

Forms and Functions of Listener Behaviors in Audio-Based Feedback Communication

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Abstract

A typical method in speech courses at the university is for students to deliver a speech and then seek and offer feedback to improve performance. This feedback communication obeys specific rules, is expressed in different forms and is mainly based on audio- or/and videotape. The course should help students to give seminar papers in an attractive way and to prepare them for professional life. These are criteria established by the European Bologna reform. In this context, self experience and learning by doing are some of the most important aims to prepare students to take their professional life in their own hands, guided by a teacher. Media, such as audio- or videotaped speeches of students and the feedback of their colleagues and the teacher, are a convincing method to reach these aims. So, the classical audio- or videotape is a means that also points to the future of the media in the 21st century. There is a lot of research about feedback in psychology, but a research deficit about feedback communication in the field of linguistic discourse analysis (see Kluger /DeNisi 1996; Slembek / Geißner 2001; Mönnich 2010). With regard to listener behaviors, I explore in my paper which forms of listener activities the teacher uses to influence learning processes (see Mönnich 2010; also for the analyzed transcripts in German). By investigating these forms, I focus on audio-/video based feedback communication.

1. Introduction

A listener is not only a recipient, but also a “co-creator of interactive talk” (Gardner 2001, 2). In linguistic research this insight is meanwhile unquestioned, so that the research on forms and functions of listener activities plays a more essential role. For example, Gardner (2001) gives a review of listener activities. He points out that

for the research on response tokens it is important to investigate them on one hand “as items in themselves, for example their phonetic form, prosodic shape, or intonational contour” (4) and on the other “in the context in which they occur, particularly their timing and their precise placement within a sequence of talk, or whether the token is an ‘only’ in its turn” (4).

As typical uses of “activities participants in talk-in-interaction do in the role of listener” (2) Gardner summarizes: continuers, acknowledgements, newsmarkers, change-of-activity-tokens, assessments, brief questions, collaborative completions and many vocalizations and kinesic actions. Gardner characterizes “continuers, acknowledgment tokens, newsmarkers and change-of-activity tokens” as response tokens (3) and explains:

These tokens are a prime example of action types of a non-primary speaker (or current listener) in interactive talk, and demonstrate the non-primary speaker’s power to influence the course of the talk, by providing evidence on the stance that the recipient in the talk is taking at that moment (...). Together with assessments, response tokens provide information to other participants in the talk, not only about how some prior talk has been received but also some information on how the response token utterer is projecting further activities in the talk, for example whether they approve of, agree with, disagree with, will remain silent on, or have something to say about the prior talk. This is not done in a way that says something topically or semantically precise, but through the general characteristics of the brief response that has been given. (3)

Allwood et al. (2005, 131) point out that “a communication sign – whether uni- or multimodal – may well, and often does, play several communicative functions at the same time. It may be *multifunctional*.” As main kinds of interactive functions they consider feedback (give and elicit), turn-managing and sequencing (ibid.). As basic linguistic feedback features they distinguish continuation/contact, perception, understanding and attitudinal reactions (134; see Allwood/Nivre/Ahlsen 1992, 3).

Participants in a conversation continuously exchange feedback as a way of providing signals about the success of their interaction. They give feedback to show their interlocutor that they are willing and able to continue the communication and that they are listening, paying attention, understanding or not understanding, agreeing or disagreeing with the message, which is being conveyed. They elicit feedback to know how the interlocutor is reacting in terms of attention, understanding and agreement with what they are saying. While giving or eliciting feedback to the message that is being conveyed, both speaker and listener can show emotions and attitudes; for instance, they can agree enthusiastically, or signal lack of acceptance and disappointment (Allwood et al. 2005, 132).

The data used for linguistic studies about response tokens mostly are of every day conversation to find features of listener activities in general, or the data are suitable to research the influence of individual or cultural factors. There are also linguistic studies about response tokens in the context of teaching foreign languages (e.g. Rasoloson 1995). But how far are forms and functions of listener behavior influenced by institutional contexts and the identities the interlocutors have because of this institutional context?

2. Purpose

In my paper I focus on listener behaviors in ‘feedback communication’, a special type of classroom conversation communication in the institutional context of the university. My research on ‘feedback communication’ includes participant observation and a data collection of

audiotapes and videos of three speech courses (in each case with 30 lessons) at German universities. In my paper I will investigate one of these audio-based ‘feedback situations’ particularly with regard to forms and functions of response tokens.

3. Context information about the data corpus

The transcripts date from an introductory two-day seminar in applied rhetoric. The purpose is to prepare a group of twenty students to speak more eloquently and become listener oriented. The first day the students prepare and deliver a short speech, which is tape-recorded. The following day the seminar shows a typical setting: 1. Students and lecturer rehearse the tape with the recorded speech. 2. The speaker comments on her/his speech and communicates her/his self-perception during delivering and rehearsing the speech. 3. The students and the lecturer communicate their external perception while listening to the speaker. 4. The speaker sums up, which lessons s/he draws from the exercise and the ‘feedback communication’.

This setting is based on special concepts to learn rhetorical communication: ‘learning by feedback’ (e.g. comparing self-perception and external perception), ‘learning by reflection and self-monitoring’ (adapting cognitive and metacognitive competences) and ‘learning by doing’ (training skills).

4. Thesis

In ‘feedback communication’ the response tokens *hm (well!), ja (yeah)* and *ah (oh!)* are used in several variants. My thesis is:

- Response tokens have general functions, applying to the characteristics of communication as verbal interaction. Response tokens in ‘feedback communication’ have typical functions, e.g. as continuers, acknowledgments and assessments.
- In addition, response tokens have specific functions, depending on the special type of communication in the specific institutional context. Forms and functions

of response tokens in 'feedback communication' depend on the lecturers' and students' self-esteem (Richards) in the context of classroom conversation (seminar communication) at the university.

5. Analysis: The specific functions of response tokens in 'feedback communication'

Richards (2006, 51) demonstrates "how shifts in the orientation to different aspects of identity produce distinctively different interactional patterns" in classroom conversation. In the 'feedback communication' I investigate as an example the use of two different orientations and identities and two different interactional patterns of lecturers and students:

1. 'Feedback communication' is *classroom conversation*, connected with the picture of an asymmetrical teacher-learner relationship and an identity construction of 'being the teacher' – 'being the learner'.
2. 'Feedback communication' is communication in an *encounter group*; the relationship between the members is symmetrical.

The response tokens are part of these two different interactional patterns.

5.1 Functions of response tokens in 'feedback communication' as classroom conversation

5.1.1 Response tokens are part of the initiation-response-follow-up (IRF) pattern

The lecturer fulfills typical tasks of a teacher, e.g. by opening, structuring and finishing the conversation. As a teacher the lecturer is controlling the floor. The typical "Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF) pattern" (Richards 2006, 52) of classroom conversation is observable, but instead of evaluating the responses explicitly, the lecturer uses several forms of follow-up and evaluates implicitly:

- The lecturer uses the response tokens *hm hm* and *ja* as a teacher to accentuate what the students are saying. Due to the fact that these response tokens are multifunctional (continuer and acknowledge) the lecturer keeps the evaluation in suspense and opens the floor for the student's comments and evaluations (e.g. Extract 1, line 47).
- Even the absence of response tokens fulfills teacher functions: (a) to indicate what will not be important in the following classroom conversation; (b) to invite the students to enter into the conversation.
- As one of the students makes a mistake, the teacher marks the error by making use of a comment and a re-formulation. Implicitly the teacher asks the student to correct his wrong wording. The teacher evaluates the corrected formulation by using the response token *hm hm* (duplicated form of *hm [well!]*) with a falling-raising intonation, which means in German 'I agree' (Ehlich 1979, 1986; Extract 1, line 47).

Extract 1

| | | |
|----|------|--|
| 39 | S 3 | can't you? Like you notice if someone is playing a role |
| 40 | S 3 | and is exactly considering that as a play (0) don't you? |
| 41 | S 3 | So this (0) you do notice that a little bit (0) the (0) |
| 42 | S 3 | [you say (0) you (0)] That is my |
| | L | [That is YOUR way of seeing it, Christoph?] |
| 43 | S 3 | way of seeing it yeah. (0) Er (0) OF course. (0) As I have |
| 44 | S 3 | said it. Er |
| | many | ((laughing:2)) |
| | L | You said [YOU notice.] |
| | Kom | < <quoted S 3> > |
| 45 | S 3 | I see okay (0) yeah. (0) Well it MIGHT appear |
| | S u | ((coughs)) |
| 46 | S 3 | as if (0) as if that was somehow FAKED |
| | pv | <<softly>> |
| | L | a-a |
| 47 | S 3 | as if you were playing a role and (0) like |
| | pv | <<softly>> |
| | L | [hm hm] |
| 48 | S 3 | [laughingly] weren't you? (0) So. And perhaps (0) |
| | S u | ((clears his throat)) |

5.1.2 The answer particle *ja* (*yeah*) and the response token *hm hm* indicate learning by example.

The purpose of 'feedback communication' is to initiate a wealth of new knowledge for the individual and the whole group: The individual speaker gets feedback to his/her own speech in order to be able to improve on his/her competence so that all participants have the opportunity for new insights in rhetoric. For the lecturer's conversation style this involves a double addressing: With her/his feedback s/he addresses one participant and at the same time the whole

group. Furthermore s/he marks knowledge, which the speaker gains throughout the review of her/his speech, as being generally relevant ("[That's] interesting", line 163) and elicits that the speaker shows her/his broad agreement with the evaluation ("That is totally interesting", line 164) in order to focus on an important rhetorical insight for both the speaker and the listeners. After that (line 165) the lecturer evaluates the speaker's response by the answer particle 'ja' (*yeah*) and student 17 echoes the response token *hm hm* not only as acknowledger and continuer, but rather as a sign of learning by example.

Extract 2

| | | | |
|-----|-----------------|---|---|
| 161 | R 20 | like that. | ((clears his throat) (3) |
| | many | ((smirking: 2)) (2) | |
| | L | Yeah. | And |
| 162 | L | at the beginning you have been more concentrated? (4) | |
| 163 | L | Interesting. | isn't it? (0) What that causes even as |
| 164 | L | change. (...) | |
| | R 20 | That is totally interesting | (0) because |
| 165 | R 20 | it just (0) differs so much. | |
| | L | Yeah. | It's as if the first |
| | Sin17 | Hm hm | |
| 166 | L | part was one more try to speak out what you're thinking | |
| 167 | L | for you personally, (0) then read the thesis again (0) | |
| 168 | ^{pv} L | <<very soft>> | |
| | L | and then [...]. (2) | How did others feel the irritation or the |

5.1.3 The response tokens *ah*, *ah ja* and *aha* evaluate students' responses and mark relevant topics

The lecturer uses the interjection *ah* in several variants: *ah*, *ah ja* and *aha*

- **Ah:** The lecturer uses the normal form of *ah* with a falling contour (line 46). The general function of this *ah* in German is to express attention and a pleasant surprise (Ehlich 1986, 75 f. and 305). Norrick points out that the English *ah* as a free-standing interjection is also common as back-channel or an attention signal (2007, 164). That is applicable to the German *ah* in general and to the lecturer's *ah* in the feedback communication in particular. The *special functions* of *ah* in the context of feedback communication as classroom communication are (a) to mark a relevant topic (line 99-212: later, the aspect student 3 remarks to the speaker becomes the central topic of the feedback given by the lecturer); (b) within the Initiation-Response-Follow-up pattern the lecturer's *ah* evaluates the corrected feedback of student 3.

- **Ah ja:** The lecturer contracts *ah* and *ja* (*yeah*) (line 71), so that these response tokens sound like one word with a rising-falling contour. The lecturer uses the response token *ah* in the general function as a discourse marker "signalling a change in cognitive state" (Norrick 2007, 164), because student 19 has brought up a new aspect, and the lecturer uses the response token *ja* (*yeah*) as acknowledger and continuer. The *special functions* of *ja* in this context rise within the Initiation-Response-Follow-up pattern: Instead of an explicit evaluation given by the teacher, student 3 speaks in high terms of the speaker, but by using the response tokens *ah ja* the lecturer implicitly compliments the speaker on her/his speech and evaluates implicitly both the speech and the student's comment.
- **Aha:** The lecturer uses the normal form of *aha* with a falling contour: *ahà* (line 66 and 117) and with the general function to refer to the previous turn and with the meaning of "Now I understand". Moreover the German *aha* marks an aha-reaction or aha-experience (Ehlich 1986, 77). The *specific function* of *aha* within

the IRF-pattern of feedback communication is to acknowledge the student's evaluation (line 66) and to highlight a relevant aspect of a student's response (line 117). The lecturer also uses the interjection *ahâ* (line 113), the intensified form of *aha*, which expresses understanding and amazing in German. (Paraphrase in German "Ach, so ist das!"

(Ehlich 1986, 77) "Oh, I see!"). The *specific function* of *ahâ* in the context of feedback communication is to highlight the contrast between the external perception and the speaker's self-perception. With the aid of *ahâ* the lecturer directs the learning process and keeps the learners in suspense.

Extract 3

| | | | |
|------------|-----------|---|------------------------------------|
| 112 | | | |
| | <i>pv</i> | < | < <i>fast</i> > |
| R 20 | | [have usually | absolutely nothing to do with |
| 113 | | | |
| | <i>pv</i> | | < <i>fast</i> > |
| R 20 | | the topic, [(and) it] is to establish contacts with the | |
| L | | aha | |
| 114 | | | |
| | <i>pv</i> | | < <i>fast</i> > |
| R 20 | | audience, (0) er the listeners I'm looking at them | |
| 115 | | | |
| | <i>pv</i> | | < <i>fast</i> > |
| R 20 | | then (0) and I'm losing (0) a lot of (0) my excitement. | |
| 116 | | | |
| | <i>pv</i> | | < <i>fast</i> > > |
| R 20 | | This is something which I have found for myself.] | |
| 117 | | | |
| L | | Aha , (0) virtually like a strategy (0) [that you're | |
| 118 | | | |
| L | | interacting with], (0) You say [I notice with the | |
| <i>Kom</i> | | | < < <i>paraphrases R 20</i> > |
| R 20 | | [hm hm] | |
| 119 | | | |
| L | | help of it that I establish contact to the audience], [I'm | |
| <i>Kom</i> | | | < <i>paraphrases R 20</i> > > < |
| 120 | | | |
| L | | interested in how you reacted on it], I've | |
| <i>Kom</i> | | | < < <i>talks to the plenum</i> > > |
| 121 | | | |
| L | | noticed that for me it was causing irritation. | |
| 122 | | | |
| L | | (0) On the one hand in content, why do you | |

5.2 Functions of response tokens in 'feedback communication' as encounter

The examined feedback communication is based on feedback rules, which were verbalized in the context of social psychology, especially of the group dynamics, e.g. to mark self-perception and external perception as subjective.

5.2.1 The response token *hm hm* and the answer particle *ja* (yeah) help to avoid explicit evaluations

The rule to verbalize feedback without evaluating the performance of the other group members was taught too in this course on rhetoric

and classroom conversation. In contrast to this rule, it is conspicuous that speaker and listeners do not only pick out their subjective experience as a central theme; they rather evaluate the speech explicitly (e.g. "I performed *badly*"/ "Ich hab *schlecht* geredet" [speaker = student 20]) or implicitly ("you performed *not authentically*"/ "Die Rede *wirkte aufgesetzt*." [Student 3]). Only the lecturer refrains from explicit evaluations and uses just implicit forms of evaluation. Extract 4 shows as an example that response tokens also fulfill the function to avoid explicit evaluations: Student 19 reveals in his comment that he feels positive about the speaker's performance. Students and lecturer agree to this implicit evaluation, using the response token *hm hm* as acknowledger or the answer particle *ja* (yeah).

Extract 4

| | | |
|----|-------|---|
| 87 | S 19 | seemed as (0) confident as if you've still had |
| 88 | S 19 | [all] quoted words in mind and as if you [were] able to |
| | Sin u | [hm hm] [hm hm] |
| 89 | S 19 | report them [once more] easily. (0) |
| | Sin u | [hm hm] |
| | L | Yeah. |
| | Sin 6 | Yeah. |
| | S 3 | I've one |

The interplay of *hm hm*, *ja* (yeah) and echoed *ja* (yeah) shows that students and lecturer are on very good terms with each other.

5.2.2 The response token *hm hm* and the answer particle *ja* (yeah) mark a more equal encounter group

In the last part of this 'feedback communication' the lecturer wants to compare her impressions with the impressions of the group (line 168-212). As a result, she is instructed by the students why she, as the lecturer, had a problem with the beginning of the speech. On the one hand the normal student / teacher relationship is reversed, because the students instruct the lecturer and the lecturer thanks the students for their advice. On the other hand, the lecturer

maintains her dominance, because she invites the students to instruct her; furthermore she opens and ends the conversation. Added together, the last part of this 'feedback communication' is an example of a "shift away from the situated identities of the classroom and the asymmetries associated with them, towards a more equal encounter" (Richards 2005, 65), in which the parties involved explore their experiences.

The high frequency of the response token *hm hm* and of the interjection *ja*, spoken with emphasis, expresses a high level of the lecturer's involvement, not as a teacher, but as an individual member of the encounter group. Especially by laughing together with the students, the teacher marks that she holds herself at a distance from the role of 'being a teacher.'

Extract 5

| | | |
|-----|----------------------|---|
| 193 | S 3 | Whereas you can say that humor draws off |
| 194 | S 3 | the attention of oneself, (0) and furthermore |
| 195 | S 3 | You can win the audience's attention. And |
| | L | hm hm |
| 196 | S 3 | because of this irony that also comes into that, (0) the |
| 197 | ^{pv} S 3 | one who has prepared this concept as [a serious concept] <<laughing>> |
| 199 | S 3 | will have [problems] |
| | Sin u | ((smirks)) |
| | many | ((-----laughing-----)) |
| 200 | S 3 | serious meant [sentences] from the good book er should |
| | L | Yeah |
| 201 | S 3 | have been intercessions then one is of course [(...), |
| | L | ((laughs)) |
| 202 | S 3 | (0)] but [all the others] are (0) |
| | L | [(I don't care about that)] |
| 203 | S 3 | won as listeners and when they are laughing |
| | L | yeah |
| 204 | S 3 | for a start then you have got them and you can |
| | L | yeah |
| 205 | S 3 | talk fluently and that's(0) well that's |
| | L | yeah |
| 206 | S 3 | actually (0) that is a good rhetorical device. |
| | L | Yeah. That's |

| | | |
|-----|----------------------------|--|
| 207 | L | one more (0) helping (0) advice for me. |
| 208 | L S u | [Well] that I'm experiencing that in my position as super ((clears her throat)) |
| 209 | L | visor, who has planned that, differently |
| 210 | ^{pv} L | < <faked surprise (0) [WHAT my NaDOLny-thesis |
| 211 | ^{pv} L many | and laughing> > < <softly> might be intercessions? [[[laughs]])] [than you as [[laughing]])] |
| 212 | ^{pv} L S u | <softly> > listeners. That is very helpful more for me. Thanks] ((coughs)) |
| 213 | L | (1) Shall we leave it like that, Peter? |

6. Conclusion

Listener behaviors are multifunctional and adaptable. In the context of feedback communication, the response tokens *hm hm*, *ja*, *ah*, *aha* and the answer particle *ja* have not only general functions, but also *specific functions*, depending on different interaction concepts:

- Belonging to *classroom conversations* listener behaviors are used *to vary the IRF-pattern, to indicate learning by example, and to mark relevant topics*.
- Belonging to *communication as encounter* listener behaviors help *to avoid explicit valuations, they express personal*

involvement and underline *symmetric relationships*.

- For the lecturer the response tokens *hm hm*, *ja*, *ah*, *ah ja*, *aha* and the answer particle *ja* seem to be instruments to hold the balance between 'being the teacher' and 'being a member of an encounter group'.

Looking for the composition principle for the using of listener behaviors in feedback communication, I conclude it is the student's and lecturer's self-esteem and the identity they gain during this course, which set the tone.

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Conventions for Transcription

| | |
|-------|---|
| [...] | omissions in the transcript |
| (...) | unintelligible passages |
| () | assumed wording |
| < > | extension of a comment or a paralinguistic conspicuity |
| [] | extension referring to a, a paralinguistic conspicuity or simultaneous utterances |
| YOU | capital letters mark striking stresses |
| . | falling intonation |
| ? | raising intonation |

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------|
| (0) | pause, shorter than one second |
| (1) | pause, duration one second |

Speaker table

| | |
|----------|---------------------|
| R 20 | speaker 20 |
| L | lecturer |
| S | student (male) |
| S 2 – 19 | student two to 19 |
| Sin | student (female) |
| Sin 17 | student 17 (female) |
| S u | student (unknown) |
| Many | many students |