoniously synchronize their interactions. Conversely, some liken it to the controlled chaos of traffic flowing through an intersection, characterized by alternating actions without collisions. However, the predominant method of analysis is not tied to these comparisons, but rather draws parallels to the mechanisms of a market economy.

In conversations, speakers consistently offer feedback to one another. The method of providing feedback is crucial as it demonstrates the listener's engagement with the ongoing discussion. This feedback could be expressed through spoken cues like 'mhm' and 'uh huh,' by rephrasing the speaker's previous statements, or even through non-verbal cues such as body posture and eye contact.

The concept of having a chance to speak (floor), which is connected to practical conversational dynamics and the act of taking turns, is applicable in open discussions where a single speaker doesn't monopolize control (like in seminars, speeches, and propaganda). The dynamics of turn-taking are quite self-governing and rely on the participants' choice to either keep the floor or pass it to other speakers. The mechanism for managing this within a conversation essentially consists of agreed-upon norms for obtaining, holding onto, or relinquishing one's speaking turn (Yule, 1996).

In a direct spoken conversation, when both participants (referred to as the first speaker and the second speaker) engage and contribute, it aids in the flow and successful completion of the conversation. The second speaker can use

uncomplicated cues, such as basic word forms that might not even be part of formal language, including the straightforward use of the word "no."

Backchannel

Direct conversations are not flawless, unlike their written indirect counterparts. In written communication, the second speaker often waits for the first speaker to complete their sentence before responding. In direct conversations, participants use various strategies and cues to react to each other's statements. These responses can occur even while the first speaker is still talking, either through nonverbal cues like nods, gestures, and smiles, or through brief verbal expressions like 'uh-uh', 'mmm', 'yes', and 'no'. Despite holding the floor for an extended turn, speakers still anticipate signs of engagement from their conversational partners. This can take the form of head nods, smiles, and other facial expressions and gestures, among many other ways (Yule, 1996).

English employs a type of vocalization called the backchannel, which serves as a signal. Yule, who remains on the same topic, explains that these signal types ('uh-uh', 'yeah', 'mmm') offer feedback to the speaker, confirming that the message is being understood. Typically, they signify that the listener is comprehending and not disagreeing with what the speaker is saying. This phenomenon of the backchannel is also referred to as Aizuchi in Japanese. The supportive utilization of the backchannel is termed Aizuchi, a word borrowed from the Japanese language (Wildner-Bassett & Grundy, 2008).

In the next example, it can be seen the process of backchannel in the process of telephone conversations directly through media:

A backchannel is a signal from the second speaker that they are attentively understanding the implicit message conveyed by the first speaker. This has the effect of calming the first speaker and enabling them to communicate effectively. This idea is supported by Halliday's perspective, which suggests that these signals can also operate independently in a conversation, indicating that the listener is actively following the current speaker's contribution. These signals, such as 'yes', 'mmh', 'aha', and 'sure', are considered minor clauses. They do not constitute a complete turn in the conversation but rather help maintain the flow of interaction by supporting the ongoing speaker's turn. In face-to-face discussions, these signals may naturally be accompanied or substituted by other nonverbal cues like nodding (Halliday, 2014).

Halliday indicates that in a dialogue, participants will each seek to provide a response to the speech released by his interlocutor. He also mentioned that these responses (minor clauses) ensure the sustainability conversation by giving attention during the talks. Minor clauses are – according to Halliday – usually accompanied or even replaced by the indicators 'paralinguistics' such as facial expressions and body language.

Backchannels serve as a clear indication from the second speaker that they are actively engaged, as per the concept of being an attentive listener. Throughout a conversation, as speakers are talking, responsive listeners have a role to play in order to demonstrate their enthusiasm and attentive listening. The term "Backchannel" lacks inherent referential meaning; rather, it holds significant social value due to its role in maintaining the flow of conversations and directing focus towards the initial speaker. While these elements may lack referential significance, they hold substantial importance in interaction by signifying one's engagement with and endorsement of the speaker's discourse.

Cutrone states that backchannel has several function and specific forms for each functions are provided below (Cutrone, 2010):

1. Continuer

The primary purposes of this particular backchannel are to indicate to the speaker who isn't currently in the primary role that they are actively paying attention, and to enable the primary speaker to keep talking. This is built on the concept of taking turns during conversation, particularly with the non-primary speaker intentionally choosing not to take the lead speaking role. This is illustrated in the given instance where individual A's use of the backchannel response "Mm hm" serves to show that they are engaged and encourages person B to proceed with their speech.:

A. I'll pick it up from his place

B. Mm hm

A. at around 7 o'clock

Phrases like Mm hm and Uh huh, when pronounced with a certain intonation that goes up and then down, are typical examples of responses that maintain the conversation's flow. Similarly, the words Yeah and the simple form Mm, which express understanding, are referred to as acknowledgment tokens. These tokens also appear to keep the conversation going when they are spoken with an intonation that rises and then falls, or simply rises. Uematsu's list in Cutrone states that continuers include Umm(m), Hm(mmm), Un huh, Un huh un huh, Un(n), Huh huh, Ummm un un, oh(h), Ooo, Ahaa; however, his data related to English was limited to one intercultural dyadic conversation between a Canadian and a Japanese participant, and it is not clear precisely how he arrived at the conclusion of identifying the above-mentioned items as continuers.

2. Understanding

This refers to a situation where the secondary speaker believes it is important to demonstrate their comprehension of the main speaker's point as in the following example:

A: You have to go two blocks
 B: Mm hm
 A: then turn left at the video store
 B: Uh huh
 A: It's a few stores down on the right side
 B: I see
 A: You can't miss it

In this example, B sends two continuer type backchannels in 'Mm hm' and 'Uh huh' to signal to A that he/she should continue giving directions, and once B seems to understand where the place is, B signals understanding of content to A with the backchannel 'I see'.

Yeah is thought to serve several functions. Gardner (1998) for example asserts that one of these functions is to show understanding of content. Further, Ito (2007) has included the lexical items I see, and Uematsu in Cutrone found instances in which the Canadian in his analysis used discourse markers such as Oooo, Un huh, Ununun, Uh hum(mm), Ah ah, and Oh yeah as backchannel forms in this category.

3. Support and Empathy

This happens when the secondary speaker replies to a judgmental statement from the main speaker by expressing agreement or understanding, for example:

A: He quit his job again
 B: It's going to be hard to find a new one
 A: Yeah
 B: He'll have to apply...

This could be interpreted as A feeling it necessary to provide support to B's evaluative statement 'It's going to be hard to find a new one', hence A uttered the backchannel 'Yeah'.

In the Cutrone study, Maynard recognizes "Yeah" as a type of backchannel communication that serves to convey endorsement and understanding of the main speaker's opinion. Additionally, instances of laughter and the phrase "That's good" are also classified within this same group.

4. Agreement

This refers to the instance where a secondary speaker responds to a query or a statement resembling a question from the primary speaker. This can be seen below:

A: You mean you heard the news already.
 B: (Head Nod)
 C: I was going to tell you.

This instance illustrates B responding to A's statement, resembling a question, with a confirming nod. In such cases, distinguishing between the categories of agreement and comprehension can be challenging. To make this distinction clearer, it is pointed out that a non-primary speaker claim understanding when the primary speaker imparts novel information, whereas an agreement acknowledgment does not involve new information. For instance, in the second example mentioned earlier, the non-primary speaker was unfamiliar with the directions to a certain location provided by their conversation partner. Consequently, upon receiving new information, the non-primary speaker responded with a comprehension-type backchannel. Conversely, in the third example, the non-primary speaker was already aware of the news mentioned by their conversation partner, resulting in an agreement-type backchannel response.

Ito's findings in the work by Cutrone demonstrate that expressions like "That's precisely accurate" and "I share the same opinion" are used to indicate agreement. The study also introduces non-specific words like "Hm hm hm," "Um(m)," "Umum," and "Unhum." Moreover, Blundell et al., also discussed in Cutrone, have provided various phrases in this context, such as "You're (so) right," "That's very accurate," "I concur," "Exactly," "Agreed," and "Indeed." However, the specific sources of the content compiled in their book are not explicitly mentioned.

5. Emotive

This refers to a situation where the person who is not primarily speaking responds with strong emphasis to something said by the main speaker. This response goes beyond mere agreement, comprehension, or support. These types of responsive cues are observed through actions like laughter and exclamations as in the following example:

- A. I got an A+ on my Chemistry test.
- B. Fantastic!
- A. I hope I can keep it up all semester.

Other ideas put forth in the statements involve the notion that impactful emotional reactions are conveyed by phrases like Wow or Great, as proposed by Maynard and Uematsu in the work by Cutrone. They have also suggested that laughs are presented, along with the non-lexical expression Hehehe. Additionally, Gardner and Selting in Cutrone have recognized that the use of Yeah and Mm with rising-falling intonations also adopts certain qualities of assessments. This suggests a level of evaluation and increased engagement on the part of the main speaker in the conversation.

6. Minor Additions or Request for Information

This happens in cases where the speaker who isn't the main focus corrects or seeks clarity from the main speaker right after they've spoken, or when they try to add a word while finishing the main speaker's statement.

- A: John will likely be back in April.
- B: Really.
- A. Yeah, the government is reducing troops in the gulf.

In this instance, it is evident that B was taken aback by A's initial statement. B's response of 'Really' as a backchannel indicated B's desire for affirmation. This illustrates the commonplace use of 'Really' as a backchannel to seek confirmation. Another approach that could serve the same purpose is for the secondary speaker to reiterate the final few words of the primary speaker's statement with an upward inflection.

Context

The significance of context in comprehending statements cannot be overstated. Context encompasses pertinent elements of the surroundings or societal environment in which a statement is made. This backdrop of knowledge is mutually understood by the speaker and the listener, facilitating the conveyance and interpretation of their statements. In spoken communication, the role of context is to aid the speaker and listener in conveying and understanding the meanings of their statements. Context plays a crucial part in deciphering the intended meaning of an expression. Take the word "you," for instance, which can encompass various meanings. It might indicate a reference to someone, establish a sequence, or even convey anger. In such cases, the context is essential to accurately determine the specific

meaning of the statement. Without considering the context that precedes an utterance, it's impossible to derive the intended meaning of that utterance.

Mey states that the concept of context is not fixed but rather dynamic. This implies that context is a fluid situation that undergoes constant change. Context is invariably present within interactions involving individuals who communicate through language, enabling them to mutually comprehend each other's intentions (L. & Mey, 2009).

Huang's definition of "context" refers to any pertinent aspect of the evolving situation or surroundings in which a speaker employs a linguistic element. Therefore, the significance of context is crucial in facilitating the comprehension of exchanges between communicators, encompassing both speakers and listeners (Huang, 2014).

Furthermore, Huang states that the context can be seen in three different sources are:

1. Physical Context

It includes the tangible surroundings in the vicinity of the individuals conversing, as well as the ongoing events in that environment during the communication, for example:

- a. I sat in that row yesterday. (Accompanied by pointing)
- b. Please come at 7 tonight (place/time reference)

We can consider this from the perspective of the location of the conversation, the objects that are there, the actions taking place, and similar aspects.

2. Epistemic Context

Epistemic context in linguistics refers to the aspect of language that deals with the speaker's or writer's knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions about the information they are conveying. It involves understanding how language is used not just to convey factual information, but also to express the speaker's attitude, certainty, doubt, or perspective about that information.

In other words, the epistemic context in language helps to convey the speaker's stance on the truth or validity of a statement. This can include indicating whether the speaker considers a statement to be a fact, a possibility, a conjecture, a hypothesis, or something else. Epistemic markers and linguistic cues such as modal verbs ("might," "could," "must"), adverbs ("probably," "certainly"), and specific syntactic structures are often used to signal the epistemic stance of the speaker.

Consider the sentence: "It might rain tomorrow."

In this sentence, the epistemic context is indicated by the modal verb "might," which suggests that the speaker is expressing a possibility rather than a certainty. This sentence doesn't state outright that it will rain, but rather conveys the speaker's knowledge or belief about the likelihood of rain.

Epistemic context is crucial for effective communication because it allows speakers to convey not only the content of their message, but also their perspective on the information being shared. It helps listeners or readers interpret the speaker's level of confidence in what they are saying and make appropriate inferences based on that.

3. Linguistic Context

It pertains to the content that has already been mentioned in the conversation. For instance, if I initiate a conversation by mentioning Jane Smith and then subsequently mention "her" as an exceptional athlete in the following sentence, the surrounding language context informs me that the individual being referred to as "her" is Jane Smith.

Linguistic context refers to the surrounding words, phrases, and sentences that help to determine the meaning of a particular word or expression in a given communication. It's the broader textual or spoken environment in which a specific word or phrase is used. Linguistic context is crucial for understanding the nuances, connotations, and intended

meanings of words and phrases, as words can often have multiple meanings or interpretations depending on how they are used within a sentence or discourse.

4. Social Context

It pertains to the interpersonal connections between those who are speaking and those who are listening. It also refers to the set of social factors and circumstances that influence the way language is used, interpreted, and understood in communication. Language is not just a neutral tool for transmitting information; it is deeply intertwined with the social and cultural aspects of human interaction.

- a) Please Mrs. President, stop bothering me and leave.
(This sentence is only shocking because we know that we cannot talk like this to the president)
- b) I do hereby humbly request that you might endeavour to telephone me with news of your arrival at your domicile when such arrival occurs.

(Bizarre if you said to a friend instead of “call me when you get home”)

Grundy provides an illustration concerning context, wherein the statement "I am tired" from a man to his wife holds various potential meanings contingent upon the situation. If this assertion is made late at night, it could imply a desire to excuse himself for retiring before his wife. Conversely, it might also signify a request for his wife to accompany him to bed. In both cases, the underlying message is the man's intention to sleep. However, if the same man utters "I am tired" at eight in the morning, it likely indicates his reluctance to leave the bed, or alternatively, it can be perceived as a suggestion for his wife to rise and prepare a cup of coffee for him (Wildner-Bassett & Grundy, 2008)

Methods

The method used in this paper is the descriptive qualitative method. The descriptive qualitative method is a research approach used in social sciences and other disciplines to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon, event, or situation. This method focuses on capturing the intricate details and characteristics of the subject under investigation, aiming to provide a comprehensive and rich description of the studied phenomenon. The writer describes the facts and the characteristics of the data then classify the data based on the function of the backchannel.

Results and Discussion

This part presents the data analysis of Different Functions of Backchannel in a Conversations used by the participants in the conversation. The writer finds out there are six functions of the backchannel used by the participants, namely Continuers, Understanding, Support and Empathy, Agreement, Emotive, and Minor Additions or Request for Information.

The data conversation obtained are from Mary at Home (MAH), Mary at Pizza (MAP), Schannel Tape (ST), Addie and Brianne (AB), London Teenage Talk 1 (LTT1), London Teenage Talk 2 (LTT2), Below are some of the analyses:

1. Backchannel Function as Continuer

636. Pat : it looked like an oversized orange M&M
637. with a peanut inside.
638. Amy : what?
639. Pat : you know the spider that I was telling you about
640. Mary : uh-huh
641. Pat ; it was about that big
642. Mary : uh-huh
643. Pat : bigger than an M&M with a peanut inside orange,
644. bright orange, same color with four yellow circles on its back.
645. (2) good sized circles, so you =

647. Mary : = did you kill it?

(MAH: line 640 and 642)

The backchannel word in the data above is ‘uh-huh’ that is produced by Mary in line 640 and 642. It shows the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participants are following the conversation and does not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participants, Pat and Amy, are having conversation about spider that is bigger than an M & M. Mary, the other participant, is just giving feedback verbal expression ‘uh-huh’ to show that she is following the conversation, and also by stating “did you kill it?” in line 647, Mary is indeed listening attentively to the conversation.

In this conversation, the two sisters Mary (21 years old) and Amy (20 years old) are both students at universities near Chicago. They are at home with their parents Patricia and Ralph (in their mid-40's) for the long Thanksgiving break. They are having conversation about spider that bigger than orange size M & M. Mary as non-primary speaker is just listening to the conversation of what Pat and Amy say on the dialogue. In line 640 and 642, Mary gives response by giving backchannel ‘uh-uh’ functions as continuer because it signals that the non-primary speaker is indeed listening attentively and allowing the primary speaker to continue their speaking turn and it is just the continuative marker of the conversation which signals a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

2. Backchannel Function as Understanding

41. Chris : big big trunk.
42. I mean it takes up this tree
43. altogether takes up half the page exactly
44. and it takes up it's (0.5)
45. It takes up on that side it's as tall as
46. (2) mm it's about
47. (1) three quarters of the height of the page
48. and it takes up half the page
49. (2) and I told you
50. the top of it is a big bulk.
51. Matt : yeah.
52. Chris : but there are little wavy lines in it
53. Matt : (3) okay (3) well ...
54. I'm doing the best I can here.
55. Chris : sure you're doing fine.

(ST: line 51 and 53)

The backchannel in the data above is ‘yeah’ in line 51 and ‘okay well’ in line 53 that are produced by Matt. They show the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participant is following the conversation and do not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participant, Chris, is giving direction to Matt how to draw the picture. Matt, the other participant, is just giving feedback a verbal expression ‘yeah’ and ‘okay well’ and also by stating “I’m doing the best I can here” to show that he understands to the instruction that Chris gives.

In this conversation, Chris and Matt is in the class. They are doing an experiment, in which pairs of subjects are asked to reproduce a drawing seen by only one member of each pair, who described the drawing for the other member, who could hear but not see the first. All the subjects are students at various colleges near Chicago, all between twenty and twenty-five years old. The instructor of the class gives Chriss and Matt the first turn. Chris who is going to give instruction to Matt is given the picture to be described. Matt is asked to draw the picture. They are given ten minutes and Chris is the first to speak. In line 51 and 53, Mat gives response by giving backchannel ‘yeah’ and ‘okay well’ function as understanding because they signal that the non-primary speaker, Matt, indeed understands to what primary speaker, Chris, utters and they are just continuative markers of the conversation which signal a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

3. Backchannel Function as Support and Empathy

1. Rick : so Jim,
2. how you been?
3. Jim : well,
4. ...
5. to be honest,
6. ..
7. I'm-
8. I was a bit worried last night cos uh,
9. ...
10. my parents,
11. uh,
12. were talking to me about uh,
13. ...
14. my insurance on my car?
15. Rick : yeah all right.
16. Jim : and so uh,
17. my dad's gonna give me uhm,
18. ..
19. my dad's gonna let me drive his car for a bit,
20. until I've got one year's no claim.
21. Rick : yes.
22. Jim : and then I'll have cheap insurance my old car so get around places.
23. Jim : yeah,
24. it's pretty efficient to do.
25. but- well,
26. I've been learning,
27. I'm nearly passed,
28. so I've got my theory test on Wednesday.
29. Jim : do you got a car already?
30. Rick : yeah, I've got a car.

(LTT1: line 15 and 21)

The backchannel in the data above is 'all right' in line 15 and 'yes' in line 21 that are produced by Rick. They show the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participant is following the conversation and does not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participant, Jim states that "well, to be honest, I'm- I was a bit worried last night cos uh, my parents, uh, were talking to me about uh, my insurance on my car" It shows that Jim feels worry about the insurance on his car. Rick, the other participant, is just giving feedback two verbal expressions 'yeah' and 'yes', and also by giving statement of "yeah, I've got a car" to show his support and empathy to what happen to Jim based on what Rick has stated.

Jim and Rick are best friends. They have not met each other for a long time. They meet at Jim's house. They talk about everything especially about the past time. They have different activities. Jim feels worry about the car's insurance claim that his parents talked about the night before. In line 15 and 21, Rick as non-primary speaker produces backchannel signal in 'yeah' and 'yes' as a Rick's feeling to provide support to Jim's statement 'well, ... to be honest, .. I'm- I was a bit worried last night cos uh, ... my parents, uh, were talking to me about uh, ..my insurance on my car' and 'and so uh, my dad's gonna give me uhm, .. my dad's gonna let me drive his car for a bit, until I've got one year's no claim', hence Rick utters the backchannel 'yeah' and 'yes'. In that conversation, 'yeah' and 'yes' are backchannel that functions to express support and empathy toward the primary speaker's judgement. They are just the continuative markers of the conversation which signal a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

4. Backchannel Function as Agreement

348. Mary : = the other kids.
349. The woman did it after the other car was gone already
350. Ralph : so how many cars spun out there?
351. [counting you.]
352. Mary : [three.] three while we were there.
353. (4) and Brad says,
354. "that's the only thing I have in my defence
355. that I wasn't driving too fast." (2)
358. Amy : yeah that's probably the only thing
359. that's keeping him,
360. Mary : because he does,
361. he blames himself because-
362. Pat : oh, ... it's so foolish to blame yourself
363. when you think about it afterwards.
364. It happened.
365. It's over

(MAP: line 358)

The backchannel in the data above is “yeah’ in line 358 that is produced by Amy. It shows the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participant is following the conversation and does not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participant, Mary states that “three while we were there and brad says, ‘that’s the only thing I have in my defence that I wasn’t driving too fast’”. Amy, the other participant, is just giving feedback a verbal expression ‘yeah’ to show that she has already known about the information and she agrees with Mary’s statement. By giving the statement of “that's probably the only thing that's keeping him”, Amy follows the conversation.

In this conversation, the two sisters Mary (21 years old) and Amy (20 years old) is a student at university near Chicago. They are at home with their parents Patricia and Ralph (in their mid-40's) for the long Thanksgiving break. They are having conversation about the accident that happened to Amy when she was driving her car with Brad, her boyfriend, on the icy road. In line 358, Amy as non-primary speaker gives backchannel ‘yeah’ functions as agreement of Mary’s statement ‘[three.] three while we were there. (4) and Brad says, "that's the only thing I have in my defence that I wasn't driving too fast." (2)’ and her backchannel is followed by a clause ‘that's probably the only thing that's keeping him’. It shows that Amy has already known about the information and she agrees with the Mary’s statement. It is just the continuative marker of the conversation which signals a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

5. Backchannel Function as Emotive

256. Addie : [herself] like- a:: freshman
257. but anyway ..
258. that's what she does
259. and so- uhm-.
260. the other day.
261. she got up at six fifteen to do this stuff,
262. opened the door and like five hundred cans fell everywhere
263. because cans have been plastered in front [of our door]
264. Brianne : [NOOO ((laughing))]
265. Addie : yes
266. Brianne : o:::h
267. Addie : and- I don't know .. it's like this one guy=
268. Brianne : ((laughs))
269. Addie : =who doesn't really have any friends on the floor anyway
270. ((laughs)) he's kind of a jerk and we're pretty sure that's who did it

271. and- uhm- 'cause we don't think anybody could do that

(AB: line 264)

The backchannel in the data above is 'no' in line 264 that is produced by Brianne. It shows the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participant is following the conversation and does not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participant, Addie states that "herself like a freshman but anyway that's what she does and so uhm the other day she got up at six fifteen to do this stuff opened the door and like five hundred cans fell everywhere...". Brianne, the other participant, is just giving feedback a verbal expression 'no' to show that she is amused by the story. By giving statement of "o::h", Brianne follows the conversation.

Addie and Brianne are in their room dormitory. They are talking about their next-door neighbour that is always busy to start the day. The girl always goes early in the morning because she has an early class. She always does that every day; gets up in the morning and goes to campus before anyone does. One day, when she will start her activity, she is being made fun by someone by putting lots of cans on top of the door so when she opens the door, the cans fall all over her and it is so noisy. It makes everybody wake up. In line 264, Brianne gives backchannels signal '[NOOO ((laughing))]' as her responds emphatically of Addie's statement '[herself] like- a: freshman but anyway .. that's what she does and so- uhm-. the other day. she got up at six fifteen to do this stuff, opened the door and like five hundred cans fell everywhere because cans have been plastered in front [of our door]'. It shows that Brianne responds emphatically to Addie's statement, which indicate more than simple continuer, understanding or support. Brianne feels amused about the story because it can tell from Brianne's backchannel signal responds followed by 'laugh'. Though it sounds that Brianne does not believe by gives backchannel 'no', actually it signals that she shows her amusement by the story. It is just the continuative marker of the conversation which signals a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

6. Backchannel Function as Minor Addition or Request for Information.

1. Jane : so, how's your driving going?
2. ..
3. Kim : uhm okay.
4. Jane : yeah?
5. Kim : yeah.
6. I had a test the other day,
7. but I failed it.101
8. Jane : oh you fail[ed]?
9. Kim : [yeah].
10. Jane : [all right.]

(LTT2: line 4)

The backchannel in the data above is 'yeah' in line 4 that is produced by Jane. It shows the feedback of the conversation indicating that the participant is following the conversation and does not imply the confirmation of the prior clause. It can be seen that the participant, Kim in line 3 states that "uhm okay" is an answer of the question from Jane and Jane, the other participant, is just giving feedback a verbal expression 'yeah' to show that she requests for information. And Kim gives the information that Jane requested by answering "yeah I had a test the other day, but I failed it".

In this conversation, Kim and Jane are college students. They are talking about many things include about their driving test. Kim is asked by Jane about her driving test but she does not answer clearly so Jane in line 4 expresses her curiosity by expressing backchannel 'yeah' as the response of Kim's utterance. The verbal expression 'yeah' functions as minor addition or request for information. It is just the continuative marker of the conversation which signals a move in the discourse: a response in a dialogue. It is common at the beginning of clauses which challenge or dispute a prior contribution.

Conclusions

From this research, it can be concluded that there are several findings concerning the different functions of backchannel in the conversation:

1. Backchannels occurred in the data are uh-huh, yeah, yes, yeah all right, and no
2. There are six functions of backchannel found in the data, namely function as continuer, agreement, support and empathy, understanding, emotive, and minor addition or request for information.
3. Context plays an important role in the use of backchannel to determine the meaning of the responses.

References

- Crystal, D. (2004). *Language and The Internet* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cutrone, P. (2010). The backchannel norms of native English speakers: A target for Japanese L2 English learners. *Language Studies Working Papers*, 2, 28–37. <http://naosite.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/10069/28555>
- Halliday, M. A. . (2014). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd ed., Issue December). Oxford University Press.
- Huang, Y. (2014). *Implicature Pragmatics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- L., J., & Mey. (2009). *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*. In *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (2nd ed.). Elsevier Ltd.
- Wildner-Bassett, M. E., & Grundy, P. (2008). *Doing Pragmatics*. In *The Modern Language Journal* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics by George Yule* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.